The Talmudic Zohar: Rabbinic Interdisciplinarity in *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Joint Doctor of Philosophy

with Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley

in

Jewish Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Summer 2017
Abstract

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This study uncovers the heretofore ignored prominence of talmudic features in Midrash ha-Ne’lam on Genesis, the earliest stratum of the zoharic corpus. It demonstrates that Midrash ha-Ne’lam, more often thought of as a mystical midrash, incorporates both rhetorical components from the Babylonian Talmud and practices of cognitive creativity from the medieval discipline of talmudic study into its esoteric midrash. By mapping these intersections of Midrash, Talmud, and Esotericism, this dissertation introduces a new framework for studying rabbinic interdisciplinarity—the ways that different rabbinic disciplines impact and transform each other.

The first half of this dissertation examines medieval and modern attempts to connect or disconnect the disciplines of talmudic study and Jewish esotericism. Spanning from Maimonides’ reliance on Islamic models of Aristotelian dialectic to conjoin Pardes (Jewish esotericism) and talmudic logic, to Gershom Scholem’s juvenile fascination with the Babylonian Talmud, to contemporary endeavours to remedy the disciplinary schisms generated by Scholem’s founding models of Kabbalah (as a form of Judaism that is in tension with “rabbinic Judaism”), these two chapters tell a series of overlapping histories of Jewish inter/disciplinary projects. The section’s juxtaposition of medieval and contemporary models of talmudic-esoteric interdisciplinarity provides a framework for overcoming the models of disciplinarity that the field of Zohar Studies inherited from Scholem’s pioneering scholarship and clears theoretical space for rethinking the disciplinary commitments of Midrash ha-Ne’lam.

The second half of the dissertation demonstrates that Midrash ha-Ne’lam uses talmudic reasoning and rhetoric for three purposes: (1) to formulate a model of divine cosmogenesis that is akin to talmudic creativity; (2) to advocate for applying talmudic reasoning to secrets as a way to expand esoteric knowledge; (3) and to represent a scholastic community in which rabbis search for secrets together and debate each other’s esoteric lore.
Dedicated to my Zeidy
of blessed memory -

Rabbi Marvin Luban

מימ טמונים עזה כל איש
ואיש חבותוו דוללה
Acknowledgments

This work could not have reached fruition without the support, encouragement, friendship, and guidance rendered by several people and departments, to whom I wish to express immense gratitude.

Daniel Boyarin has been an exemplar of a scholar who cares equally about the past and the present, and has constantly reminded me that “if there is no flour there is no Torah.” Deena Aranoff has made herself available for endless hours of conversation and has constantly challenged me to be as clear and gracious in my writing as possible. And Niklaus Largier has opened my work to new horizons of mystical thought and critical imagination.

Without the financial and administrative support of Jewish Studies Joint Doctoral program and its staff—Sandy Richmond, Shorena Kurtsikidze, Erica Roberts, Etta Heber—this doctorate would surely have taken double the time and fourfold the toll.

That the final chapter of my dissertation addresses “scholastic sociality” and the centrality of friendship to a spiritual life has only underscored my indebtedness to my own community of scholar-friends. My local peers at UC Berkeley—Jerilyn Sambrooke, Jennifer Valentina Mackenzie, Raphael Magarik, Eli Rosenblatt, Eyal Bassan—have incredulously made my time on campus a time wherein sociality does not come at the cost of scholarship. And the many friends and mentors who have offered support, insight, edits, and a listening ear—Avishai Bar-Asher, Jonatan Benarroch, Hillel Broder, Eitan Fishbane, Amit Gvaryahu, Joel Hecker, Gilah Kletenik, Jana Jett Loeb, Ronit Meroz, Moulie Vidas, Nathan Wolski—have transformed the solitariness of dissertation writing into a time of convocation.

Finally, over the past two years, my partner, Amy Rae Ruben, has reminded me daily that, “you got this.” Her trust and love are an undercurrent present throughout these pages.
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Introduction

I. Toward a Bibliographical History of Midrash ha-Ne'lam

Printed in the sixteenth-century, partly in Sefer ha-Zohar (Cremona and Mantua, 1558-1560) and partly in Zohar Hadash (Salonika, 1597), Midrash ha-Ne'lam on Genesis is an eclectic and often esoteric midrash on the first thirty-two chapters of Genesis. The relationship between Midrash ha-Ne'lam and the Zohar is an historical enigma. The early-modern editions of the Zohar present Midrash ha-Ne'lam as a vertical column with its own title, configured alongside a parallel column that is simply titled, Zohar (or Zohar Hadash). Although they share narratological and rhetorical features, modern scholars have identified stylistic and theological differences between Midrash ha-Ne'lam on Genesis and other strata of zoharic literature. Stylistically, Midrash ha-Ne'lam contains a heteroglossic mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew (almost all other sections of zoharic literature are written solely in Aramaic), an assemblage of short midrashim (in contrast to the longer homilies of “Zohar”), and references to a wide, dispersed network of rabbinic sages (many other sections of zoharic literature revolve around “the hevraya,” an intimate cohort of ten rabbis). Theologically, Midrash ha-Ne'lam on Genesis is devoid of the kabbalistic theosophy and erotic mythology that defines other zoharic strata. Instead, its pericopes feature philosophical allegoresis and pre-kabbalistic traditions on a (comparably) small set of themes: cosmogony, the nature of the soul, the afterlife, eschatology, and the angelic realm.

This dissertation introduces an additional quality that distinguishes Midrash ha-Ne'lam from other sections of zoharic literature, namely, the talmudic orientation of Midrash ha-Ne'lam. I contend that both the Babylonian Talmud and the medieval discipline of talmud study inform multiple features of Midrash ha-Ne'lam: its disputational rhetoric, its advocacy of creativity, its representation of rabbinic sociality, its model of divine cosmogenesis, and (in at least one instance) its compositional style. Because these talmudic features cut across stylistic, cultural, and theological registers, they encourage a historiography of Midrash ha-Ne'lam that incorporates both the formal and ideational developments of medieval Judaism.

Given its unusual textural form (as a text within a text, so to speak), a bibliographical history of Midrash ha-Ne'lam is required before a formal-intellectual history of “the talmudic

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2 For instance: (1) the zoharic phrase, “ta-hazi,” already occurs several times in Midrash ha-Ne’lam; and (2) the temporal marker, “ad d’havi,” found in most narratives from later strata of zoharic literature, can also already be found in Midrash ha-Ne’lam.
4 Throughout the remainder of this dissertation, “Midrash ha-Ne’lam” refers specifically to Midrash ha-Ne’lam on Genesis, unless otherwise noted. On Midrash ha-Ne’lam on Exodus, see Ronit Meroz, Headwaters of the Zohar – Research and Editions of Zohar, Exodus (Tel Aviv: The Haim Rubin Tel Aviv University Press, forthcoming) [Hebrew]. On Midrash ha-Ne’lam on Song of Songs, Ruth, and Lamentations, see The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Vol. 11, translation and commentary by Joel Hecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. xi-xiii. The historical and literary relations between these various Midrash ha-Ne’lam commentaries is, for the moment, unknown.
Zohar” can be presented. A bibliographical history of Midrash ha-Ne’lam ought to address three central conundrums: (1) the history of the passages that came to be printed as Midrash ha-Ne’lam; (2) the relationship between Midrash ha-Ne’lam and “the Zohar”; (3) and the history of the phrase, “Midrash ha-Ne’lam.” The remainder of this introductory section surveys twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship on these questions. Because the philological study of zoharic texts is a young and burgeoning sub-field of Zohar Studies, and the heart of this dissertation addresses related but methodologically distinct questions, this introduction serves more to distill the operant and still open questions than to offer final answers to the bibliographical mysteries that surround the genesis of Midrash ha-Ne’lam.

The earliest citations of the passages printed as Midrash ha-Ne’lam occur in late thirteenth-century Spain, though they are not cited as Midrash ha-Ne’lam. The earliest citation is from Isaac ibn Sahula’s Mashal ha-Qadmoni, which Scholem dates to 1281. Raphael Loewe has recently argued to push the date of Mashal ha-Qadmoni’s composition back a few years, with the coronation of Alfonso X in 1271-2 as the terminus a quo. The earliest citation from Midrash ha-Ne’lam, therefore, occurs in Spain sometime between 1271 and 1281. Both ibn Sahula and Moses de Leon resided at this time in the Castilian city of Guadalajara, and Scholem raises this proximity as evidence for his thesis on de Leon’s involvement in the composition of Midrash ha-Ne’lam (Scholem’s theory of zoharic authorship is more fully explored later in this section). It is telling that the citation from Midrash ha-Ne’lam in Mashal ha-Qadmoni is not a verbatim quote. Rather, ibn Sahula was using a short fragment from MS Cambridge 1023 (one of the earliest Zohar manuscripts) on Gen. 1:14-19, a text that is in the style of Midrash ha-Ne’lam but is not included in any printed edition of the Zohar. Scholem hypothesizes that this fragment, cited by ibn Sahula, is one of the earliest attempts by de Leon to invent a new midrashic discourse. But for some reason, the periscopes included in MS Cambridge 1023 eventually fell out of the zoharic corpus. They were a a rough draft, replaced by the a commentary on those verses that was eventually published as Midrash ha-Ne’lam. Both commentaries share thematic similarities, a fact that grants some plausibility to Scholem’s reconstructive hypothesis. Two other citations appear in the writings of another Spanish Rabbi, Todros Abulafia, probably also from the early 1280’s, and are introduced with the generic title, “ha-midrash.”

The first rabbis to cite sections from Sefer ha-Zohar as Zohar, Menahem Recanati and Joseph Angelet in the early fourteenth century, do not differentiate between Sefer ha-Zohar and Midrash ha-Ne’lam. They both conceive of the pericopes later published as Midrash ha-Ne’lam

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8 See Scholem, Major Trends, p. 187.


10 See Scholem, Major Trends, p. 188.
as no different than any other zoharic pericopes—Recanati’s citations that match the printed edition of Midrash ha-Ne’lam are cited as “Sefer ha-Zohar.” However, as Boaz Huss points out, Recanati came across passages from Midrash ha-Ne’lam (specifically on Genesis) after his first exposure to zoharic literature. While his early work, Ta’amei Hamitzvot, cites many zoharic texts under the title Sefer ha-Zohar, none match “Midrash ha-Ne’lam.” It is only in his later commentary to the Torah that he includes citations that match our Midrash ha-Ne’lam. Indeed, on one occasion, before he cites a passage from Midrash ha-Ne’lam, he states “I have found more from the book of the Zohar, gleanings after gleanings [liqutei betar liqutei].” A similar trend occurs in the writings of Joseph Angelet. Throughout his early treatise, Korpat ha-Ruchlin, he frequently cites sources as “Zohar,” but, again, none of these match the printed Midrash ha-Ne’lam. It is only in his later work, Livnat ha-Sapir, from 1334/5, where he does the exact opposite of Recanati and cites all his zoharic sources as Midrash ha-Ne’lam, that some of these match the printed Midrash ha-Ne’lam. From this bare evidence we can infer two conclusions: (1) in the early fourteenth century, not all zoharic manuscripts contained texts from “Midrash ha-Ne’lam,” and at least some Midrash ha-Ne’lam pericopes circulated separately (liqutei betar liqutei);” nevertheless, (2) early transmitters of zoharic material appraised these sections of zoharic literature as parts of a single corpus.

Early Zohar manuscripts follow a similar trend. To the best of my knowledge, no medieval Zohar manuscript contains the title Midrash ha-Ne’lam, even as most of the earliest Zohar manuscripts—MS Cambridge Add. 1023, MS Vatican 68, MS Vatican 213, MS Toronto 5-015—contain large sections of “Midrash ha-Ne’lam.” This reinforces the sense that already at an early stage in the circulation of zoharic material (at the latest by the 1330’s), Midrash ha-Ne’lam was an integral part of the zoharic corpus. The status of Midrash ha-Ne’lam during this early stage of zoharic composition and manuscript copying is further illuminated by an odd editorial feature of early zoharic manuscripts. Many of the earliest Zohar manuscripts, made in fourteenth-century Spain and fifteenth-century Byzantine, contain numbered sections, which

12 See Huss, The Zohar, pp. 70-73.
13 Yet some manuscripts differentiate between other Zohar section such as Tosefta, Matnitin, and Sitrei Torah through use of these titles. See MS Munich 217. See also Avishai Bar-Asher, “The Earliest Citation from Sefer ha-Zohar and from Whence Had the Book of Zohar Received its Name,” Kabbalah, Vol. 39 (2017), p. 120: “Many sections of the “Zohar” to Genesis, to which the printers gave numerous titles, like heikhalot, Midrash ha-Ne’lam, Sitrei Torah, and more—are found in the pre-print era in only a minority of manuscripts, and generally in separate units and in a different order.”
correlate to the same passages across different manuscripts. Amiel Vick has recently demonstrated that numbered sections “three” through “eighteen” refer to *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* (numbers one and two have yet to be located). This data demonstrates that not only was *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* an integral part of the zoharic corpus by mid fourteenth century, it was positioned as the opening section of that corpus. Vick’s forthcoming publications on this feature of Zohar manuscripts will certainly shed further light on the early bibliographical history of *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*.

The early-modern zoharic corpus contains more material than any previously created manuscript, and certainly contains many more sections than are numbered by the early transmitter(s) of zoharic literature. *Sefer ha-Zohar*, published in the 1550’s, includes some twenty distinct literary sections, many of which are given separate headers. The breadth of texts included in *Sefer ha-Zohar* is indicative of the printers’ fantastical endeavor to produce a sellable and comprehensive Zohar book, though their product seems more an anthology than a homogenous book or singular literary structure. Gershom Scholem aptly expresses the situation the scholar faces when confronting this philological pluralism: “At first sight, the existence of a multitude of writings of apparently very different character, loosely assembled under the title of “Zohar,” seems to leave no argument against the view that they do in fact belong to different writers and periods.” Famously, though, Scholem negates this only-apparently indisputable conclusion of textual difference; only a few paragraphs later, Scholem nominates the thirteenth-century Castilian, Moses de Leon, as author of almost all of what was “loosely assembled under the title of ‘Zohar.’”

Since the 1990’s, scholars have attenuated if not altogether replaced Scholem’s model of zoharic unity with a model of zoharic literature as a heterogeneous literature. Created by a plurality of people, writing in different styles and with dissimilar theologies, zoharic texts have no single source of origin or single author; “the Zohar” is more a literary movement than a book. Discerning how these different zoharic texts became woven into early manuscript collections and editions is a task that a growing number of contemporary Zohar scholars are working on. By tracking the histories of zoharic passages in the centuries before the printed editions of *Sefer ha-Zohar*, these new bibliographical studies on the Zohar make visible the historical relationships and stylistic affinities between zoharic texts, as well as the bibliographical processes that led to

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17 The fact that *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* is a commentary on the first thirty-two chapters may play some factor in this editorial structure. Yet, given that there are many other zoharic strata that address these same chapters, there must be an additional criteria for their position as the inaugural pericopes of the zoharic corpus.
20 In his early research, Scholem believed that *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* is the latest section of the Zohar. See Gershom Scholem, “Chapters from the History of Kabbalistic Literature, 6: The Kabbalah of R. Isaac ben Shlomo ben Abi Sahula and *Sefer Ha-Zohar*,” *Kiryath Sepher* 6 (1929), pp. 109-119 [Hebrew].
22 See sources cited above in n. 5 as well as throughout this introduction.
the notion of *Sefer ha-Zohar* as a book.

Yehuda Liebes instigated this social turn by proposing a new model of collective authorship that better accounts for the thematic and stylistic uniqueness of many zoharic sections, such as the *Idrot, Midrash ha-Ne'lam,* and *Guf Ha-Zohar* (“the body of the Zohar,” a modern coinage that refers to those parts of zoharic literature that have no other title and form the majority of *Sefer ha-Zohar*).23 Jonathan Benarroch, one of Liebes’ students, has recently identified other sections of the zoharic archive as belonging to what he calls “the middle stratum.”24 This intermediate stage in the archive’s texts includes some of the more boldly epic sections, such as *Sava De-Mishpatim,* the *Yenukah* and *Sabba* stories, and the *Idrot.* These texts are now thought to emerge in the last years of the thirteenth century after much of the *Guf ha-Zohar* had already been composed, but before the fourteenth century zoharic adaptations of *Tikunei Zohar* and *Rayah Mehemna.* Touting a hybridic philological-literary perspective, Ronit Meroz has begun to meticulously excavate the archeology of the zoharic archive by working backwards from print to manuscript. She has been able to use these textual archaeologies to suss out a few sections that, she alleges, predate de Leon by several centuries.25 She further concludes that the majority of the epic frame of the *Zohar*—the exegetical adventures of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and friends—is later than much of the theological exegesis woven through that frametale.26 Boaz Huss’ work adds a further social-history perspective to these questions of zoharic composition. Honing in on the early and late reception history of zoharic texts, Huss makes visible the ideological production of “the Zohar,” as a textual idea, a material artifact, and a field of symbolic value.27 More recently, Daniel Abrams has published a comprehensive deconstruction of the single-text, single-author Zohar thesis. In a two hundred page chapter titled, “The Invention of the Zohar as a Book,” Abrams canvasses the methodological and historical shortcomings of the notion that the Zohar is a book, or that it has an author in our modern sense.28 His critical strategy traces the historical stages of the fantasy that the *Zohar* is a *sefer* (a book), and exposes how this fantastical assumption in one form or another still anchors much of contemporary Zohar scholarship. These contemporary trends of scholarship seek to attend to the rhetorical uniqueness of each zoharic macroform (whether that difference be indexed as a difference of myth, midrash, or poetics) and to develop a fuller textual-history of the manifold writings that have come to be known and adored as the Zohar.

27 See Huss, *The Zohar.*
Of the twenty-some Zohar sections, Scholem works the hardest to prove that *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* is by the same author as “the bulky part which has no specific title,” which for reasons of stylistic grace we now call *Guf Ha-Zohar*. Scholem maps both of these works onto his intellectual biography of Moses de Leon in a manner that supports his broader historiography of Jewish Mysticism. This requires some literary reconstruction since very little biographical information is available on this thirteenth-century Castilian Jew. De Leon seems to have been born around 1240, lived in Guadalajara, and passed on in 1304. Scholem contends that the first concrete evidence we have for his existence is a Hebrew translation of *The Guide for the Perplexed*, dedicated to “ha-maskil Rabbi Moses de Leon,” dated to 1264. Subsequently, de Leon authored *Or Zaruaḥ*, a pre-kabbalistic treatise which Alexander Altmann dates to 1274 based on its similarities to Gikaltilla’s *Ginat Egoz*, composed in that year. This early work contains a rich amalgamation of Heikhalot tropes and linguistic speculation that seems miles away from the kabbalistic theosophy what would soon dominate his Hebrew writings. In 1286 he authored his first properly kabbalistic treatise, *Shushan Edut*, and continued to write at least six other such volumes before 1294.

Around this biographical skeleton, Scholem fleshes out both a psychological narrative of de Leon and a literary history of the Zohar, as the two are ultimately inseparable for Scholem. In Scholem’s historiography, all of the works of the Zohar were composed in the years between *Or Zaruaḥ* (1274) and *Shushan Edut* (1286), but in two stages. In the years 1275-1280, de Leon wrote *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* while still under the receding sway of philosophy and allegorical reading practices. De Leon then had a conversion to theosophy, “a mystical doctrine, or school of thought, which purports to perceive and describe the mysterious workings of the Divinity, perhaps also believing it possible to become absorbed in its contemplation,” and at a rapid pace composed the remaining sections of the Zohar between 1280 and 1286. He would then revert to a less sublime style—his Hebrew texts are formally inconspicuous—in an attempt to grant and gather support for his novel ideas, which he only began to copy and circulate in 1293 and continued to do so until his death twelve years later. This tenuous biography—one that has been disputed, both by Tishby and Wolfson—traces a clean developmental arch from Maimonidean philosophy to zoharic theosophy, wherein *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* serves as an overcome middle ground that elicits little attention in the wider sweep of Judaism’s medieval

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To his credit, Scholem acknowledges that there was more to the intellectual and literary picture in Castile during the late 1270’s than permutations of Maimonides and Geronse Kabbalah. For in a notable passage, Scholem introduces two other literary models in order to stress the differences between the two stages of de Leon’s composition of Zohar:

In the *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*, the author is still endeavoring to find for his thought a place within the frame-work of the old Merkabah mysticism; the other parts no longer show any trace of this tendency. In the *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*, too, his literary method is more dependent on the genuine older Midrashic literature than in the later parts.\(^{36}\)

To summarize Scholem’s position, then, *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* was written while de Leon was still under the throes of that text he had had translated fifteen years earlier, *The Guide for the Perplexed*. But as already evidenced by his 1274 *Or Zaruaḥ*, eclectic models of speculation were infusing his Maimonideanism and opening it toward new directions. *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* is the first real fruit of that new direction, a project that finds de Leon struggling to find his own voice within three different discourses: Maimonidean philosophy, Merkabah speculation, and Midrash. To our loss, Scholem never followed through with this insight—to trace the ways that these discourses mingle and transform each other in *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* before being ironed out into the sublime and symbolic style of later sections of the Zohar.

Further evidence on *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*’s relationship to zoharic literature, as least as per early-modern conceptions of this relationship, can be elicited from paratextual cues within the early printed editions of *Sefer ha-Zohar*.\(^{37}\) The title page of the Mantua edition reads: “*Sefer ha-Zohar* on the Torah, from the divine, holy, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Z”L, with *Sitrei Torah*, and *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*, and *Tosefta* on a few parshiot…” And the title page of the Cremona edition reads: “*Sefer ha-Zohar* on the Torah, from the divine and holy man, the tanna, Rashbi, with many innovations [*im hidushim harbei*], and they are *Sitrei Torah*, and *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*, and *Tosefta* on some parshiot.” Both of these title-pages (and especially Cremona’s) articulate *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*’s distinction from “*Sefer ha-Zohar*,” even as they are published in that very context. Reinforcing this sense of textual bifurcation is a fascinating note that the Mantua editors include before the beginning of *Zohar vayeḥi*:

The editors say: from the language (of this section) it is apparent that it is not from *Sefer ha-Zohar*, as light is distinguishable from darkness. And in our estimation it is from *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* and it was originally in the sacred tongue [i.e., Hebrew]. And the cunning ones changed the true language and they effaced the intention and meaning of the passage…and we would have omitted it because in the manuscript that came from Safed we did not find it. But we printed it as it is so that others should not boast on our

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account that our work is incomplete, and we do not have the power in our hands to remedy its distortions.38

This note captures the ambivalent feelings the Mantua editors had toward Midrash ha-Ne’lam. On the one hand, the note makes clear that they do not consider Midrash ha-Ne’lam to be just a subsection of Sefer ha-Zohar; rather it is a completely different text that originally existed in Hebrew and over time became eroded by translators who sought to make it stylistically analogous to other, Aramaic, sections of the Zohar. Yet, on the other hand, the Mantua printers were competing with the Cremona printers to publish a more comprehensive and compelling edition of Sefer ha-Zohar, and were therefore going to incorporate as much zoharic material as possible, even if it did not appear in all the manuscripts they were working with. These paratextual data only make clear that by the mid-sixteenth century, there was no clear sense of how Midrash ha-Ne’lam fit into the wider scheme of zoharic literature. The only thing that was clear was that Midrash ha-Ne’lam somehow belongs to “the Zohar,” and that it is distinguishable and out to be demarcated as distinct from “Sefer ha-Zohar:”

To add to the puzzle, Zohar Hadash (Salonika, 1597) adds significant further material under the title of Midrash ha-Ne’lam on the early books of Genesis. Later editions of Zohar Hadash include further sectioned titled as Midrash ha-Ne’lam on Lamentations and the Canticle (Krakow, 1603) and on Ruth (Venice, 1662), though the latter was previously published as Yesod Shirim (Thuengen, 1559) without any mention of belonging to the Zohar or Midrash ha-Ne’lam.

While all modern scholars agree that Midrash ha-Ne’lam is the earliest strata of Zohar, over the past eighty years, scholars have dated sections of Midrash ha-Ne’lam as early as the first century,39 as late as the thirteenth,40 and as “in-the-middle” as the ninth-eleventh centuries.41 In truth, at least three distinct styles can be identified within Midrash ha-Ne’lam, each reflective of one of the historical contexts proposed by scholars: an allegorical mode of midrash that at least formally and thematically recalls Jewish Hellenistic reading practices; cosmic, psychological, and eschatological speculations that recall Heikhalot literatures and their early medieval developments in midrashic form as collected by A. Jellinek (Beit ha-Midrash) and S. A. Wertheimer (Batei Midrashot); and narratives of midrash, wherein acts of interpretation take

38 Sefer ha-Zohar, 1:211b:

This Hebrew passage means: “The holy Bible is a mystery and is written for them and for those who seek wisdom and understanding. And we have transformed it to enlighten others and to prevent them from misunderstanding the true and the hidden meaning. If the same thing occurs in the translation, the editors have added a note and have signed the book. And we do not have the power to correct it and we do not have the power to change it. We only published it because we have no other choice. And we do not have the power to change it.”

See Huss, The Zohar, p. 103.


on a performative and social expression, a literary style that is the trademark of many of the other sections of Sefer ha-Zohar, which scholars date to the late thirteenth century. This does not mean that parts of Midrash ha-Ne’lam were authored in all of these time periods, but it opens the possibility that it is a text made of many historical and stylistic strata. Even Gershom Scholem’s strong theory of authorship acknowledges that certain sections of Midrash ha-Ne’lam feel later than the rest: “One has the impression that he (Moses de Leon) simultaneously wrote the later parts of Midrash ha-Ne’lam simultaneously with the main part...as though he was occasionally tempted to continue for a while in the old direction.”

Given the lack of any medieval evidence as to the existence an individuated section of Sefer ha-Zohar that is called Midrash ha-Ne’lam, where did the sixteenth-century publishers get this bibliographical notion? This is a difficult historical questions to answer, and one can only hope that further research into the reception of zoharic texts in the late medieval period will prove helpful. For now, some help can be gleaned from the genealogy of this odd locution, “Midrash ha-Ne’lam.”

The term first appears in an undated letter by Moses of Burgos (1230-c.1300), a student of the Castilian kabbalist Jacob ha-Kohen. The letter responds to an inquiry concerning the proper intentions for reciting the forty two letter name of God. The adjective ne’lam appears in three different contexts in the first few lines of the letter. First it used in an encomium to his addressee, whom he says, “understands hidden secrets” [meivin sitrei ha-ne’lmot]. A few lines later, the nature of the addressee’s esoteric inquiry is referenced as a matter of “hidden/lofty wisdom” [hokhmah ne’lmah]. The third and definitive usage occurs in Moses’ recitation of his addressee’s question: had he received or heard anything about this matter from “ga’on mi-geonei ha-Midrash ha-Ne’lam”? The odd locution clearly refers to the kabbalists with whom Moses was in contact, orally or via text. Scholem stipulates that this usage of the locution proves that the zoharic section, Midrash ha-Ne’lam, means a “mystical Midrash” and not “a hitherto unknown Midrash,” though he defers from explicating how he reached that conclusion. Scholem goes so far as to propose that this was de Leon’s reason for titling his early work such, despite the fact that there is zero evidence that de Leon ever called anything he wrote Midrash ha-Ne’lam. It is noteworthy that Isaac ibn Sahula, the very person who first quotes Midrash ha-Ne’lam, testifies that Moses of Burgos was his teacher. However, it seems highly unlikely that Moses was referring to our Midrash ha-Ne’lam, least of all because the forty-two letter name of God is not a topic addressed in Midrash ha-Ne’lam. I believe that it is more likely that the locution initially referred to local readers of Sefer Ha-Bahir. Not only is it “a hitherto unknown midrash” that was

42 Meroz, “And I Was Not There,” p. 186: “Perhaps even Midrash ha-Ne’lam itself is made from multiple literary strata, and therefore multiple narrative strata.”
43 Scholem, Major Trends, p. 184.
45 See Scholem, Major Trends, p. 183, and p. 393, n. 104.
46 See Lowe, Meshal Haqadmoni, p. xvii.
beginning to be held in high esteem at this period, but in a passage from his Commentary to the Torah (Gen. 1:3), Nahmanides speaks of the Bahir in strikingly similar terms: “Our rabbis have in this matter a midrash concerning a hidden secret” (”midrash be-sod ne’elam”). Nahmanides is certainly not saying that the Bahir’s title is midrash be-sod n’elam, but the almost identical locutions might indicate that in the latter half of the thirteenth-century, this was an epithet attached to the Bahir among Spanish kabbalists. What changed then between Moses of Burgos’ use of the locution to refer to his contemporary kabbalists (and perhaps in reference to readers of the Bahir), Joseph Angelet’s use of it to refer to another “unknown” midrash (i.e., zoharic literature), and the printers’ adoption of “Midrash ha-Ne’elam” as the title for one small section within their bibliographical invention, Sefer ha-Zohar?

In late fifteenth century Spain, many rabbis still used Midrash ha-Ne’elam as a title for all of Zohar, for instance throughout Akedat Yizhak, authored by Isaac Arama (c. 1420-1494). Isaac Aboad of Castile testifies explicitly to this co-identification in an epistle: “I heard that it is written in Midrash ha-Ne’elam, which is Sefer ha-Zohar….“ Abraham Saba (1440-1508) is the sole Spanish exception to this trend. Throughout his Zeror ha-Mor on the Bible, he uses Midrash ha-Ne’elam (some twenty-eight times) as a title for select parts of the Zohar (i.e., he also uses Sefer Ha-Zohar to refer to regular sections of Zohar some forty times). Saba is a fascinating figure in this story, as he testifies that before he was forced to flee Portugal he had many versions of the Zohar, which he had to leave behind: “It will not be believed when it will be told/ that I had editions upon editions (“mahadurot”)/ of the books of Zohar (“sifrei ha-Zohar)…“ His library of multiple Zohar editions (“mahadurot”) suggests that his use of Midrash ha-Ne’elam as a title for select parts of Zohar might be based on an earlier Zohar manuscript (titled Midrash ha-Ne’elam, in the Spanish tradition) lost to history when it was stolen from him.

The earliest uses of Midrash ha-Ne’elam to refer to specific sections of Zohar occur in Safed, but they do not refer to Midrash ha-Ne’elam on Genesis. In Beis Yosef (written before 1550), Joseph Karo (1488-1575) uses the locutions Midrash ha-Ne’elam to Song of Songs and Midrash Ruth ha-Ne’elam. Similarly, (as far as I can tell) Moses Cordovero never references

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48 Nahmanides, Commentary on the Torah, Genesis, 1:3.
49 See Huss, The Zohar, p. 76.
52 Beis Yosef, Orakh Hayim 31.
53 Beis Yosef, Orakh Hayim 182, 183, and Hoshen Mishpat 2. Moshe Hallamish, “Joseph Karo,” claims that at the time he wrote Beis Yosef, Karo did not have access to all sections of zoharic literature.
Midrash ha-Ne’lam to Genesis. Hence, for now, all we can conclude is that in the first half of the sixteenth century, Midrash ha-Ne’lam became a signifier that was not synonymous with “the Zohar.” Instead it either referenced a specific collection of zoharic materials (as per Saba) or midrashim on the meglot. It is not inconceivable then that soon afterwards (either right before the first editions were published in the late 1550’s or by the Cremona and Mantua printers themselves) Midrash ha-Ne’lam was extended as a title to those sections of Zohar on Genesis that are stylistically distinct but never received a distinct title. We can only hope that future textual scholarship will shed further light on the bibliographical history of the enigmatic midrash now known as Midrash ha-Ne’lam.

Given the current historical haze surrounding the emergence and bibliographical evolution of Midrash ha-Ne’lam, this dissertation seeks less to apply the tools of philology to discover the origins of Midrash ha-Ne’lam than to analyze the rabbinic discourses and disciplines of Midrash ha-Ne’lam. The following section introduces the models of rabbinic disciplines and interdisciplinarity in Late Antiquity, which provide the backbone for the interdisciplinarity of Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s own literary project.

II. A Heap of Nuts: On Rabbinic Interdisciplinarity

Throughout late antiquity, rabbinic disciplines were typically formulated as a trivium: midrash, halakhot, and aggadot. Some early sources, however, add mishnah and/or talmud to this taxonomy of disciplines. Throughout this dissertation, I speak of rabbinic interdisciplinarity to refer to the use of rhetoric or styles of thought of one rabbinic discipline in the framework of another rabbinic discipline. One of the more suggestive reflections on this sort of disciplinary

54 For instance, in Or Ne’erav, Cordovero writes:


mingling occurs in *Avot De-Rabbi Natan*, a late-rabbinic text that is itself an unusual tapestry of rabbinic genres.\(^{57}\)

Rabbi Judah the Prince used to list the excellences of the Sages and give them a nickname: to Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Johanan ben Nuri, and Rabbi Yose the Galilean.

He called Rabbi Tarfon, “a heap of stones” or, some say, “a heap of nuts,” because when a person removes one from the pile, they all go tumbling into each other. This is what Rabbi Tarfon was like. When a scholar came to him to ask him on some matter, Rabbi Tarfon would cite for him Scripture, Mishnah, Midrash, Halakhot, and Aggadot. When the scholar parted from him, he went away filled with blessing and goodness.

He called Rabbi Akiva, “a well-stocked storehouse.” To what might Rabbi Akiva be likened? To a laborer who took his basket and went out to the field. When he found wheat, he put some in his basket; when he found barley, he put that in; lentils, he put that in. Upon returning home, he sorted out the wheat by itself, the barley by itself, the lentils by themselves, the beans by themselves. This is how Rabbi Akiva assorted the whole Torah (like) different coins.\(^{58}\)

This passage metaphorizes two approaches to rabbinic disciplinarity as two different modes of collecting, cataloging, and collaging. Each approach is linked to a sage, and given due praise. Like a heap of nuts that stands without any definite structure and is liable to scatter when a single nut is extracted, Rabbi Tarfon’s pedagogy does not pay heed to the borders of rabbinic disciplines. His teaching style is comparable to the kinetics of loose nuts crashing down, knocking into each other, and setting each one on a new course. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, values compartmentalization. Although he learns each of the disciplines during his school-house studies, when he is alone he works to differentiate each into its proper place, a methodology comparable to the interior-design of an agrarian storehouse that is careful to separate and label each of its foods.

It is important to note that Rabbi Akiva’s rabbinic virtue is not exemplified here as a form of pedagogy, as is the case for Rabbi Tarfon, but as a style of literary composition. The concluding line, with its image of coins, is glossed accordingly by Rashi, the eleventh century

\(^{57}\) In his introduction to Schechter’s edition of *Avot De-Rabbi Natan*, Menahem Kister notes that it is one of the most variegated of rabbinic books: “It contains *memrot*, stories (including *aggadot* related to the destruction of the Temple), *midrashim* (some very lengthy exegeses on the Torah) which are brought tangentially; it includes many genres.” See Menahem Kister, *Avot De-Rabbi Natan: Solomon Schechter Edition, with References to Parallels in the Two Versions and to the Addenda in the Schechter Edition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1997).

\(^{58}\) *Avot De-Rabbi Natan*, 18 (MS JTS Rab. 25): yapılanוהיה"

French commentator, as follows (in his comments on a condensed version of our text, located in the Babylonian Talmud, *Gitin*, 67a):

When Rabbi Akiva would learn from his masters, he would listen to a scriptural teaching, and afterwards a halakhic teaching, and afterwards a midrashic teaching, and afterwards an aggadic teaching. He focused his heart so as to return to each and set their proper wording (*gorsan*) until they were organized in his mouth. And he did not say, “I will learn scripture by itself, midrash by itself.” Rather, when he became a great sage he made all the Torah into coins: he organized *midrash Sifrei* and *Sifra* by themselves, and he recited them by themselves to his students, and (so too) with halakhot by themselves and aggadot by themselves.59

The uniqueness of R. Akiva, according to Rashi, is located exclusively in his compositional style. During his years as a student, he would study the rabbinic disciplines together (“and he did not say, “I will learn scripture by itself, midrash by itself”). Only at a later stage in his life, did Rabbi Akiva extract each discipline and fashion singularly focused anthologies of midrash, Halakkah, and Aggadah: “when he became a great sage he made all the Torah into coins.” Analogous to the material singularity of a currency, Rabbi Akiva creates treatises that only contain one type of rabbinic discourse.

Rabbi Akiva’s model of discursive compartmentalization is emblematic of much of Palestinian rabbinic literature. While Rabbi Akiva is formally connected only to the production of the *Sifrei* and *Sifra* (two midrashim that are largely law related), all rabbinic texts produced in Palestine follow a similar model of generic specificity. Rabbi Tarfon’s style, however, is much closer to the form of literary production that became iconic of Late-Antique Babylonian Jewry. Babylonian rabbis did not produce *midrashim*, books of Aggadah, or collections of *halakhot*. Instead, all forms of rabbinic discourse were woven together in one book, the Babylonian Talmud.60 This stylistic fatness is reflected on in the Babylonian Talmud itself, when the Palestinian Rabbi Yoḥanan (*Sanhedrin*, 24a), perhaps condescendingly, explains the etymology of Bavel: “Rabbi Yoḥanan said: It (Babylonia) is mixed (*belula*) with scripture, mixed with mishnah, mixed with talmud.” Playing off the closeness between the Hebrew name for Babylonia, *Bavel*, and the Hebrew word for a mixture, *belul*, Rabbi Yoḥanan’s pun suggests that long before the actual literary production of the Babylonian Talmud (created several centuries after Rabbi Yoḥanan), Babylonia was viewed as a place of intellectual mingling, a region where disciplines were widely mixed together. This heterogeneity would lead later Jewish scholars to praise the exclusive study of the Babylonian Talmud as a sufficient form of pedagogy because of its inclusion of all other types of Jewish knowledge.61 It is hence appropriate that a text as

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59 Rashi, BT *Gitin*, 67a:

60 For a historical contextualization of the Babylonian Talmud’s genre blending, see Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

61 Tosaftot, *Avodah Zarah*, 19b
interdisciplinary as *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* (as will be demonstrated) adopts literary features of the Babylonian Talmud for its effort to integrate the newer, medieval rabbinic disciplines of philosophy and esotericism into the classical rabbinic discipline of midrash.

### III. Summary of Chapters

The subsequent two chapters of this dissertation survey models of inter/disciplinarity at work in modern and medieval attempts to disconnect or connect the study of talmudic literature and the study of Jewish secrets. The first of those chapters analyzes the modern processes that engendered a disciplinary division between two academic fields of Jewish Studies: Rabbinics and Kabbalah. To tell this history, I map a mostly ignored chapter in the intellectual biography of Gershom Scholem, the founder of Kabbalah Studies—his decade long fascination with the Babylonian Talmud. I contend that this early period in Scholem’s life sheds new light on why he came to theorize Kabbalah as a cultural project at tension with rabbinic Judaism. In the second half of the chapter, I explore the interdisciplinarity turn that has been transforming Kabbalah Studies since the 1990’s, as scholars have begun locating new intersections between rabbinic and esoteric literature.

After documenting the modern trends that govern the disciplinary allegiances of Kabbalah Studies, Chapter Two, “Maimonides’ Pardes,” argues that Maimonides fashioned an unprecedented analogy between talmudic reasoning and the mode of reasoning needed to rediscover Jewish secrets (lost during the Jewish diaspora). I suggest that Maimonides’ interdisciplinarity model adopts the strategies of a parallel Islamic attempt to bridge the methodologies of jurisprudence and theology.

The second section of this dissertation then argues that *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*, written just a few decades after Maimonides’ writings began to circulate Spain, builds on and transforms Maimonides’ model of esotericism by integrating elements of talmudic discourse into emerging medieval discourses of esotericism. More specifically, I demonstrate that three features of the Babylonian Talmud play a significant role in the theology, poetics, and rhetoric of *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*: (1) talmudic reasoning as a creative, analytic practice; (2) talmudic composition as a temporally sensitive model of intertextuality; (3) talmudic rhetoric as a literary device that constructs an imagined scholastic community in action. Each of the dissertation's final three chapters are dedicated to case-studies of these phenomena.

Chapter Three investigates the practices and logic of *binah*—a rabbinic mode of analytical creativity—in rabbinic and esoteric sources. The first half of the chapter explores why and how *binah* became associated with talmudic reasoning. The second half begins by offering a survey of medieval Hebrew texts that advocate for performing analytical techniques connected to *binah* in order to expand received secrets into new esoteric knowledge. The final section then demonstrates that *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* is one of the first texts to shift the referent of *binah* from the creativity of the human scholar to the cosmic creativity of God, thereby generating an unprecedented analogy between talmudic creativity and divine creativity.

Chapter Four examines the medieval politics of esoteric creativity as negotiated in one extended section of *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* (*Zohar* Hadash 25c-26a). I argue that this section’s talmudic format—a Hebrew source cited before an Aramaic elaboration on that source—
diagrams a relationship between secrets (sod) and creative reasoning (svara). Paradigmatic of Midrash ha-Ne'lam’s project at large, the compositional strategy of this narrative-homily casts secrets as ancient (mishnaic), and sevara as the method for reviving, questioning, and expanding secrets.

Chapter Five analyzes the talmudic rhetoric of Midrash ha-Ne'lam. I argue that its talmudic rhetoric produces a sense of scholastic sociality—an imagined scholarly community. Typically studied for its eroticization or fictionalization of mythic theosophy, zoharic literature also differs from other treatises of medieval Kabbalah in its underlying critique of spiritual experiences that are asocial. In place of the figure of the isolated contemplative, many zoharic texts advocate for a communal form of mysticism in which rabbinic friends walk together, share scriptural secrets with each other, and receive heavenly epiphanies together. I demonstrate that isolating the talmudic rhetoric of debate and collaboration used in different strata of Sefer ha-Zohar brings to light a genealogy of this communal spirituality and introduces a new method for historicizing the relationships between mysticism, esotericism, and sociality. In a field once dominated by phenomenological examinations of theological concepts, this chapter swerves toward an analysis of the rhetoric of community, collaboration, and dissensus in the earliest stratum of zoharic literature. After mapping earlier critiques of amoraic anachronisms in Midrash ha-Ne'lam, I suggest that a deeper anachronism has gone unnoticed. Midrash ha-Ne'lam also adopts two rhetorical practices that are central to the Babylonian Talmud: disputational rhetoric [masa u-matan] and connective rhetoric [“d’amar…”]. By mapping the evolution of these techniques from their legal, talmudic origins, to their role in the theological homilies of Midrash ha-Ne'lam, I argue that these literary techniques of the Talmud enable Midrash ha-Ne'lam to represent a social-field organized around talmudic practices of debate and collaboration. If previous chapters explored Talmud as a mode of creativity, here Talmud is imitated as mode of (representing) community.
Chapter One
Jewish Esotericism and Talmudic Studies in Modern Jewish Scholarship

Over the past three decades, scholars have begun to bridge together medieval Jewish esotericism and late-antique rabbinic midrash, two areas of study that have long been divided by disciplinary and periodizing borders. This dissertation broadens this interdisciplinary trend by looking not to the poetic, theological, and narrative features of midrash but to the cognitive, compositional, and rhetorical features of the Babylonian Talmud. The core of the dissertation therefore maps instances where the textuality of the Babylonian Talmud and the analytical techniques used to study its legal logic mold the discourses and practices of medieval Jewish esotericism. Before turning to these sites of intersection, this opening chapter examines how the Talmud came to play a more divisive role in modern times. I argue that the hegemony of the Babylonian Talmud within modern rabbinic culture catalyzed the disciplinary rift that distanced Kabbalah from Rabbinic Studies in mid-twentieth century Jewish scholarship.

Gershom Scholem, the founder of modern Kabbalah Studies, frequently portrays the relationship between Kabbalah and Rabbinic Judaism as one of cultural tension and rebellion. To trace the emergence of Scholem’s outlook on rabbinics, this chapter’s first section narrates an early chapter in Scholem’s life (ages 16-24) when the study of Talmud became cathected with a combination of enthusiasm and critique. Throughout these years, Scholem had an almost daily practice of Talmud study and would write extensively about his passion for and disillusionment with the text. When brought together, the autobiographical documents of Scholem’s talmudic courtship cast a new light on the ambivalent role that “the Rabbinic” plays in his Kabbalah scholarship. The chapter then concludes by documenting the revisionary work that has been done since the late nineteen-eighties to better study the nexus of Kabbalah and Rabbinics.


Throughout this dissertation I use the term “Jewish esotericism,” rather than “Kabbalah” or “Jewish mysticism,” to refer to relevant medieval sources, for several reasons: (1) to accommodate the diverse range of medieval disciplines interested in the discovery, development, and, often, creation of Jewish secrets: astrologers, philosophers, scriptural interpreters, magicians, and, most important for our contexts, talmudists; (2) to avoid the theoretical problems inherent in grouping all Jewish esoteric traditions under the rubric of ‘mysticism’; (3) to include traditions of Jewish esotericism (torat ha-sod) from the early medieval period that are not yet oriented around a notion of “Kabbalah” or the symbolic system of the sephirot; (4) “esoteric” translates a native term (sod, raz, ne’lam) in the discourses under study. On these questions of scholarly terminology, see Boaz Huss, The Question about the Existence of Jewish Mysticism: The Genealogy of Jewish Mysticism and the Theologies of Kabbalah Research (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute Press, 2016) [Hebrew]. I reserve the term “Kabbalah” for discussions of modern scholarship where the term serves an important, disciplinary function.

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demonstrate that these advancements can be organized into two paradigms of interdisciplinarity, and gesture toward yet a third model to be taken up in the next chapter. Together, these two sections provide a panoramic view of both the disciplinary borders that divide the fields of Talmudic and Jewish Esoteric Studies and the routes that have begun to undermine those borders.

I: “Don’t Become Frum”: Scholem’s Talmudic Studies (1913-1921)

On December 2, 1911, at age fourteen, Gerhard Scholem was bar mitzvahed in a Reform synagogue in Berlin. He was a third-generation Berliner, born into a middle-class family, emblematic of the emancipated Jewish bourgeoisie of Wilhelminian Germany.64 His great-grandparents migrated from Poland to Berlin during the nineteenth century, and like many of those families, slowly shed their Orthodox lifestyle for a more liberal Jewishness. In his first journal entry, written soon after his bar mitzvah, Gerhard traces his ancestry back to Glogau, a town in southwestern Poland. Dismayed that he is unable to locate any reputable rabbis within his lineage, Gerhard singles out a cantor “named Isaac from Koeben” as the sole member in his family who cultivated a religious vocation.65

Gerhard’s bar mitzvah, delayed a year because his father deemed him too immature at age thirteen,66 was a turning point in his Jewish journey. Closing that first journal entry, Gerhard confesses that “since that day I have been an Orthodox Jew (I hate the Linderstasse [synagogue], where my bar mitzvah took place).”67 Orthodoxy was Gerhard’s first of many rebellions. While it would not last long, it would not be his last attempt to overcome and escape his German-Jewish milieu.68

Soon after his bar mitzvah, Gerhard became a regular at the Orthodox services at the Alte Synagogue. He attended because of his appreciation for the congregants’ rapport with the cantor (the congregants knew Hebrew, a feature lacking in Reform synagogues) and because Yetka, his first romantic interest, often sat in the women’s section on Shabbat afternoons and would allow him to go on strolls with her after services.69 A central impetus in his teenage turn to Orthodoxy was a desire for a deeper Jewish literacy and a working knowledge of Hebrew. That desire would

66 See Scholem, From Berlin to Jerusalem, p. 37.
67 Lamentations of Youth, p. 22.
69 See Scholem From Berlin to Jerusalem, pp. 39-40 and p. 57.
soon draw him into a ten-year study of the Babylonian Talmud, a commitment that tested his post-assimilatory Jewish identity and his estimation of rabbinic literature. In the following pages, I chart the contours of Scholem’s Talmud study, attending to both the social dimensions of Talmud study in Weimar Germany and the existential and philosophical issues it raised for the precocious Gerhard. By examining Scholem’s early devotion to rabbinic literature and analyzing the reasons why he eventually redirected his energies toward the study of Kabbalah, this section offers a new perspective on Scholem’s formulation of Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism as disciplines and religiosities that are at odds with Rabbinic Judaism.

Gerhard Scholem first encountered the Babylonian Talmud, in its original form and language, on a Sunday in April 1913. Scholem was sixteen at the time, several years past the age when Orthodox boys typically begin talmudic training. But because the Scholems were not Orthodox and the Berlin Jewish Community Council refused to hire Talmud teachers for any of its religious day schools, Jewish teenagers from liberal families had little access to talmudic education. Gerhard overcame these social handicaps with the help of a few Conservative Rabbis who organized a talmudic study group for teenagers, facilitated by an Orthodox teacher in a small synagogue on Dresdenerstrasse. Over the next four years, Rabbi Isaak Bleichrode—the great-grandson of one of Eastern Europe’s talmudic luminaries, Rabbi Akiva Eiger—taught Gerhard how to learn the Talmud, to navigate its routes of logic, and to follow the cadences of its Aramaic grammar.

At the age of eighty, many decades after Gerhard emigrated to Palestine and took on a Hebrew first name, Gershom Scholem spoke of his inaugural encounter with the Talmud as an experience that jolted and restructured his Jewishness: “If I ask myself whether I ever had what one might call an Erlebnis [a living experience] in my relationship to things Jewish, I can only give one answer: it was the thrill I experienced on a Sunday in April 1913 when Bleichrode taught me to read the first page of the Talmud in the original.”

Scholem’s word choice is bewildering. For many early-twentieth-century Jews, Erlebnis was a fraught concept. Among young Jews living in pre-war Berlin, the concept was associated with the neo-romanticism of Martin Buber and the Jewish youth movements that were fashioned

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70 In a journal entry from February, 24. 1913, Gerhard writes that he had just read Samson Raphael Hirsch’s Beziehung des Talmuds (1884), and was deeply disappointed: “The reader fails to get a picture of the Talmud. On the basis of the passages he cites, one would think that the Talmud is composed of exclusively moral proverbs and the like, which isn’t the case.” See Lamentations of Youth, pp. 24-25.


72 “One did not study the Talmud, one ‘learned’ it.” Gershom Scholem, From Berlin to Jerusalem, p. 48.

73 Throughout his long life, Scholem held Isaak Bleichrode (1867-1954) in the highest esteem. In Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship (New York: New York Review of Books, 1981), p. 21, he relates an exchange he had with Walter Benjamin in 1915: “I commended to Benjamin my teacher Isaak Bleichrode, the very pious, modest, and reclusive rabbi of a small private synagogue association in our neighborhood. This great-grandson of one of the last great Talmudists of Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century had a great gift for interpreting a page of Talmud and teaching the Jewish tradition generally.” (Benjamin declined Scholem’s offer.)

74 Scholem, From Berlin to Jerusalem, p. 47.
after the *Wandervogel*, a German youth movement dedicated to hiking as a method of experiencing the natural and agrarian dimensions of German history and society.\(^{75}\) In opposition to the abstractness of historical understanding, *Erlebnis* was touted as a technique that could bring one into immediate contact with the living embers of one’s heritage—a solution for overcoming the historical distantiation that ailed young German Jews in search of a richer Jewish identity. One of these groups, the Blau-Weiss youth group, would embark on Sunday hikes, filled with Hebrew sing-alongs and community-building exercises, in hopes of experiencing a rural Jewish culture that was unburdened of urban utilitarianism. After going on two such outings with Blau-Weiss, Gerhard decided that the type of Jewishness he was seeking could not be cultivated by a hike, by camaraderie, or by the anti-intellectualism of *Erlebnis*.\(^{76}\)

Martin Buber, a mentor to a majority of the Jewish youth movements,\(^{77}\) stressed the importance of *Erlebnis* as the engine of Jewish renaissance.\(^{78}\) For modern Jewish culture to flourish again, Buber preached, Jews would need to look beyond the objective forms of Jewish religiosity and reacquaint themselves with Judaism’s core experiences, its *u*rerlebenis—mystical, untrammeled experiences of the Jewish spirit.\(^{79}\) Young German Jews would only overcome their existential alienation from Jewish tradition if they “experienced” their Judaism.

A few young Jews at the time, however, were not enamored of Buber or the prestige of religious experience.\(^{80}\) When Scholem and Walter Benjamin met in August of 1916 they forged their teenage friendship around a shared antipathy for the Jewish popularization of *Erlebnis*. In a journal entry from that period, Scholem states that their friendship was sparked by their shared critique of religious experience:

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\(^{80}\) In a journal entry from November, 6, 1916, Scholem frames his distaste for *Erlebnis* in terms of German-Jewish identity-politics: “One of the deep roots and connections of ‘Deutschjudentum’ to this impostering with Erlebnis lies herein: As a matter of fact, when one wishes to ‘experience’ [*erleben*] in Germany, one will always have a ‘German-Jewish’ experience. It is no wonder that the Erlebnis-people are so German-Jewish, but the important thing is not: to experience oneself, but to know oneself, and that is hard, very hard and for most much too inconvenient. If one were to do so he would never fall into ‘German-Jewish’ arms, but he who ‘experiences the landscape,’ who experiences this and that and absolutely everything, he saves himself from the ultimate Jewish demand. With Erlebnis one remains always a German-Jew, with Erlebnis one cannot go to Zion.” See *Lamentations of Youth*, p. 147.
During our entire period together we spoke an awfully lot about Judaism: about going to Palestine and ‘agrarian Zionism,’ about Ahad Ha-Am and ‘justice,’ but mostly about Buber, from whom after these four days not so much as anything remained. Benjamin was not wrong, when as he bade me farewell he said, were I to meet Buber I should give him a barrel of tears. Not that I learned anything in this matter from Benjamin. On the contrary, for more than nine months I thought exactly the same as he; only one point now became also verbally clear to me: the repudiation of the value of Erlebnis. From here is the question, the ‘key question,’ one may say: ‘Have you already had the Jewish Erlebnis?’...Benjamin sought to induce me to include in [an article I was to write on Buber and his youthful followers], a decisive rejection of Erlebnis-cronies: Down with Erlebnis!81

Scholem did not believe that the immediacy of experience should be promoted as the catalyst for religious revitalization. Instead, he began to foster for himself a more textually mediated encounter with the Jewish past.82 Only the painstaking study of history, he believed, with its recourse to the artifacts, texts, and archives of the past, could sustain a reawakening of Judaism. It is worth wondering why, then, Scholem describes his first encounter with the textual remnants of post-biblical Judaism as an Erlebnis, the very concept that text study was supposed to combat.

Despite Scholem’s ecstatic first experience of Talmud study, his slow acquaintanceship with the Talmud—a complex and often challenging corpus—was not painless, especially once he began to distance himself from Orthodoxy several months afterwards. The journals he kept during his first years of Talmud study capture his competing emotions as he struggled with the discrepancies between his own radical, emergent Jewish identity and the Orthodox provenance of Talmud study. In a journal entry from November 1914, a year and half after he started studying Talmud, Scholem writes: “This evening I’ll study Gemara Schir with Bleichrode. I’m eager to know what he’ll say when he finds out I’m no longer Orthodox. Still, I’m going with a good conscience, and not because of religion but to learn the Talmud thoroughly. And whoever wishes to do so has to go to the Orthodox.”83 “A good conscience” aptly describes Scholem’s desire to find his own grounding in the Jewish tradition without adapting the religiosity of those who, at the time, held the intellectual keys to that tradition. Studying the Talmud with an Orthodox Rabbi for less than Orthodox reasons gave Scholem an early opportunity to both fashion and struggle with his own idiosyncratic Jewishness. To dedicate himself to a text whose entryways were guarded by Orthodoxy Jews, he first had to grapple with his own unorthodoxy.


83 Lamentations of Youth, p.37.
Alongside his meditations on the role that religious identity plays in talmudic learning, Scholem articulates a series of critiques directed at the sacredness of the Talmud. The first of these, written on New Year’s 1916, depicts the Talmud as a forlorn catacomb of fragments:

Let’s be honest. The Talmud is not a palace with many passages, to use the metaphor people like to use out of phony romanticism. The Talmud is a heap of ruins in which occasionally magnificent fragments can be discovered and upon which one can build something again. Still, it’s a field of ruins, a gigantic structure that has unfortunately caved in. Ritual law is not an amphitheater; it’s a field of corpses. The corpses whisper like spooks, as if they were alive. It’s a heroic book, with an unusual object of heroism. The main point of this heroism is not what’s being fought for (as an absolute) but that a struggle is being waged for something recognized as absolute.\(^{84}\)

Two-and-a-half years after his original talmudic Erlebnis, the talmudic texts had become ghostly, a literary relic incapable of becoming animate again, not even by the romanticization of specters and ruins so popular among artists and intellectuals in the early twentieth century.\(^{85}\) Despite the Talmud’s occasional magnificence, Scholem expresses disbelief in its ability to rescue the Jewish past from the Talmud’s literary structures that, over time, have caved in around it. Stripped of its capacity to coherently teach Jewish content, Scholem highlights the Talmud’s minimal heroism as its redeeming contribution to Jewish culture: the Talmud models a tireless Jewish commitment to intellectual and moral struggle, the one absolute Jewish value. As Scholem notes at the close this entry, the policies and arguments of these talmudic struggles are less significant than the brute fact that they are performed repeatedly, on each page of the Talmud.

Ten days later, Scholem returns to the same concern to articulate an even more fundamental critique of the Talmud:

For me, at least, I’ve known for quite some time that the Bible is a holy book, whereas the Talmud isn’t. This is the major difference. Yes, within these entirely trivial comments resides the main difference between the deepest strata of Talmudic wisdom and the religiosity of the Bible—and this is the sense of being holy, the sense of something personally being born into us. It may be that we’re born with the legalistic Talmudic

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\(^{84}\) *Lamentations of Youth*, p. 92.

spirit, and with a legalistic dialectic, and all other such advantages and disadvantages. But deep down we know perfectly well that none of this is holy. What is holy is only that which is intact, and only the Torah and the prophets are holy.\footnote{\textit{Lamentations of Youth}, p. 97. The Bible held a special place for the young Gerhard. In a journal entry from November, 17, 1914 (\textit{Lamentations of Youth}, p. 36), he writes: “I am reading the Bible. There is no book in the entire world I read more. Each time it hits me with something fresh...I’m finding that I get much more out of the Bible than any Orthodox Jew. The reason for this must be—as Buber says—because I understand and honor it as a subject, rather than an object of religiosity. To take the Bible as an object would be terrible!” Cf. Scholem’s journal entry from December, 4, 1914 (\textit{Lamentations of Youth}, pp. 43-45).}

Scholem’s adolescent rebellion against his more secular upbringing, wherein the Bible was the sole bastion of Jewish literacy, had arrived at a moment of crisis. The legal dialectics of the Talmud capture something fundamental about the Jewish spirit’s commitment to legal rectitude. But in comparison with the Bible, the Talmud fails Scholem’s existential litmus test of holiness—when one reads the Talmud, nothing is “born into us.” A two-year-plus pursuit of the living legacy of rabbinic Judaism had seemingly been for naught, as it led Scholem to believe that the Talmud falls short of replicating or advancing the sacral style of the Hebrew Bible.

Scholem eventually quieted these philosophical and religious misgivings, at least for the time being, and resumed his Talmud studies. In late October of the same year, Scholem attests to a transformation in his relationship to the Talmud and Orthodoxy, an inner change that enabled him to return to his Talmud studies in good faith:

My two-year-long flirtation with Orthodox Judaism, or rather with its deepest inner core has really been remarkable...The Talmud is another factor in all this, as I’m finding my way back to it after having consciously abandoned it. This is happening because I now understand things in a deeper and better way...Now I know that the driest “juristic” deliberation in the Talmud is religious. In a word: it is religious because Judaism desires justice.\footnote{\textit{Lamentations of Youth}, p. 145.}

Long after renouncing his membership in the Agudah Yisrael, a nascent Orthodox youth movement, in May 1914, Scholem apparently continued to “flirt” with the “deepest inner core” of Orthodoxy, a core that, for him, centered around Talmud study. The exact factor that had led him to abandon the Talmud some ten-months earlier—the legalism of the Talmud—is now admired as the heart of Jewish religiosity: the pursuit of justice.

The following summer, in 1917, Scholem was finally drawn into the tumult of WWI and had to report for military duty in Allenstein (now part of Poland). While this event marked the end of his four-year talmudic apprenticeship with Isaak Bleichrode, it was not the culmination of Scholem’s talmudic studies. After feigning symptoms of dementia for weeks on end, Scholem was released from military service and made his way to Jena in November 1917. Once he arrived
at the University of Jena, Scholem beseeched an Eastern European, Orthodox medical student to tutor him in Talmud.  

By now his Talmud lessons were no longer a side hobby. In April 1918, Scholem delivered a lecture on the development of the Talmud to a large crowd in the neighboring city of Erfurt. He describes his reasons for giving a public lecture on the Talmud in a letter sent shortly afterwards: “I tried my best to explain the spiritual foundation of the text in as clear a manner as possible….beginning with an internal metaphysical concept (constituting the spiritual essence of the Talmud) in connection with the historical development, I wanted to elaborate on the gradual and necessary formation of the Talmud.” Unfortunately, we do not possess any further record of his Talmud lecture, which would shed considerable light on Scholem’s early theories of the Talmud. His claim to have constructed a relationship between the metaphysics and history of the Talmud is formally analogous to how Scholem approached Kabbalah— as a history that unfolds, almost necessarily, from conflicting, metaphysical axioms. The brief, first-hand reference to this lecture indicates that Scholem was working to formulate and communicate an original approach to the Talmud, and testifies to a deeper immersion in talmudic historiography than is typically attributed to Scholem.

In 1919, Scholem moved to Munich to pursue his doctoral studies with the orientalist, Fritz Hommel. His academic life did not deter him from rededicating himself to his Talmud-studies. Over the next few years in Munich, he worked through the tractate of Ketubot—a central and demanding section of the Babylonian Talmud—with the help of the Rabbi of the local Orthodox synagogue, Dr. Heinrich Ehrentreu, an émigré from Hungary, whom Scholem once described as “a dyed-in-the-wool lamdan.” In an interview with Dan Miron conducted in the late nineteen-seventies, Scholem shared an anecdote that speaks to how his peers perceived his ongoing talmudic commitments:

(S. Y.) Agnon and I were together in Munich for six months before his wedding...One time, we were walking together in Munich and I told him about my daily-life. At the time I was studying Talmud, every day, with a very great talmudic Rabbi, Rabbi Ehrentreu, and I told him all about it. One day, Agnon confronted me on the street….and he said, “Schulem” —he always called me “Schulem,” never “Scholem,” as he spoke with a Galician accent—“Schulem, I suspect that you want to be frum,” using that exact term.

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88 Scholem, From Berlin to Jerusalem, p. 108.
The word ‘frum’ has no good translation. He then said to me, “Schulem, I suspect that you want to be frum; don’t become frum!”

Agnon’s suspicions of Scholem’s frum fantasy exemplify the cultural politics surrounding Talmud study at the time. Unlike his study of Kabbalah (with its more inchoate Jewish identity-politics), Scholem’s study of Talmud, especially when conducted in a non-academic context with an Orthodox Rabbi, suggested to Agnon that he was on his way towards becoming frum, a Yiddish term for someone who adheres to Orthodox forms of religiosity. At the time, neither Agnon (who had grown up frum) nor Scholem were very frum, but Scholem’s daily Talmud study triggered something in Agnon, a fear that Scholem would lose his quirky Jewish secularism and fall into the ranks of frumkeit. Scholem seems to have paid little heed to Agnon, as he continued to study with Rabbi Ehrentreu throughout his doctoral studies, which did not lead him to become frum.

Scholem’s devotion to unraveling the pages of the Talmud did not impact his doctoral studies. He chose to write his dissertation on Sefer ha-Bahir, one of the earliest and most arcane books of Kabbalah. In part, that choice was motivated by his growing sense that Orthodoxy, and culture of talmudic study at its core, could not account for the resiliency of diasporic Judaism. For Scholem, only a Judaism of mystical tendencies (as captured in Sefer ha-Bahir) could explain the durability of Jewish culture; and only a theology of a dynamic, affectable, and mythic God could explain the Jewish adherence to particularistic rituals and laws throughout the difficult vicissitudes of exile.

Many years later, Scholem attributed his turn to Kabbalah to an appreciation of Jewish history as a dialectical process of law (Halakhah) and mysticism:

I was interested in the question: Does halakhic Judaism have enough potency to survive? Is Halakhah really possible without a mystical foundation? Does it have enough vitality of its own to survive for two thousand years without denigrating? I appreciated Halakhah without identifying with its imperatives. This question was tied up with my dreams about the Kabbalah through the notion that it might be Kabbalah that explains the survival of the consolidated force of halakhic Judaism.

Halakhic culture, on its own, Scholem argues, could not overcome the catastrophes of Jewish history. Rather, there had to be some other explanation for the resiliency of diasporic Jews, some theological mystique unbeknownst to the Orthodox readers, teachers, and adherents of the Talmud. Only the cultural impact of Kabbalah, with its mystical model of Jewish ritual and

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94 Scholem, On Jews and Judaism in Crisis, p. 19.
identity, can explain the endurance of halakhic Judaism. Once Scholem sensed that Jewish resilience could not be understood through the framework of talmudic texts and legal theories of halakhic Judaism, he shifted his intellectual energies toward Jewish trends that run parallel to Halakhah. His Orthodox Talmud teachers had little wisdom to share about these trends of Jewish mysticism.\(^95\)

By the time Scholem emigrated to Palestine in 1923, he was fully committed to analyzing and mapping the fragmented literary history of Kabbalah. Later in his life, Scholem speaks to this intellectual evolution—from Talmud to Kabbalah—in remarks that conclude his retelling of his early talmudic Erlebnis:

> It is safe to say that the encounter with Judaism, which I had in the years of my youth, kindled my intellect and my imagination equally. But this encounter was far removed from the vision that crystallized after an occupation of fifty or sixty years with so many aspects of this phenomenon. What fascinated me in those days, the power of a tradition thousands of years old, was strong enough to shape my life and to cause me to progress from the absorption of a learner to that of a researcher and thinker. In the process, however, my vision of that tradition has changed decisively...What I thought myself capable of grasping at the time—I filled many notebooks on the subject in my youth—became transformed as I grasped it, and the comprehension that I strove for turned into something that resisted conceptualization all the more emphatically the older I became; for it revealed a secret life, one which I had to acknowledge as being impossible to conceptualize, and which seemed portrayable only through symbols.\(^96\)

In hindsight, Scholem characterizes the impact of his ten years of Talmud study more as a training in critical scholarship than as an attainment of rabbinic knowledge.\(^97\) The Talmud demands of its readers a high level of participation, both logical and literary. Thus Scholem’s decade-long immersion in talmudics taught him that “reading” was not a separate act from “thinking,” a lesson that would greatly impact Scholem’s career as a critical reader of kabbalistic texts. But as Scholem delved deeper into those kabbalistic texts, he began to rethink the very nature and media of Jewish wisdom. The knowledge that Scholem sought from the Jewish past was increasingly one that defied concepts or logic: the terrain of talmudic literature. His intellectual aims now centered on extracting the “secret life” of Judaism, an esoteric region of

\(^95\) In 1915, when Scholem first became curious about Kabbalah, he bought a copy of the Zohar but could not make sense of it or find anyone who could teach him Zohar, not even his Rabbi (almost certainly a reference to Rabbi Bleichrode). When he and some friends pressed the Rabbi to teach them Kabbalah, “he suggested that a small group of us read the musar [ethical] book Reishit Hokhmah together. We learned till he stopped. He said, ‘children I can’t explain the quotations from the Zohar I don’t understand them.’” See Gershom Scholem, On Jews and Judaism in Crisis, p. 17.

\(^96\) Scholem, From Berlin to Jerusalem, pp. 48-49.

\(^97\) In the subsequent paragraph (From Berlin to Jerusalem, p. 49), Scholem highlights the three elements of the Talmud that impressed him in his youth: (1) its uncensored relationship to tradition; (2) its stylistic laconism; and (3) its dialogicity—“the dialogue of the generations, uninterrupted for so many centuries, whose protocol is the Talmud. Here truly prevailed that ‘dialogic’ life which the later Buber so emphatically placed at the center of his philosophy.”
Jewish culture that could be expressed and transmitted only through the art of symbols: the terrain of Kabbalah. The Talmud, with its focus on explicating the norms and concepts of Jewish life, is not the best text if one is seeking the elements of Judaism that transcend the limitations of common language.

Erlebnis, then, is the perfect term to describe Scholem’s inaugural encounter with the Babylonian Talmud, for the exact reasons Scholem criticized the term. Reading the Talmud for the first time with Dr. Bleichrode gave Scholem a “thrill,” an experience of a region of Judaism that had previously been withheld from his upbringing and education. Unlike baser thrills, this one impacted the course of his life—his Erlebnis was a storm, not an anchor. Yet, as Scholem shifted the nature of his Jewish search toward the ineffable, his dedication to the Talmud inevitably waned. Scholem’s use of the term “Erlebnis” to capture the significance of his first encounter with the Talmud both underscores the event’s importance and undercuts its gravity. An Erlebnis can be powerful, and even foundational, but its indiscriminate passion is a faulty gauge of what will become central to a person’s Jewishness.

Scholem believed that the inability of an Erlebnis to differentiate between religious pleasure and religious wisdom is especially problematic for young adults who are just beginning to create their Jewish identity and lifestyle. In “Farewell: An Open Letter to Dr. Siegfried Bernfeld and Against the Readers of this Journal,” a polemical essay Scholem published in 1918 in the newly created Zionist journal Jerubbaal, he lampoons the German-Jewish youth culture for its blind dedication to Erlebnis:

Since (the) youth could not keep silent or speak, could not see or do, it had living experiences (Erlebnisse). In these pages, even the Torah has been turned into an Erlebnis. The vague mysticism to which Judaism is offered up on the altar of Erlebnis, that is the true crown of the youth movement. There is nothing great, from landscape to God and Torah, that in Erlebnis has not been connected to chatter. And they even had a living experience of the war when that was still fashionable...But in truth the Erlebnis is, after all, the chimerical, the absolute turned into chatter.

While it’s unlikely that Scholem appraised his youthful passion for the Talmud as a chimerical affection, it is not difficult to see how and why Scholem’s first experience with the Talmud would undergo the same critique that he leveled against all Erlebnis: Jewish experiences are not informative. Experiences are unable to generate a genuine knowledge of the Jewish tradition or of the fragmentary character of that tradition in its modern guise.

Moshe Idel, one of Scholem’s most significant successors, credits Scholem’s fateful turn to Kabbalah to a lack of familiarity with the sources of classical Judaism: “Devoid of an intimate relation to those Jewish classical sources that informed most of the Jewish mystics, Scholem found the solution for his quandary as to the causes which contributed to the survival of Judaism

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98 Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 47.
in religious material *en vogue* during his early reading on Kabbalah, viz. (Joseph Franz) Molitor, and his intellectual milieu.”

The documents collated here on Scholem’s early engagement with the Babylonian Talmud paint a different picture. When searching for the mystical proclivities of Judaism, Scholem did not overlook rabbinic literature out of ignorance. Rather, his belief that rabbinic culture and Jewish mysticism are incommensurate emerged out of his own experience grappling with the message and metaphysics of the Talmud. Scholem’s sense of a foundational schism between Rabbinics and Kabbalah may be rightfully challenged, but it was not caused by a lack of familiarity with rabbinic texts. Rather, the history traced here of Scholem’s ambivalent, decade-long relationship with the Babylonian Talmud paints a more complex picture of Scholem’s relinquishment of rabbinic study-culture and his formulation of Jewish mysticism as a sort of counter-Halakhah.

How might we best approach this entanglement of Scholem’s early life experiences with his subsequent scholarship? Some insight may be gleaned by exploring how Scholem himself approached a similar problematic.

The majority of Jewish mystics did not produce or circulate confessional writings, a feature that distinguishes Jewish mystical literature from the autobiographical style of Islamic and Christian mystical writings. Scholem laments this lacuna because it inhibits the scholar from recovering a vibrant, multi-dimensional history of Kabbalah: “It is obvious that the absence of the autobiographical element is a serious obstacle to any psychological understanding of Jewish mysticism.”

With Scholem we are more fortunate. Throughout his long life, he maintained personal journals and preserved his numerous epistolary exchanges. These confessional

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documents enable a “psychological understanding” of Scholem as a person and scholar. How do these intimate resources reorient our perception of Scholem’s Kabbalah scholarship?  

The documentary traces of Scholem’s talmudic studies do not necessarily generate a psychological rereading of Scholem’s kabbalah scholarship. But the history of Scholem’s fraught experience with rabbinic literature and his subsequent decision to turn to a more symbolic, mythic, and theosophic substratum of Jewish creativity provides a new lens onto Scholem’s compartmentalization of Judaism into two opposing styles: a traditional/Orthodox/Rabbinic Judaism and an anarchic/subversive/mystical Judaism.

The earliest evidence of this schism in Scholem’s scholarship can be extracted from the classificatory work he produced as a librarian during his early years in Jerusalem. In 1927, Hugo Bergman (the acting director of the Hebrew University Library) and Scholem (the director of the Judaic collection) developed an adaptation of the Dewey Decimal Classification for the purposes of organizing the Judaic collection into broad area-topics and sub-thematic taxonomies. The resultant guide, *Seder ha-Miktso’ot be-Mada’e ha-Yahadut* (Jerusalem, 1927), divides the “296” class number, dedicated by Dewey to “Jewish Religion,” into eight subclasses: (296.1) Religion, Theology, and Philosophy; (296.2) Antisemitism; (296.3) Prayer and Minhagim (Traditions); (296.4) Ethics and Homilies; (296.5) Halakhah after the closing of the Talmud; (296.6) Sects, For a maximalist position on the power of Scholem’s autobiographical documents to generate new perspectives on his scholarship, see Benjamin Lazier, “Writing the Judenzarathustra: Geshom Scholem’s Response to Modernity, 1913-1917,” *New German Critique*, Vol. 85 (2002), pp. 33-65. See especially his comments on pp. 36-37: “Scholem described his diaries as a ‘place of honesty, where I am alone with myself’; they afford, it seems, an unparalleled vantage. Moreover, a detailed grasp of Scholem’s early years—“decisive. . . for his entire life,” as he later wrote—proves indispensable for a proper understanding of his subsequent academic and political trajectory. It enables us to de-divinize Scholem, by revealing his monumental work, in part, as the highly contingent and idiosyncratic product of his youthful obsessions. In doing so, it on the one hand helps to open a cultural space for competing approaches to Kabbalah studies, and on the other, helps us better appreciate the true virtuosity and force of Scholem’s researches.” For a different perspective, focused on the relationship between the diaries of ‘Gerhard’ and the scholarship of ‘Gershom,’ see Michael Brenner, “From Self-Declared Messiah to Scholar of Messianism: The Recently Published Diaries Present Young Gerhard Scholem in a New Light,” *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 177-182. See also Joseph Dan, *Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), pp. 4-9. More recently, Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 3, has proposed that the plot of Scholem’s life and the plot of his kabbalistic historiography must be read in light of each other. In a letter, penned on January 13, 1958, Scholem responded with a vengeance to Zwi Werblowsky’s critical review of his book on Sabbatai Zvi. Among his many criticisms, he addresses the very methodological issue that concerns us here: “I find myself confronted here with a phenomenon that is completely foreign to me—namely, a psychological interpretation of the factors determining the relation between a researcher and his field of study. A major part of your essay is devoted to such reflections, and I cannot understand your interest in it. Was it a bad joke that led you to write about me in such a way? Or did you think you had discovered something about my innermost soul that has not revealed itself to me? I can only shake my head” (*A Life in Letters*, p. 371). For a similarly cautious approach to this methodological question, with a different range of concerns, see Daniel Abrams, “Presenting and Representing Gershom Scholem: A Review Essay,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (May, 2000), pp. 226-243.

102 For a maximalist position on the power of Scholem’s autobiographical documents to generate new perspectives on his scholarship, see Benjamin Lazier, “Writing the Judenzarathustra: Geshom Scholem’s Response to Modernity, 1913-1917,” *New German Critique*, Vol. 85 (2002), pp. 33-65. See especially his comments on pp. 36-37: “Scholem described his diaries as a ‘place of honesty, where I am alone with myself’; they afford, it seems, an unparalleled vantage. Moreover, a detailed grasp of Scholem’s early years—“decisive. . . for his entire life,” as he later wrote—proves indispensable for a proper understanding of his subsequent academic and political trajectory. It enables us to de-divinize Scholem, by revealing his monumental work, in part, as the highly contingent and idiosyncratic product of his youthful obsessions. In doing so, it on the one hand helps to open a cultural space for competing approaches to Kabbalah studies, and on the other, helps us better appreciate the true virtuosity and force of Scholem's researches.” For a different perspective, focused on the relationship between the diaries of ‘Gerhard’ and the scholarship of ‘Gershom,’ see Michael Brenner, “From Self-Declared Messiah to Scholar of Messianism: The Recently Published Diaries Present Young Gerhard Scholem in a New Light,” *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 177-182. See also Joseph Dan, *Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), pp. 4-9. More recently, Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 3, has proposed that the plot of Scholem’s life and the plot of his kabbalistic historiography must be read in light of each other. In a letter, penned on January 13, 1958, Scholem responded with a vengeance to Zwi Werblowsky’s critical review of his book on Sabbatai Zvi. Among his many criticisms, he addresses the very methodological issue that concerns us here: “I find myself confronted here with a phenomenon that is completely foreign to me—namely, a psychological interpretation of the factors determining the relation between a researcher and his field of study. A major part of your essay is devoted to such reflections, and I cannot understand your interest in it. Was it a bad joke that led you to write about me in such a way? Or did you think you had discovered something about my innermost soul that has not revealed itself to me? I can only shake my head” (*A Life in Letters*, p. 371). For a similarly cautious approach to this methodological question, with a different range of concerns, see Daniel Abrams, “Presenting and Representing Gershom Scholem: A Review Essay,” *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (May, 2000), pp. 226-243.

Religious Movements, and *Torat ha-Sod* (Esotericism); (296.7) Folklore; (296.8) Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash. Books related to Kabbalah are included in 296.6 (296.65) alongside books on other Jewish sects, such as the Karaites (296.63), and other modes of Jewish mysticism, such as *Gnosis* (“mysticism during the talmudic and geonic period”). The literature of Kabbalah, according to this taxonomy, has more in common with sectarian rebels than with talmudic Rabbis.

Scholem’s subsequent writings on Jewish mysticism further accentuate this taxonomical schema. When approaching the relationship between rabbinic culture and Jewish mysticism (typically relegated to Halakhah and Aggadah, respectively), Scholem transforms a pedagogical distinction (who studies Halakhah and who studies Aggadah) into a phenomenological dialectic (“mysticism” and “rabbinism” differ even as they dynamically affect each other) and a historiographical discontinuity (medieval Kabbalah does not emerge from Late Antique rabbinic traditions). Thus, when we assess Scholem’s eventual decision to fashion the study of Kabbalah as an autonomous domain within the history of religions, detached from Rabbinic Studies, we need to explore how his kabbalistic historiography engenders both a synchronic schism between mystical and rabbinic orientations, and a diachronic disjunction between the literatures produced by Late Antique rabbis and medieval kabbalists.

On the synchronic plane, Scholem plots “rabbinism” and “mysticism” as overlapping but distinct arenas of Jewish life. Commenting on the *Lebenzeit* of Hekhalot texts (written around the middle of the first-millennium), Scholem writes:

> Too great was the danger, in this period of ubiquitous Jewish and Christian heresies, that mystical speculation based on private religious experience would come into conflict with that “rabbinical” Judaism which was rapidly crystallizing during the same epoch. The ‘Greater Hekhaloth’ show in many and often highly interesting details that their anonymous authors were anxious to develop their ‘Gnosis’ within the framework of

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Halakhic Judaism, notwithstanding its partial incompatibility with the new religious spirit; the original religious impulses active in these circles came, after all, from sources quite different from those of Orthodox Judaism.105

Scholem’s anachronistic identification of Late Antique rabbinic culture with Orthodox Judaism mirrors his own experience in early twentieth-century Europe of Orthodox Jews as the sole teachers of rabbinic Judaism. The larger semantic slippages in this excerpt, between rabbinic Judaism, Halakhic Judaism, and Orthodox Judaism, inhibit Scholem from aptly studying the variety of discourses and Jewish identities that flourished in Late Antiquity. Ra’anan Boustan diagnoses this shortcoming of Scholem’s approach to Late Antique Judaism: “Scholem’s understanding of the inner dialectic between the mystical and the halakhic-normative dimensions within a single but multifaceted Judaism has unwittingly encouraged a binary view of the Jewish tradition, in which the mystical and the rabbinic represent two diametrically opposed forms of Judaism.”106 Scholem’s commitment to a phenomenological schism that divides rabbinic law from Late Antique mysticism deterred him from studying the relationships forged throughout Late Antiquity between the sensibilities of religious life depicted in the Talmud and those depicted in more mantic, magical, and apocalyptic texts of the same period. In place of a hybrid model of Late Antique Judaism, Scholem views the Talmud as the bastion of Halakhic Judaism. Meanwhile, Hekhalot texts—even as they try, for heresiological reasons, to smuggle their mystical tropes into boundaries of rabbinism—expose the vast chasm between rabbinic and mystical forms of religiosity.

Scholem maintains that the schism between rabbinic and mystical propensities continues into the medieval period as an orienting factor in the formation of Kabbalah in Spain and France:

There has been no lack of kabbalists who either had no learning whatsoever, or who lacked the proper rabbinic training. Thus enabled to look at Judaism from a fresh angle, these men frequently produced highly important and interesting ideas, and so there grew up, side by side with the scholarly Kabbalah of the Rabbis, another line of prophetic and visionary mysticism. The pristine enthusiasm of these early ecstatics frequently lifted the heavy lid of rabbinic scholasticism, and for all their readiness to compromise occasionally came into conflict with it.107

The socio-cultural divide between two forms of Jewishness is clearly articulated: scholasticism and rabbinic training on one side, enthusiastic and ecstatic mystics with little rabbinic education on the other. For Scholem, among the latter grouping are Spanish kabbalists such as Abraham Abulafia and Isaac ha-Kohen who were known to lack a robust rabbinic education. However, as Scholem was surely aware, these were historical outliers. At large, even those medieval Spanish

105 Scholem, Major Trends, p. 47.
107 Scholem, Major Trends, p. 125.
kabbalists who were not part of the rabbinic elite demonstrate a mastery of rabbinic texts and tropes, either legal or theological.\textsuperscript{108}

On the diachronic plane, Scholem’s historiography of Kabbalah counters the origin narratives of more traditional accounts of Kabbalah. Medieval kabbalists mainly attribute their esoteric lore to biblical and rabbinic characters. Some attribute the origins of their traditions to an angelic revelation of secrets to ancient figures like Moses and Adam, while others point to rabbinic figures as the progenitors of esoteric texts.\textsuperscript{109} After years of archival labor, Scholem arrived at the conclusion that a documentary history of Kabbalah does not substantiate these origin stories. Rather, the principles of modern philology prove that the central themes of Kabbalah originate within the medieval context of its production and circulation.\textsuperscript{110} Although Jewish mystical traditions can be dated as far back as the Second Temple period, Scholem stresses their discontinuity, both in terms of content and transmission, with medieval Kabbalah: “the forms of Jewish mysticism that appeared in the Middle Ages from around 1200 onward under the name ‘Kabbalah’ are so different from any earlier forms, and in particular from the Jewish gnosis of Merkabah mysticism and German Hasidism of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that a direct transition from one to the other is scarcely conceivable.”\textsuperscript{111}

In Scholem’s historiographical model, ancient Jewish esoteric traditions and medieval kabbalistic traditions may only be connected under the broad phenomenological rubric of “Jewish mysticism,” but lack any firm genealogical ties.\textsuperscript{112} Kabbalah is historically alienated from earlier esoteric Jewish traditions, such as Second Temple apocalypticism, talmudic cosmogony, magic, linguistic cosmologies, and ascent literature. Instead, Kabbalah’s origins must begin outside of Judaism, in the neighboring (and nebulous) theosophies of medieval

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\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., p. 7.
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Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. This historiography of discontinuity substantiates Scholem’s broader, Hegelian theory of Judaism’s evolution. A primordial mythic stage (pre-biblical) is overcome by the anti-mythic tendencies of “ethical religion” (biblical and rabbinic period). Eventually those tendencies are mitigated by the resurgence of kabbalistic mythology in the Middle Ages in a new register—the soul rather than nature now serves as the site of mythos.

Even as rabbinic literature contains flashes of “mysticism,” those rare moments exist within an anti-mythic cultural milieu that is radically at odds with the mythic weltanschauung of medieval Kabbalah. Hence the historical (diachronic) and phenomenological (synchronic) distinctions that organize Scholem’s approach to Kabbalah reinforce each other to thoroughly distance the rabbinic from the kabbalistic.

The recent surfacing of Scholem’s juvenilia has instigated a reappraisal of the ideology and passions that galvanized the founder of Kabbalah Studies throughout his six decades of scholarship. For the most part, contemporary historians have been making use of these autobiographical documents to excavate Scholem’s political theology: the messianism, Zionism, and anarcho politics that engulfed his youth in Germany. By exploring Scholem’s personal involvement in these early twenty-first-century movements, a revisionary light is cast onto Scholem’s theories of Early-Modern kabbalistic messianism and onto his perception of his scholarly labor as a secular form of nation-building.

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113 “Theosophy” is Scholem’s preferred term for what distinguishes Kabbalah (along with Gnosticism and Neoplatonism) from other forms of religious philosophy. The term was first made popular by Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) and the organization she founded, the Theosophical Society. On the role of Kabbalah in this movement, see Boaz Huss, “Qabbalah, the Theo-Sophia of the Jews: Jewish Theosophists and their Perceptions of Kabbalah,” in Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Tradition, eds. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016), pp. 137-166. Scholem defines his use of the term (Major Trends, p. 206) as follows: “By theosophy I mean that which was generally meant before the term became a label for a modern pseudo-religion, ie. theosophy signifies a mystical doctrine, or school of thought, which purports to perceive and to describe the mysterious workings of the Divinity, perhaps also believing it possible to become absorbed in contemplation. Theosophy postulates a kind of divine emanation whereby God, abandoning his self-contained repose, awakens to mysterious life; further, it maintains that the mysteries of creation reflect the pulsation of this divine life.”

114 See Scholem, Major Trends, pp. 7-8.

I have turned to Scholem’s biography for insight into a different problem within Scholem’s scholarship—namely, his excision of Kabbalah from rabbinic literature and culture. The documentary history of Scholem’s devotion to the study of Talmud (1913-1921) provides a window onto his evolving relationship to rabbinism, both as an ancient textual phenomenon (the Talmud) and as a modern social formation (Orthodoxy).

The one constant feature of Scholem’s ever-changing relation to the Talmud is his association of the Talmud with Orthodoxy. When he first began studying its Aramaic pages he fashioned himself as an Orthodox rebel; Talmud study gave him access to the parts of Judaism that were purged from his liberal upbringing. Later, after he shed all allegiances to Orthodoxy, Scholem continued to study Talmud with Orthodox rabbis. At the time, they were the only ones able and willing to mentor him in the logic of talmudic argumentation. This identification of Talmud with Orthodoxy, solidified throughout his youth in Germany, plays an implicit though significant role in the Kabbalah scholarship Scholem wrote in Palestine. Given that Scholem views Kabbalah, along with Jewish mysticism more generally, as an anarchic form of Judaism that is in constant dialectical tension with “Orthodox” rabbinic norms, and given that Scholem associates the study of talmudic literature with the latter, he is want to argue that talmudic and kabbalistic knowledge are produced within distinct cultural spaces.117

II: Models of Interdisciplinarity in the Modern Study of Medieval Jewish Esotericism

Since the late nineteen-eighties, many Jewish Studies scholars have resisted Scholem’s disjunctive historiography of Kabbalah/Rabbinics. By broadening the disciplinary and period-based schemas of Kabbalah studies, these scholars have generated new methodologies for mapping the entanglements of Kabbalah and rabbinic culture.118 These multidisciplinary paradigms reintegrate Kabbalah into the long duration of Jewish esotericism, re-explore Kabbalah’s relationship to the medieval afterlives of rabbinic texts and modes of learning, and revise Scholem’s models of kabbalistic phenomenology. While these trends do not necessarily reaffirm the traditionalist approach to Kabbalah (which sees no historical or generic gap between rabbinic and kabbalistic creativity), they do engage more seriously with the central role that rabbinic learning (the study of Talmud and Midrash) had for medieval kabbalists.

Two distinct paradigms may be identified within the recent revision of Kabbalah scholarship: source-history and curricular-history. Each of these paradigms has its own method of studying the historical relationship between “the rabbinic” and “the kabbalistic.” Scholars who work in the source-history paradigm investigate how the emergence of Kabbalah in the post-rabbinic moment is enabled by a resurgence of rabbinic images, concepts, mythologies, and cosmologies. While the two forms of Jewish culture and literature emerge at two distinct

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117 This perspective may have also played a role in his decision to ignore the Orthodox kabbalists of Palestine. See Boaz Huss, “Ask No Question: Gershom Scholem and the Study of Contemporary Jewish Mysticism,” Modern Judaism, Vol. 25 (2005), pp. 141-158; and Shaul Magid, “The King is Dead [and has been for three decades], Long Live the King’: Contemporary Kabbalah and Scholem’s Shadow,” Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. 102:1 (2012), pp. 131-153.

118 For the most recent account of these ongoing trends, see Boaz Huss, The Question About the Existence of Jewish Mysticism, pp. 71-101.
historical moments—Kabbalah in the Middle Ages and Rabbinics in Late Antiquity—these scholars argue that they are bound up with each other as a candle to a flame (to borrow a kabbalistic metaphor). Scholars who work in the curricular-history paradigm transform Scholem’s synchronic arguments. By focusing on the formation of multiple medieval Jewish study-cultures, they highlight the dynamic interactions between kabbalistic and rabbinic learning practices. One way to capture the difference between these two trends is that source-historians examine the antecedents of kabbalistic concepts and images, while curricular-historians examine the formation of kabbalistic practices and methods of learning.

Moshe Idel and Yehuda Liebes have both mobilized a “source-history” of Jewish mythology to make axial revisions to Scholem’s historiography. In an early essay, Liebes writes of his indebtedness to and metamorphosis of Scholem’s history of Judaism:

I am a disciple of Scholem, but I have attempted to break further ground. Scholem did carve out a space for myth within Judaism, but restricted it to a specific, defined realm, opposed to ‘ordinary’ Judaism whereas, in this book, I try to show that Jewish myth spans far beyond the ‘ghetto’ to which it has been confined. The chief uniqueness of Kabbala is not its mythologoumena, in and by themselves, but in the form and in the patterns of thought in which they were expressed.119

Leibes approaches Kabbalah not as a radical theological revolution instigated by Gnostic mythologies but as a stylistic transformation of ancient Jewish symbols and myths. The goal of Kabbalah scholarship is to map those slow transformations of style and form so that a lineage can be traced from Kabbalah back to Rabbinic literature. In a subsequent essay, “‘De Natura Dei’: On the Development of the Jewish Myth,” Liebes highlights a cluster of mythological connections between texts from the Talmud and Kabbalah. Yet, Liebes is less interested in the stylistics of the Talmud than in the Talmud as a comprehensive repository of mythologies. He turns to the Talmud to help document the indigenous evolution of Kabbalah, “given the Talmud’s central place in Jewish literature and its quality as a clear, early document, less influenced by outside currents of thought and marked by stronger mythical leanings.”120 In this model, Medieval kabbalists did not look to the Talmud for its formal and logical specificity—its textuality—but, rather, for its theological contents, its imaginings of the celestial realm, its stories of rabbinic miracle workers, and its angelic lore.

Moshe Idel also refrains from addressing the Talmud’s precise role in the development of Kabbalah. His critique of Scholem is directed at his predecessor’s phenomenological reduction of rabbinic culture into a mentality that is both monotonous and antithetical to the kabbalistic mentality. Idel proposes that in order to provide a more exacting model of rabbinic influence on Kabbalah, we need to be more precise with how we organize and label rabbinic sources:

In lieu of assuming such a profound contrast between two types of religiosity, (which were often cultivated by one and the same person) it would be better to make use of a more moderate description. Rabbinism was not a homogeneous religiosity; it incorporates diverging views on many issues, including the preference, or the rejection of mythical types of expression. It is therefore quite strange that Scholem implicitly identified Rabbinism exclusively with Halakhah, whereas the Aggadah was not included as part of the discussion of the dichotomy Rabbinism-Kabbalism.\textsuperscript{121}

In the continuation of that essay, Idel hones in on the rabbinic origins of kabbalistic theurgy, the notion that rituals can empower or arouse God. Theurgy welds together myths about God with rabbinic laws about ritual, and therefore provides a powerful example of how to approach the interrelations in rabbinic thought between law and legend. Idel’s scholarship continues to encourage other Kabbalah researchers to search through primary rabbinic sources and extracanonical traditions to locate the concepts that inspired later kabbalistic authors.\textsuperscript{122}

Jacob Katz and Moshe Halbertal have also offered serious revisions to Scholem’s theses and methods, and have done so from a unique angle. Both began their scholarly careers working and writing on medieval rabbinic culture and only later came to address the role of Kabbalah and esotericism within rabbinic culture. Their unique disciplinary orientation allows them to address questions and employ methodologies that are rather different than those common among Kabbalah scholars. Instead of mapping the origins of kabbalistic concepts within rabbinic culture, they turn to medieval Jewish curriculums as the cultural sites where kabbalistic learning and talmudic learning overlap, compete, and transform each other. Where “text-historians” map the emergence of Kabbalah, Katz and Halbertal map the medieval moments where Kabbalah merges together with other disciplines of Jewish scholarly life. The questions at the heart of their projects include: How was Jewish learning structured in the schoolhouses of kabbalists? Did kabbalists spend equal time studying exoterica and esoterica? And, most important for our context, what role did Talmud study play in the life of a medieval kabbalist? These questions shift the conversation from the ideational origins of Kabbalah to the curricular decisions medieval Jews had to make as they encountered new bodies of esoteric knowledge.

In an essay from 1979, Katz noted a significant lacuna in contemporary kabbalistic scholarship: Scholem and his students study the Kabbalah as a history of ideas; Heinrich Graetz and Yitzhak Baer elucidated the social history of kabbalistic movements; but little research exists on the social dimensions of kabbalistic learning—the institutional negotiations that must have occurred between the study of Kabbalah and the study of other fields of intellectual life, such as philosophy, Halakhah, Aggadah, and poetry.\textsuperscript{123} Some of these concerns have been addressed, declares Katz, by modern scholars who mapped the intersections of philosophy and Kabbalah


and tracked the influence Kabbalah had on medieval poetry. However, “the contact between Halakhah and Kabbalah, whose existence is apparent to the eye, has not yet found its advocates.” Katz indexes that contact along three criteria: (1) the preference of one field’s legitimacy in the realm of legal decision-making, (2) the allocation of study time (curriculum), and (3) the mention and use of halakhot in kabbalistic writings. Focusing on the history of these scholarly negotiations allows Katz to study kabbalists as Jews who both made choices between competing disciplines and made new connections between areas of Torah study with multiple points of overlap.

The principles of Katz’s model of disciplinary competition become explicit in his second essay on this topic, “Halakhah and Kabbalah as Competing Disciplines of Study.” Here, he organizes the data on different Jewish study practices into the arch-categories of Halakhah and Aggadah. The former designates all study related to ritual (mitzvoth), while the latter captures those Jewish attempts to provide the former with meaning and mystery. Katz indexes the competition between these two domains in units of study time (curriculum) and esteem (intellectual capital), and figures that competition as a zero-sum equation. Each Jewish scholar had to choose between giving eminence and priority to Halakhah or to Aggadah. Katz no longer stresses the points of contact between multiple medieval disciplines, as he had done in his earlier article. Instead, he highlights the inevitability of medieval competition between two arch-disciplines—Halakhah and Aggadah.

The exact theory motivating Katz’s zero-sum model of disciplinary competition becomes visible in the essay’s analysis of the early-modern kabbalist, Rabbi Moses Cordevero (Ramak). In Or Ne’erav, Cordevero’s introduction to Kabbalah meant for a new and growing sixteenth-century audience, he writes that some knowledge of pilpul, the art of talmudic dialectics, is necessary for comprehending the non-material nature of metaphysics. Katz rightly highlights this moment as one of interdisciplinarity, where the specificity of talmudic thinking is brought to bear on the practices of Kabbalah. Yet Katz concludes that interdisciplinarity was unlikely to succeed in this context because of the fundamental difference between the two disciplines’ epistemologies:

An atmosphere of irrational tension pervaded kabbalistic study—the opposite of the mentality that obtained among those engaged in the analysis of talmudic passages or the classification of points in Halakhah. To move back and forth periodically between the two worlds obviously demanded considerable effort, and we have already noted the difficulties encountered by Ramak in preserving his ties with both. Such tensions would

presumably result if not in a declining involvement in Halakhah then in a weakening desire to increase and improve one’s knowledge of it.126

Katz’s assumption—explicit here, but implicit throughout the essay—is that the illogical methods of kabbalistic learning are irremediably distinct from the logical methods of halakhic learning and attempts to shuttle or create bridges between the two are fated to fail. It is no surprise, then, that the cognitive dissimilarity between kabbalistic and halakhic mentalities creates a scholarly environment of competition, one that enforces epistemological barriers against attempts at collaboration.

Katz’s essays on Kabbalah and Halakhah gesture toward a new methodology of Jewish history, one that studies the interaction of disparate disciplines and situates the development of Kabbalah within a robust landscape of different styles of rabbinic learning and creativity. But his decision to collapse those disciplines into the binary of Halakhah and Aggadah, and to argue that their relation is inherently one of antagonism and competition, hinders the reach of his project.

This critique of Katz is remedied by Moshe Halbertal’s studies on the relationship between Talmud study and other Jewish disciplines within medieval rabbinic culture.127 Halbertal examines why a medieval scholar might have spent more time studying Kabbalah than Talmud, without arguing for the irrationality of a particular discipline. Adopting Moshe Idel’s thesis that Kabbalah is best organized into two phenomenological trends, ecstatic and theosophic,128 Halbertal argues that each of these trends produced its own critique of exclusive talmudism. Ecstatic Kabbalah names a group of kabbalists who developed techniques for attaining self-absorption in God, an experiential state they identified with devekut (cleaving). Halbertal argues that the specific end goal of these techniques runs counter to the demanding logic of the Talmud. He notes that, “Talmud study could not help one attain the mystical goal of devekut, for the demand for constant attention to intellectual detail conflicts with self-negation...In neo-Platonic terminology, the talmudist is on the way down while he should be on the way up.”129 The theosophical kabbalists, on the other hand, were less concerned with ecstatic experience and aimed at developing a dynamic mapping of the Godhead that could be both affected and harmonized through ritual action. Rather, they criticized the talmudists as being blind to the true, theosophical meanings of the commandments. Thus, only for the ecstatic kabbalist does the dialectical methodology of Talmud study hinder the kabbalistic aim. The theosophical kabbalist, who does not seek personal absorption within God, is more critical of the Talmud’s telos than of the scholastic techniques of Talmud study. On its own, the Talmud does not lead a reader to the theosophical mysteries of the mitzvoth.

Halbertal also modifies Katz’s model of curricular competition by highlighting that kabbalists and philosophers frequently impose their hermeneutics of depth upon the Talmud,

129 Moshe Idel, Kabbalah, p. 120.
finding allegorical or symbolic resonances in talmudic discourses. The conflict between Talmud and Kabbalah is not only about curricular prominence. Each field of study also has its own discipline, reading strategies, and norms. Those disciplinary orientations tend be totalizing—many allegorical readings of the Talmud were produced by medieval philosophers and kabbalists.\textsuperscript{130} Halbertal frames these disciplinary crossovers as acts of strong reading:

Neither camp—kabbalist or philosopher—was content with merely supplementing the curriculum or, in more extreme versions, replacing it. They claimed that the supplement they proposed affected the reading of the shared textual material; that it was the hidden meaning of the traditional text, its allegorical interpretation, or its profound symbolic layer. This attitude expands the scope of the issue, for now it concerns not only the question of what, if anything, should supplement the Talmud, but also how to read the Talmud itself.\textsuperscript{131}

This shift in analysis from what was studied to how it was studied opens up new avenues for analyzing the relational history of Talmud study and the study of philosophy and Kabbalah. By identifying how one discipline impacts another, historians can move beyond models of curricular competition to research the influence of each discipline upon the methodologies of other domains of Jewish learning. Halbertal limits his observations to a single direction of influence: the impact of philosophy/Kabbalah on talmudic reading practices. The next chapter of this dissertation extends Halbertal’s concerns to the other side of the relationship: how did the methodologies and practices of Talmud study affect the medieval discipline(s) of Jewish esotericism? Maimonides’ eclectic writings provide a compelling and unique data set for answering that exact question.


\textsuperscript{131} Moshe Halbertal, \textit{People of the Book}, p. 124.
Chapter Two

Maimonides’ Parades:
A Medieval Model of Jewish Interdisciplinarity

I: The Pardes in the Talmud

Few figures are more lauded than Maimonides for uniting disparate Jewish disciplines. His magnum opus, *Mishneh Torah*, begins by addressing theological topics and incorporates ruminations on non-legal tropes throughout its fourteen books of legal code. In this chapter, I expand upon this portrayal of Maimonides as an interdisciplinary innovator by analyzing how he blends together two disciplines, talmudics and esotericism, in a manner that is distinctly dissimilar from his synthesis of law and (exoteric) philosophy, of Torah and science. Our investigation into Maimonides’ theory of talmudic disciplinarity will revolve around a seemingly straightforward claim that Maimonides makes in his *Mishneh Torah*: “The subjects called *pardes* are included in the Talmud.”

To unpack the meaning and cultural stakes of this declaration of inclusion, I will first elucidate its two key terms—“Talmud” and “pardes”—beginning with “Talmud.”

An influential rabbinic adage advises one to divide their hours of scholarship into equal thirds—a third for scripture, a third for mishnah, and a third for talmud. Maimonides redefines the talmudic portion of that curriculum as follows:

> The time allotted to study should be divided into three parts. A third should be devoted to the Written Law; a third to the Oral Law; and the last third should be spent in reflection, deducing conclusions from premises, developing implications of statements, comparing dicta, studying the hermeneutical principles by which the Torah is interpreted, till one knows the essence of these principles, and how to deduce what is permitted and what is forbidden from what one has learned traditionally. This is termed Talmud.

The portion of the rabbinic curriculum designated as “Talmud” no longer prescribes reading or interpreting the pages of the Talmud, but performing the very practices of ratiocination that characterize talmudic discourse, such as the production of teleological inferences, deductions,
and analogies. Study of the pages of the Talmud, one presumes, is only included in the second division of the curriculum, that of the “Oral Law.”

Maimonides’ redefinition of Talmud study as a practice of thinking, in contradistinction to a practice of textual study, is a big part of why he composed the Mishneh Torah in the first place. In the introduction to the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides laments that rabbinic students of his milieu get bogged down in the labyrinthine rhetoric and dialectics of the Talmud. The remedy for this would be a more succinct summation of the Talmud’s legal directives, and his magisterial code of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah, aims to provide exactly that stylistic concision. Hence, when Maimonides writes that the second third of one’s study regimen should be dedicated to the Oral Torah, he does not wish students to devote too much of that time to dissecting the dialectics of the Talmud. Rather, he is prescribing the recitation of his own summation of oral tradition so that students will then have ample time to practice talmudic forms of knowledge production. Maimonides makes this radical aim clear in the introduction to Mishneh Torah:

I, Moses the son of Maimon the Sefardi, bestirred myself, and, relying on the help of God, blessed be He, intently studied all these works (of rabbinic literature), with the view of putting together the results obtained from them in regard to what is forbidden or permitted, clean or unclean, and the other laws of the Torah—all in plain language and terse style, so that thus the entire Oral Law might become systematically known to all, without citing difficulties and solutions or differences of view, one person saying so, and another saying something else—but consisting of statements, clear and convincing...so that no other work should be needed for ascertaining any of the laws of Israel, but that this work might serve as a compendium of the entire Oral Law...Hence I have entitled this work Mishneh Torah (Repetition of the Law), for the reason that a person who first reads the Written Law and then this compilation, will know from it the whole of the Oral Law, without having occasion to consult any other book between them.

Maimonides’ well-organized code of the Oral Law promises to free the rabbinic scholar from wading through the dense panoply of talmudic voices and dialogue—a demanding task that rarely leads to legal lucidity. These two passages, when read in tandem, suggest that Maimonides believes that Jewish scholars would be better off minimizing the time and effort they typically

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136 Hannah Kasher claims that Maimonides would not consider one who studies the dialectics of the Talmud as having fulfilled the requisites of “Talmud study” (i.e., talmudic reasoning). See her “Talmud Torah as a Means of Apprehending God in Maimonides’ Teachings,” Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought 5 (1986), p. 78.


spend reading the Talmud and apply that excess intellectual energy to hone the very acts of rabbinic logic that the Talmud records.\footnote{See Menachem Kellner, “Maimonides’ Disputed Legacy” in ed. Carlos Fraenkel, \textit{Traditions of Maimonideanism} (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 263.}

In truth, Maimonides’ redefinition of Talmud study revives the original meaning of “talmud.” As used in the talmudic adage that directs one to spend a third of one’s life studying talmud, the term “talmud” refers to the analytical, discipline of Torah, wherein one analyzes the reasoning and implications of scriptural and oral laws.\footnote{In tannaitic and Palestinian amoraic sources “talmud” designates a practice akin to scriptural exegesis, as exemplified in the legal midrashim. See, Moulie Vidas, \textit{Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 120.} By reinstating its original and practical meaning, Maimonides is resisting what Talya Fishman calls the “textualization of the rabbinic culture”—the medieval transformation of talmud from an oral negotiation of competing traditions to the study of talmudic texts as binding legal referents.\footnote{See Talya Fishman, \textit{Becoming the People of the Book: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Cultures} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); for her comments on Maimonides, see p. 160.} To resist the new trends of rabbinic study culture, Maimonides adopts an older, and largely outdated, theory of talmud as a discipline, a set of cognitive practices that generate deductions, inferences, and analogies from established Jewish traditions.

After elucidating the Maimonidean referent of “talmud,” I turn now to the meaning of “pardes.” In an earlier chapter of \textit{Mishneh Torah}, Maimonides defines \textit{pardes} as a rabbinic catchword for the study and elucidation of \textit{ma’aseh bereshit} (the secret interpretation of Genesis 1) and \textit{ma’aseh merkavah} (the secret interpretation of Ezekiel 1), two of the central branches of rabbinic esotericism.\footnote{\textit{Mishneh Torah}, \textit{Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah}, 4:13.} But Maimonides also redefines the disciplinary nature of these two branches of esotericism to better align with Aristotelian philosophy. In a radical, far-reaching move, Maimonides identifies \textit{ma’aseh bereshit} with sub-lunar physics and cosmogony, and \textit{ma’aseh merkavah} with metaphysics.\footnote{Maimonides, \textit{Commentary to the Mishnah}, \textit{Haggigah} 2:1.} What exactly does Maimonides mean, then, when he argues that the speculative study of these philosophical (and esoteric) disciplines is a part of talmud? How are we to make sense of his claim that, “the subjects called \textit{pardes} are included in the talmud.”\footnote{\textit{Mishneh Torah}, \textit{Hilkhot Talmud Torah}, 1:12.}

There are three plausible interpretations of Maimonides’ formulation, two of which exemplify the two approaches to the relationship between Talmud and esoterica mapped in the previous chapter: Maimonides may mean that the teachings of \textit{ma’aseh bereshit} and \textit{ma’aseh merkavah} can be found in the text of the Talmud (as per “source-history”);\footnote{See Elazar Rokeach, \textit{Maaseh Rokeach} (Venice, 1742/3), p. 10:1.} that the study of these topics ought to occupy the same privileged portion of the curriculum as Talmud study (as
per curricular-history); or, that the disciplinary practices of talmudic reasoning are appropriate for the study of esoteric philosophy. Maimonides’ terse words—“the subjects called Pardes are included in the Talmud”—thus serve as a synecdoche for a range of contemporary theories on the medieval nexus of Talmud and Jewish esoterica.

The shortcoming of the former two readings is that they do not accommodate Maimonides’ transformation of Talmud from a textual study practice to an abstract analytical practice. It is therefore hard to justify the possibility that Maimonides claims that knowledge of pardes can be found in the pages of the Talmud or that the study of pardes is more appropriately relegated to the hours of talmud study rather than the hours of Oral-Torah study. The interpretive desideratum is therefore to analyze how Maimonides views the relationship between the practices of talmud study and the practices of pardes study.

Maimonides defines talmud study as a set of cognitive practices: “deducing conclusions from premises, developing implications of statements, comparing dicta, studying the hermeneutical principles by which the Torah is interpreted, till one knows the essence of these principles, and how to deduce what is permitted and what is forbidden from given norms.” These techniques encompass three fundamental categories of jurisprudential logic: inference-making, analogy-making, and application of the thirteen rabbinic hermeneutical principles to deduce contemporary legal norms from traditional legal precedents. All three are creative, analytical techniques for extrapolating new legal knowledge from older legal wisdom. To clarify how these talmudic techniques of extrapolation are related to the philosophical techniques of speculation occasioned by the study of the pardes, we must turn to Maimonides’ Arabic writings on law, logic, and metaphysics. These texts articulate the theory behind Maimonides’ belief that talmudic reasoning and study of the pardes share methodological and epistemological affinities. As I will demonstrate, those affinities are engendered by Maimonides’ decision to redefine both Jewish disciplines through the prism of jadal, the practice of Islamo-Aristotelian dialectics.

II: Jadal in Early Islamic Fiqh (Jurisprudence) and Kalam (Theology)

The etymology of jadal connects the Arabic term to verbs of “wrangling,” “wrestling,” and “twisting.” Commonly translated as “argumentation,” jadal plays a significant role throughout the Qur’an, where derivatives of the root j-d-l appear twenty-nine times, predominantly with a

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147 See Isadore Twersky, Introduction to the Code, p. 500, for an answer to this problem that has conceptual analogues to my own approach.

148 Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Talmud Torah, 1:11.

condemnatory valence. According to Qur'anic anthropology, man “is the most disputatious [jadalan] of all things” (18:54). Yet his argumentative tendencies can be used for both praiseworthy and destructive causes. Rejectors of Muhammad's prophecy “twist” the truth to aggravate the faithful into vain argumentation: “Those who disbelieve, dispute (yujāadilul) by [using] falsehood to [attempt to] invalidate thereby the truth and have taken My verses, and that of which they are warned, in ridicule” (18:56). Even among the faithful, the Qur'an is weary of jadal and warns pilgrims to Mecca not to provoke each other with arguments while making pilgrimage (2:197). And yet, other verses call upon the faithful to argue with disbelievers: “Call to the way of your Lord by means of wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them (jādilhum) according to what is best” (16:125). And the paradigmatic Qur'anic figures of Abraham and Noah are depicted as arguing with God for the sake of humanity. Taken as a composite, the Qur'an seems less concerned with eradicating questioning than with disciplining its execution—to teach humans how and when to ask questions.

These scriptural precedents orient subsequent Islamic traditions of debate, encouraging their flourishing as well as governing their tone and intention. Throughout the Ummayad Caliphate (7th and 8th century), Muslims cultivated a wide range of argumentative genres, some with pre-Islamic roots: satire (al-hijā'), poetic flying (al-naqā'id), religious polemics (mujādalah), and compilations of legal disagreements (khilāf). Specifically, the latter two genres underwent pivotal transformations during the subsequent Abbasid Caliphate, primarily due to the impact of Aristotelian translations. In 782 Caliph al-Mahdī commissioned the Nestorian Patriarch Timotheus I to translate Aristotle's Topics from Syriac to Arabic. Al-Mahdī chose to translate this specific Greek text because of polemical motives. Christian clerics would frequently debate Muslims and make use of the sophisticated arts of argumentation discussed in the Topics to win these debates. Al-Mahdī therefore encouraged Muslim theologians to refute the arguments of Christian clerics by incorporating Aristotelian dialectic (jadal), the main subject of the Topics, into their defense of the Islamic faith.

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151 Georgina L. Jardim argues that these different viewpoints are representative of two stages in the Qur'an's composition: “The development of questioning or arguing (jadala) from the earlier to later revelations point to an increasing distinction in the understanding of debate that differentiates between the debate of rejecters and the debate of those who reflect on the message of the Qur'an.” See Georgina L. Jardim, Recovering the Female Voice in Islamic Scripture: Women and Silence (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 163-180.


153 See Mohammad Syifa Amin Widigo, Imam Al-Haramayn Al-Juwayni on Jadal: Juridical and Theological Dialectic in the Fifth/Eleventh Century, PhD, Indiana University, 2016, pp. 41-42.

154 For an account of this intercultural context, see Sara Leila Husseini, Early Christian-Muslim Debate on the Unity of God (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 174-186.
In his *Topics*, Aristotle defines dialectic as “a method (*methodos*) whereby we shall be able to reason from opinions that are generally accepted (*endoxa*) about every problem propounded to us and also shall ourselves, when supporting an argument, avoid saying anything contrary (*hyphenation*).”

In the chapters of the *Topics*, Islamic theologians found a system of argumentation, to which they could adapt existing *jadal* practices. Although earlier forms of verbal disputation and *ikhtilāf* literature were dialectical in form (carried out through an exchange of questions and answers), both lacked systematization and theoretical formulations. Scholars in debate sessions and literary polemics did not develop methods, norms, or an ethics of debate that other scholars could follow and apply to their own debates.

By the tenth and eleventh centuries, theoretical works of *Jadal*, which enumerate and analyze models of argumentative exchanges, were widespread throughout Persia and Iraq. The techniques of argumentation (*jadal*) were even integrated into school curricula and honed by students in the colleges of law (*masjids* and *madrasas*) as scholastic exercises.

Aristotle’s dialectics offers a logic of *endoxa*, generally accepted opinions that cannot be proven by syllogistic demonstrations. The *Topics* answers a fundamental question: How can you formulate a convincing argument for an opinion that is unprovable? This question became especially pertinent for medieval Muslims. Since many Islamic beliefs are *endoxas*, Aristotle offered Muslims a systematic method to rationally argue for or against the validity of contentious theological propositions. Rather than demand conclusive proofs that can engender certain knowledge (‘ilm), dialecticians employed *jadal* to attain a “preponderance of conviction” (*ghalabat al-ẓann*), a form of certainty that stands below the certainty achieved by proofs ( qaṭʿīyāt) but above the weak epistemology of probability ( ẓann) and doubt (shakk/shubhah).

Medieval Islamic Jurists thus found in Aristotle a way to philosophically distinguish between epistemological gradations of proof. If a jurist cited a Qur’anic verse, a prophetic tradition (*sunnah*), or a legal consensus (*ijmāʿ*), their argumentation attained the legitimacy of a logical demonstration (*burhān*). However, legal argumentation based only on an equivocal Qur’anic verse (*zawāhir al-Qur’ān*), a tradition from the Prophet’s companions, or a mode of analogical reasoning (*qiyas*) was deemed analogous to a proof based on an *endoxa*, as per Aristotelian dialectic. In that case, a legal claim could reach the level of ẓann (the probable) or the level of shakk (the doubtful), but not the level of qaṭʿī (the epistemologically certain).

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159 See Miller, *Islamic Disputation Theory*.

160 See Widigo, *Imam Al-Haramayn*. 
is hence an art of Islamic argumentation, with native origins and Hellenistic amplifications that was significant for both legal and theological modes of Islamic reasoning.

III: Dialectics and Dissensus in Maimonides’ Legal Theory

Maimonides’ earliest composition, the Treatise on the Art of Logic, reinstates the Aristotelian notion that dialectics (jadal) is a method of reasoning other than scientific demonstration. Adopting the Arabic augmentation of Aristotelian logic, Maimonides describes five genres of syllogisms: (1) demonstrative syllogisms based on apodictic premises, (2) dialectical syllogisms based on at least one conventional premise, (3) rhetorical syllogisms based on at least one received premise, (4) sophistic syllogisms based on at least one false premise, and (5) poetic syllogisms based on premises that are mimetic (forms of praise or blame that imitate their object of evaluation).

These meditations on Aristotelian logic play a critical role in Maimonides’ earliest formulation of Jewish jurisprudence, the introduction to his Commentary to the Mishnah, a momentous project Maimonides began in Fez at the age of twenty-three (in 1161) and completed at the age of thirty, soon after he had migrated to Egypt. Al-Farabi, Maimonides mentor in all matters of logic, had already set the philosophical groundwork for applying Aristotelian logic to jurisprudential contexts. Maimonides uses this Arabicized Aristotelian logic to answer a

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161 On the shift from dialectics as method (in Aristotle) to dialectics as art (in Islam), see Miller, Islamic Disputation Theory, pp. 54-55.
163 By the tenth century, Islamic Aristotelianism had integrated Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics into the Organon, the classical collection of Aristotelian logic. Thus for Maimonides, rhetoric was as much a part of logic as was dialectics. On the Islamic expansion of Aristotle’s Organon (an expansion that had some precedent among the late Greek commentators of the school of Alexandria) and the consequences of that inclusion on medieval Islamic culture, see Deborah L. Black, Logic and Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy (Leiden: Brill, 1990).
167 See Joep Lameer, Al-Farabi and Aristotelian Syllogistics: Greek Theory and Islamic Practice (Leiden: Brill, 1994).
fundamental question of rabbinic jurisprudence: Why did legal disagreement first emerge in rabbinic culture?

Whatever...the elders received [from Moses] was not subject to discussion or disagreement (ikhilāf). But the applications (furūʿ) not heard from the Prophet were subject to discussion, the laws being extrapolated through analogical reasoning (qiyyas), with the thirteen rules given to him at Sinai, and they are “the thirteen middot by which the Torah is interpreted.” And among those extrapolated [laws were] matters that disagreement did not occur in them, but rather there was consensus (ijmāʿ) about them; but in some of them there was disagreement between the two syllogisms: for this one devised a syllogism and maintained it strongly, and the other devised another syllogism and maintained it strongly, for this typically occurs with the dialectic syllogisms (al-maqāyīṣ al-jadaliyya). And if such a disagreement arises, the majority is followed, because of the dictum of God: “Follow the majority” (Exod 23:2).

Maimonides does not believe that the rabbis of Late Antiquity argued over the facts of oral traditions. Their disputes were solely directed at the adaptability of those traditions, their extrapolation to new legal cases. Hence the disputes and debates that define rabbinic literature emerge only after the sages began to apply the thirteen rabbinic hermeneutical techniques, a set of literary-logical principles that enable the development of new branches of law from scriptural cues. This historical thesis rebuts Abraham ibn Daud, Maimonides’ contemporary, who claimed that differences of rabbinic opinion were generated by the gradual deterioration of the social bonds that sustain oral transmission. But for Maimonides, rabbinic dissent emerged not because of history but because of epistemology. Maimonides refers to that epistemology of rabbinic hermeneutical principles as “maqayis jadaliyyah,” “dialectical argumentation.”

The inability of halakhic logic to achieve the epistemological status of a syllogistic demonstration is dependent on two sub-factors. First, Maimonides' belief that aside for the first two of the ten commandments (which teach principles regarding God’s existence and unity and are thus capable of demonstration), the commandments “belong to the class of generally accepted opinions and those adopted in virtue of tradition, not to the class of the intellecta.”

Therefore, all attempts to formulate extrapolative arguments based on the norms of a commandment fall under the logical category of dialectic, the art of fashioning arguments based on received tradition (endoxa, in Aristotle’s terms). And second, halakhic arguments cannot be scientifically demonstrated because legal extrapolation is never conclusive. As Moshe Halbertal formulates the issue, “the semantics of deductive principles (kal va-homer) and lexical analogy

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169 For an account of these competing medieval views, see Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 54-71.


(gezeira shava) cannot be formulated in absolute terms,” seeing as “there is always liable to be some further question.” Thus, for Maimonides, halakhic logic is dialectical both because of the epistemic status of its premises and because of the indeterminability of its styles of argumentation.

Maimonides’ claim that rabbinic legal exegesis is non-demonstrable helps explain his frequent association of the thirteen principles of rabbinic hermeneutics with qiyas, an Islamic term for an analogical style of legal extrapolation that, while neither conclusive nor demonstrable, is essential to the practices of al-fiqh (Islamic law). As defined by Mutahhar al-Maqdysi (c. 945-991), qiyas refers to “everything that is known by inference without being evident or perceived by the senses.” Since a qiyas is an uncertain judgment (zanni), it is often countered by an opposing jurists’ qiyas. In such cases, the two jurists adjudicate the two analogical inferences by dialectical procedures of jadal until they reach a consensus (‘ijma).

In the citation from Maimonides’ Commentary to the Mishnah above, Maimonides uses the term qiyas twice to describe the role that extrapolative rabbinic legal reasoning plays in the creation of dissensus. The similitude between rabbinic legal exegesis and Islamic practice of qiyas extends to the two other practices of legal reasoning that Maimonides associates with talmudic thought. In Islamic jurisprudence, the two most significant types of qiyas are qiyas al-shabah (legal arguments based on analogy) and qiyas al-illah (legal inferences based on applying the cause, the “illah,” for one law to a related legal context). Both closely parallel

172 Moshe Halbertal, Maimonides: Life and Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 125. Halbertal’s conclusion identifies qiyas with the realm of rhetoric: “this is why Maimonides called these analogies “rhetorical principles,” emphasizing that these principles of deduction are not of a purely logical kind.” Cf. Cohen and Ravitsky who both identify the logic of qiyas with dialectics.


177 For a survey of these two forms of qiyas and the medieval disputes surrounding their legitimacy in Islamic jurisprudence, see Karmen E. Talbot, Arguments Against the Sunni Legal Methodology: Ibn Hazm and his Refutation of Qiyas, MA Thesis, McGill University, 1987.
Maimonides’ characterization of the techniques of talmudic logic as yotzi davar mi-davar (legal inferences) and yidmeh davar l-davar (legal analogies). Hence there is textual as well as contextual evidence to suggest that Maimonides conceives the three methods of talmudic reasoning—inference, analogy, middot—as epistemologically analogous to the methods of Islamo-Aristotelian dialectics. In the twelfth century, talmudic extrapolation and Islamic jadal were both scholastic disciplines that trained students to create and critique legal arguments, to formulate legal analogies, and deduce logically sound conclusions out of earlier legal norms. In light of the cultural parallelism between Islamic and Jewish scholasticism, Maimonides was able to seamlessly redefine talmudic epistemology and talmudic reasoning through the Arabic terminology and Aristotelian theories of Islamic jadal.

IV: Entering the Pardes: Dialectics and Dissensus in Maimonidean Esotericism

Despite the fact that the Arabic term for dialects (jadal) appears only once in Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed, a burgeoning trend in Maimonidean scholarship emphasizes the importance of

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178 I have yet to locate a Maimonidean source that explicitly links these two talmudic practices to Aristotelian dialectics. Suggestive evidence appears at the end of chapter eight of Maimonides’ Treatise on the Art of Logic: “The demonstrative syllogisms do not use analogy under any circumstances, nor do they use induction except under certain conditions; but the art of dialectics does use general induction; and the art of rhetoric uses the analogical syllogism,” trans. I. Efros, Maimonides’ Treatise on Logic (New York, 1938), p. 49. The similarity between an inductive syllogism (which Maimonides defines elsewhere in the Treatise as “when there is a certain proposition whose particulars you have examined and some of them have been proven inductively to be true, we may take this proposition as a universal and posit it as a premise of a syllogism,” Maimonides’ Treatise on Logic, p. 46) and talmudic deduction (as formulated by Maimonides in Mishneh Torah) requires further analysis. I see no grounds on which Maimonides would identify talmudic practices dependent on the thirteen hermeneutical rules as dialectic but not those dependent on deduction and analogy-making. See chapter 3 of this dissertation for a genealogy of the terms Maimonides uses to describe talmudic deduction (“mitbonen b-da’ato l-havin davar mi-davar”). Cf. chapter 7 of the Treatise on the Art of Logic, wherein Maimonides alludes to the existence of “other syllogisms which we call juridical, (but which) we need not discuss in this connection” (Efros, p. 47). Many commentators interpret these “juridical syllogisms” as proofs based on the thirteen rabbinic principles of interpretation. See Aviram Ravitsky, “Halakhic Arguments as Dialectical Arguments and Exegetical Principles as Aristotelian Topoi in Maimonides’ Philosophy,” Tarbiz Vol. 73, No. 2 (2004), p. 17, n. 80 [Hebrew].


dialectics to the esoteric project of the Guide. This dialectical turn in Maimonidean scholarship revises Shlomo Pines’ critique of Leo Strauss’ theory of Maimonidean esotericism. Strauss famously argued that the esoteric stratum of the Guide is singular and straightforward: Maimonides’ secret philosophical commitment to Athens (i.e., Aristotelian philosophy) is camouflaged by his explicit religious commitment to Jerusalem (i.e., biblical and rabbinic theology). In the late nineteen-seventies, after Strauss’ death, Shlomo Pines published a pivotal article that upended Strauss’ thesis. Pines argues that there are four, not two, levels of meaning in Maimonides’ Guide: (1) traditional theology; (2) Aristotelian philosophy; (3) critical epistemology; (4) and intellectual mysticism (sufism). “Athens,” to use Strauss’ terminology, is but the exoteric meaning of the Guide. Strauss, Pines contends, was blind to the true form of Maimonides’ concealed philosophy: a skepticism that critiques the epistemological certainty of Aristotelian metaphysics; and an intellectual eros that seeks communion with the unnamable. Maimonides’ critical epistemology is born from the belief, explicitly articulated by al-Farabi, that humans are unable to achieve complete cognition of the separate intellects, let alone of God, because of their carnality. Pines concludes that, given Maimonides’ disbelief in philosophical self-perfection, the Guide’s final chapters gesture at his esoteric platform: devotees should redirect their intellectual passion to the more practical domains of human ethics and social politics.

The scholars who have subsequently mapped the centrality of dialectics to the Guide refuse to cede Maimonides’ religious commitment to the theoretical life. Pushing back against Pines, they contend that Maimonides does not negate all modes of apprehending the separate

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intellects, just the mode of apprehension achieved via demonstrative proof. Maimonides’ aim in the *Guide* is not to curtail metaphysical investigation, but to encourage satisfaction with dialectical knowledge, which, epistemologically speaking, hovers between the verifiability of scientific knowledge and the aporias of philosophical skepticism. In this new reading, the *Guide* does not offer a path out of perplexity, but an argument for the constitutive role that dialectical reasoning, philosophical dissensus, and doubt play in man’s speculative efforts to know and cleave to the Divine. The only way in and out of the pardes is through dialectics.

Maimonides’ esoteric view of speculation as a dialectical discipline is motivated by the writings of Alexander of Aphrodisias, a third-century peripatetic philosopher whose commentaries on Aristotle were central to Maimonides’ engagement with the Aristotelian corpus. At two central moments in the *Guide*, Maimonides turns to Alexander as a guide for navigating the realms of philosophy that resist demonstrability and conclusivity. A short survey of those two moments illuminates why and how Maimonides applies dialectics to the esoteric topics of the *Pardes*.

In Book II of the *Guide* (chapter 22) Maimonides portrays Aristotle's proofs of the eternity of the cosmos as “something analogous to guessing and conjecture.” To help navigate the epistemological uncertainty of cosmological speculation, Maimonides endorses Alexander’s recommendation for how to best study topics that cannot be logically demonstrated and are therefore philosophically dubious:


189 On Alexander’s role in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, see Pines, pp. Lxiv-Lxxv. On Alexander’s theory of dialectics, see Marta Spranzi, *The Art of Dialectic between Dialogue and Rhetoric: The Aristotelian Tradition* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011), pp. 102-105. In a passage that Maimonides does not cite, but is nevertheless philosophically central to Maimonides’ employment of dialectics in the Guide, Aristotle underlines the critical role that dialectics play in the philosophical sciences: “(Dialectics) has a further use in relation to the ultimate bases of the principles used in several sciences. For it is impossible to discuss them at all from the principles proper to the particular science in hand, seeing that the principles are the prius of everything else: it is through the opinions generally held on the particular points that these have to be discussed, and this task belongs properly, or most appropriately, to dialectic” (*Topics*, 101a, 37-101b, 3).
Do not criticize me for having set up doubts that attach to his (Aristotle’s) opinion. You may say: Can doubts disprove an opinion or establish its contrary as true? Surely this is not so. However we shall treat this philosopher as his followers have enjoined us to treat him. For Alexander has explained that in every case in which no demonstration is possible, the two contrary opinions with regard to the matter in question should be posited as hypothesis, and it should be seen what doubts attach to each of them: the one to which fewer doubts attach should be believed. Alexander says that things are thus with respect to all opinions regarding the divine that Aristotle sets forth and regarding which no demonstration is possible.190

Siding with Alexander, Maimonides does not suppose that Aristotle’s inability to generate a syllogistic demonstration for the eternity of the cosmos ought to halt a student’s speculation on cosmic questions. Rather, cosmological doubt ought to transform the methods through which speculation generates assent and conviction. On Aristotelian topics that concern the divine realms, where no demonstration is possible, Alexander councils that the best way to speculate is negatively: contrast dissenting opinions and determine which produces fewer doubts. This practice of critically examining competing theses is a central mode of Aristotelian dialectics, known as aporetic dialectics, which differs in style from the more dialogical mode of dialectics, where two individuals debate the logical cogency of their propositions and conclusions.191

By accepting the appropriateness of dialectics for studying one of the most central topics of Maaseh Bereishit—the origins of the cosmos—Maimonides accedes that it is impossible to apply demonstrative logic to most questions about the supra-lunar spheres. The best method available for speculative cosmogony is the art of aporetic dialectics, where doubts are minimized but never fully resolved. In fact, Maimonides adopts this very approach several times in the Guide when addressing cosmogonical questions. In the chapters that Maimonides dedicates to the topic of creation (II:13-31), he cites and works through the strengths and weaknesses of three different cosmogonic approaches: Aristotle, Plato, and Torah.192 Maimonides concludes there

191 On aporetic dialectics, see Marta Spranzi, The Art of Dialectic between Dialogue and Rhetoric: The Aristotelian Tradition (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011), pp. 14-23; and Nicholas Rescher, Dialectics: A Classical Approach to Inquiry (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2007), pp. 87-118. Maimonides addresses this branch of logic in his Treatise on the Art of Logic: “The masters of this art deal also with a kind of syllogism which they call apagogic. Thus, if, wishing to verify a certain proposition, we construct one of the categorical syllogisms which yields to us as a conclusion the proposition whose truthfulness we wanted to ascertain, we call it a straight categorical syllogism. But if we verify this proposition in another way, namely, by assuming hypothetically the contradictory of the proposition which we want to verify, and by forming a syllogism, proving the falsehood of that hypothetical contradictory proposition, so that the contradictory of that which we hypothetically assumed is the true one without a doubt, and is the proposition we want to substantiate, such a syllogism, demonstrating to us the falsehood of a contradictory of a proposition which we want to verify, we call apagogic” (Efros, pp. 45-46).
that the Biblical-Rabbinic approach is epistemologically superior to the Hellenistic options only because it generates fewer doubts, not because it is revelatory or demonstrable.

Maimonides does not merely argue that the epistemic limits to human apprehension are best remediated through the dialectical examination of competing speculative claims. He also claims that epistemic impediments are the very cause of philosophical disagreements. Just as in jurisprudence, dissensus emerges where no conclusive demonstration is possible and arguments must be made that are probable but uncertain. Early in the Guide (I:31), Maimonides directly addresses this dynamic between doubt and dissensus:

> With regard to such things (to which man has a great longing to know) there is a multiplicity of opinions, disagreement arises between the men engaged in speculation, and doubts crop up; all this because the intellect is attached to an apprehension of them; and also because everyone thinks that he has found a way by means of which he will know the true reality of the matter. Now it is not within the power of the human intellect to give a demonstration of these matters. For in all things whose true reality is known through demonstration there is no tug of war and no refusal to accept a thing proven….The things about which there is this perplexity are very numerous in divine matters, few in matters pertaining to natural science, and nonexistent in matters pertaining to mathematics.¹⁹³

Since seekers are typically unwilling to settle for anything less than demonstrable truth, and most of the topics of the pardes—the divine and natural sciences—elude demonstrability, an advanced student of the pardes must chart a course through the tug and pull of dissensus and

To accentuate this connection between the cognitive status of *pardes* and *dissensus*, Maimonides cites Alexander of Aphrodisias’ claim that there exist three prime causes of disagreement: (1) the love of strife; (2) subtle and obscure objects of apprehension; (3) and ignorance. Maimonides is most directly interested in the second cause—the manner by which obscure topics engender disagreement. As he mentions in the conclusion to the citation above, the areas of obscurity are few in regards to *ma'aseh bereishit*, restricted to the eternality of the cosmos and the exact nature of the celestial mechanics. *Ma'aseh merkavah* (“divine matters”), on the other hand, demarcates a realm of speculation where the limits of human apprehension are even more acute. Maimonides’ aim, therefore, is not primarily to critique persons who speculate about divine and cosmogonic matters after they have gone through the proper intellectual training; the *Guide*, after all, is a guide through those precise topics. What aggravates Maimonides is the insistence on producing philosophical demonstrations in areas where philosophical certitude is unattainable. A logical praxis other than demonstrable proof-making is required for students to properly apprehend the abstract thematics of the *pardes*.

Maimonides addresses that need in the ensuing chapter (I:32) where he outlines a dialectical methodology capable of guiding students through their speculations on the *pardes*. The chapter offers not a map of the *pardes* but the techniques one requires to steer through its

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194 Maimonides endorses a similar engagement with theological dissensus elsewhere in the *Guide*: “You must not find it incongruous that, having mentioned the interpretation of Jonathan ben Uziel (regarding Ezekiel's vision)...I propounded a different interpretation. You will find that many among the Sages, and even among the commentators, differ from his interpretation with regard to certain words and many notions that are set forth by the *prophets*. How could this not be with regard to these obscure matters? Moreover, I do not oblige you to decide in favor of my interpretation. Understand the whole of his interpretation from that to which I have drawn your attention, and understand my interpretation. God knows in which of the two interpretations there is a correspondence to what has been intended (III:4:425).” On Maimonides’ understanding of the proliferation of theologies spoken by Job’s friends, see *The Guide of the Perplexed* III:23. Maimonides advocates a similar deferment of judgment with regards to rabbinic disagreements that have no legal repercussions. See Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Sotah 3:3: “I have already told you numerous times that if sages disagree about a position that does not have an action as its telos, then it is inappropriate to say that the Halakhah is like one of them.” For similar remarks see Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 10:3 and Shevu’ot 1:4. See also Maimonides comments in his *Epistle of Resurrection*, in *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership*, trans. Abraham Halkin (New York: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985), p. 219: “But every issue that does not involve practice, on which opinions differ, cannot be resolved in favor of one over the other.” Maimonides’ understanding of medicine as an inconclusive science (see his *Iggrot*, ed. Kapah, p. 153) leads him to a similar valorization of collaboration and dialectical deliberations in matters of medical etiology; see Maimonides, *Treatise on Asthma*, in *Maimonides’ Medical Writings*, Vol. 6, trans. Fred Rosner (Haifa: The Maimonidean Research Institute, 1994), pp. 132-133: “If all [the physicians] gather together [in consultation], as is done for kings and for wealthy people, and if they debate and deliberate and then render their opinion about what should be done [for the patient, the result] is helpful and good. The patient benefits from their collective opinions...If there are many [physicians together in consultation] one reminds the other and assists him in completing his line of reasoning until they reach the perfect treatment plan to which they all agree.”


innumerable aporiai. Drawing on an analogy between the strain of intense sensory apprehension (i.e., forcing one's eyes to focus for a long time on a distant point) and intense metaphysical apprehension (i.e., attempting to prove metaphysical claims), Maimonides admonishes those who believe that metaphysical comprehension is simply a function of cognitive capacity. The brain is also a bodily muscle; it too can be dulled by excessive and strenuous effort. However, cognitive overexertion, for Maimonides, is not caused by intense intellectual effort per se. It all comes down to method (demonstrative or dialectical)—to how one approaches the epistemological arduousness of apprehending the topics of the pardes:

For if you stay your progress because of a dubious point; if you do not deceive yourself into believing that there is a demonstration with regards to matters that have not been demonstrated; if you do not hasten to reject and categorically to pronounce false any assertions whose contradictions have not been demonstrated; if, finally, you do not aspire to apprehend that which you are unable to apprehend—you will have achieved human perfection and attained the rank of Rabbi Akiva, peace be on him, who entered in peace and went out in peace when engaged in the theoretical study of these metaphysical matters. If, on the other hand, you aspire to apprehend things that are beyond your apprehension; or if you hasten to pronounce false, assertions the contradictories of which have not been demonstrated or that are possible, though very remotely so—you will have joined Elisha Aher.\(^1\)

Maimonides transforms the two central protagonists of the rabbinic pardes narrative\(^2\)—Elisha/Aher and Rabbi Akiva—into two types of philosophers.\(^3\) Elisha is the gluttonous metaphysician, a philosopher who refuses to inhibit his cognitive desires. Rather than tarry among premises that cannot be demonstrably proven or demonstrably contradicted, Elisha is hasty to negate what has no direct contradiction and to affirm what is beyond the limits of human apprehension. In this reading, Elisha’s heresy is less a theological mistake than a methodological mistake, a misconception of the methods of speculation. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, is the paragon of dialectics, the one who speculates on cosmogonic and metaphysical matters free from the allure of scientific certainty. By dimming the passion of certitude, Rabbi Akiva achieves a maximal level of human perfection. Now this does not mean that Maimonides is counseling his readers to dally in doubt and dissensus. As he established elsewhere (II:22) in the Guide, when

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\(^2\) See Tosefta *Hagigah*, 2:2.
confronted with an array of dissenting *endoxas*, one ought to negate the least persuasive premises and come to peace with the approximate certainty of the remaining hypothesis.\(^{200}\)

Study of the *pardes* induces doubt and dissensus because one must speculate on topics that transcend the reach of human cogitation and syllogistic proof. Rabbi Akiva is able to enter and exit the *pardes* in peace only because he has mastered dialectical modes of reasoning—the cognitive techniques that guide one through the perplexities of doubt and dissensus. Given this conclusion, we may state that the esoteric principles of the *Guide* align with neither the empiricism of Aristotelian philosophy (as per Strauss) nor the fatalism of skepticism (as per Pines), but with the tentative epistemology of Islamo-Aristotelian dialectics.\(^{201}\)

**Conclusion: Talmud/Jadal/Padres**

A single enigmatic sentence in Maimonides’ law-code sent us on a scavenger hunt through the Islamic landscape of Maimonides’ milieu, Maimonides’ jurisprudential theory, Aristotelian logic, and one of the most labyrinthine of Jewish books ever written, *The Guide of the Perplexed*. The breadth of Maimonides’ intellect and the range of intellectual sources that he engaged with necessitate this form of panoramic analysis, especially when the subject of study is a declaration about the interconnection between disparate disciplines. Much is at stake in how one interprets that declaration of Maimonides—“the matters called *pardes* are included in the Talmud.” Might Maimonides be radically rewriting the rabbinic curriculum to include the philosophical arts? Is Maimonides merely affirming the talmudic roots of medieval philosophical tropes? Or is Maimonides insisting on a deeper, disciplinary affinity between talmudic reasoning and contemplation of the supra-lunar realm?

Disciplines may depend on social and institutional structures, but they primarily demarcate different epistemologies and styles of reasoning.\(^{202}\) This section introduced a new reading of Maimonidean interdisciplinarity by focusing on the epistemological underpinnings of medieval Jewish disciplines. I proposed that Maimonides conjoins esoteric theology (*pardes*) and talmudic scholarship because both are styles of reasoning predicated on “conventional


Conceptualizing Maimonidean interdisciplinarity has its complications. First, Maimonides links together not two but three disciplines: jurisprudence, logic, and supra-lunar physics/metaphysics. Secondly, Maimonides adopted elements from multiple cultures of scholarship: to conjoin talmudic and philosophical-esoteric disciplines, Maimonides looked to Islamic scholarship, to how it integrated Aristotelian dialectics into jurisprudential and theological modes of conjecture. For instance, a century before Maimonides, Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni (1028-1085), al-Ghazali’s teacher, composed a treatise on juridical and theological jadal as a means to forge an unprecedented synthesis between theological and jurisprudential practices. At the time, Shafi’i legal scholars were skeptical of the legitimacy of Ash`ari theology (kalam). By demonstrating that jadal is a central method of both kalam and usul al-fiqh, Al-Juwayni deflated that antagonism and helped integrate kalam into Sunni Orthodoxy.

Maimonides may have had a comparable project in mind—to legitimize the rabbinic study of Aristotelian esoteric philosophy by demonstrating that its epistemology is analogous to that of traditional talmudic inquiry. Is Maimonides an innovator of Jewish interdisciplinarity, then, or a borrower of Islamic models of interdisciplinarity? Since both seem true, perhaps we ought to conceive of Maimonides as an intercultural interdisciplinarian, as a scholar who embraced the borrower of Islamic models of interdisciplinarity? Since both seem true, perhaps we ought to conceive of Maimonides as an intercultural interdisciplinarian, as a scholar who embraced the

203 Other medieval Jews made similar arguments about other disciplines of Torah-study. See Gersonides, Commentary on the Torah, Venice, 1547, 2c-d:


205 See Widigo, Imam Al-Haramayn, pp. 205-270. For an early thirteenth-century Islamic jadal treatise with similar goals, see Weiss, The Search for God’s Law.
Despite creating these generative intersections, Maimonides’ model of esotericism differs from Islamic jadal in one pivotal way. It neutralizes the dialogical comportment of both the Talmud and Islamic dialectics. Legal deductions and metaphysical deliberation are figured by Maimonides as practices of ratiocination that an individual performs within the mind’s confinement. The study of antecedent traditions may be a central part of these disciplines, but the authors of those traditions cannot argue back. Maimonides thus eliminates both the sociality and the rhetorical style of the Talmud in order to transform talmudics into a completely cognitive discipline. Similarly, Maimonides recommends that the study of the pardes be a solitary venture.

The emergence of Kabbalah in the decades immediately following the translation of the Guide into Hebrew (1204) is often portrayed as a reaction to Maimonides’ equation of Jewish esotericism with Aristotelian philosophy. The kabbalists of France and Spain, troubled by Maimonides’ claim that all lineages of Jewish esoteric traditions had been destroyed in the diaspora, contended that they were recipients of ancient secrets and that the true meanings of ma’aseh Bereshit and ma’aseh merkavah are best deciphered through a neo-platonic rereading of rabbinic aggadot. Midrash ha-Ne’lam, the earliest stratum of the Zohar, complicates this history. On the one hand it adheres to two central components of Maimonidean esotericism: (1)

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207 In the introduction to his Commentary on the Mishnah, Maimonides writes that the topics of the pardes are esoteric and ought not to be discussed in public, “because these matters are not part of what ought to be taught and meditated on in the academies of wisdom.”

208 See Maimonides’ introduction to the third section of his Guide.

its depictions of Jewish esoteric concepts are still heavily dependent on Maimonides;210 and (2) it instantiates Maimonides’ model of esotericism by integrating talmudic forms of reasoning into its discussions of esoteric tropes. On the other hand, Midrash ha-Ne’lam is replete with talmudic rhetoric and talmudic sociality, formal features that are absent from maimonidean esoteric discourse. The literary results of that formal revision provide a window onto a fascinating and largely untold development in the history of Medieval Jewish esotericism: the decades in between the Castilian reception of Maimonides in the early thirteenth century and the flourishing of kabbalistic theosophy in that region of Spain during the last two decades of the thirteenth century. To analyze Midrash ha-Ne’lam contestations of esotericism and its disciplinary hybridization, the following chapters survey its adoption and transformation of talmudic modes of reasoning, rhetoric, and composition. The subsequent chapter begins to tell this story by analyzing the transformation of binah from a mode of talmudic creativity to a mode of divine creativity in Midrash ha-Ne’lam, a shift that precipitates but is distinct from the elevation of binah into a theosophical-kabbalistic symbol. To appreciate the cultural and theological significance of this history, the subsequent chapter first assesses how talmudic reasoning came to be associated with binah.

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Chapter Three

The Logic of Binah:  
A Genealogy of Generative Cognition in Pre-Modern Jewish Literature

Judah Loew ben Bezalel (d. 1609), the Maharal of Prague, adds a psychological layer to Maimonides’ model of talmudic reasoning. The Maharal proposes that each of the three canons of rabbinic learning corresponds to a different cognitive modality:

The three (canons of rabbinic Judaism)—Bible, Mishnah, and Gemarah—correlate to the three parts of the intellect—hokhmah, da’at, and tevunah. The Torah is hokhmah. The Mishnah is da’at, because through (studying) Mishnah one knows how to differentiate between one matter and another, and this is da’at, when a person separates between one matter and another...Tevunah is the (practice of) learning (Gemarah) (“limmud”) since he derives and infers one matter from another (meivin davar mi-tokh davar).1

In the concluding clause of this excerpt, the Maharal correlates three distinct things: Talmud study (i.e., “Gemarah”), tevunah, and inferential reasoning—the cognitive techniques a scholar uses to generate new knowledge from old knowledge (“meivin davar mi-tokh davar”; “meivin” is a verbal form of tevunah). Four centuries earlier, Maimonides uses a similar formulation to describe the analytical practices of talmudic reasoning: “mitbonen b-da’ato l-havin davar midavar,” “(he) contemplates in his mind to infer one thing from another.”2 While Maimonides does not explicitly connect the discipline of talmud to tevunah, he too links together three different things: verbs of tevunah (“mitbonen” and “l-havin”), a mode of reasoning that is relational (one thing is inferred from another; “davar mi-davar”), and the practices of talmudic analysis.

These two related texts prompt a cluster of questions: Why do Maimonides and the Maharal presume that tevunah is a mode of cognitive creativity that defines talmudic learning? Apart from Maimonides (as discussed in the previous chapter), is there evidence of other medieval Jews adopting practices of talmudic reasoning (i.e., tevunah-like modes of cognition) for the study of secrets? And how might this pre-kabbalistic history of tevunah/binah relate to later theosophic conceptions of binah as the third of the ten powers of the godhead (sefirot)? In other words: What prompts the correlation of tevunah/binah to talmud study? Did medieval Jews advocate for applying talmudic modes of reasoning to the study of secrets? And did the correlation of tevunah/binah and talmud study play a role in Jewish esoteric discourses about binah?

1 Tiferet Yisrael, 56:  
2 Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilhot Talmud Torah 1:12.
To address these questions, I will first investigate how talmudic reasoning came to be associated with both tevunah (or binah, a more common cognate of tevunah) and the cognitive practices of inferring “davar mi-davar,” “one matter from another matter.” In the second half, I will then analyze how Jewish esoteric sources adopt and adapt talmudic techniques of creativity. I will argue that the logic of “davar mi-davar,” a logic of inferences and analogies associated with binah and talmudic reasoning, is indeed a significant trope in medieval Jewish esotericism. To set-up this claim, the first half of this chapter offers a history of “davar mi-davar” terminology in rabbinic literature. I will demonstrate that inferential reasoning—inferring one davar from another davar—shifts from being a matter of contention in early rabbinic literature to becoming firmly associated with the analytical practices of talmudic reasoning by the crest of the rabbinic period (4th-6th century). The subsequent section then maps the medieval sources that advocate for the use of rabbinic practices of inferential reasoning to expand the breadth of esoteric knowledge. Specifically, I will explore how an ancient notion of binah as a mode of esoteric decipherment intersects with the rabbinic notion of binah as a mode of inferential creativity in late medieval sources. In the final section, I turn to passages in Midrash ha-Ne'lam that characterize tevunah and inferential creativity less as a mode of rabbinic cognition than as a mode of divine cosmogenesis: God created the heavens “davar mi-davar,” i.e., by deriving the celestial realm from a previously created angelic light. Midrash ha-Ne'lam will thus be identified as a pre-kabbalistic discourse that attributes binah to the creativity of the divine in a manner comparable to how earlier sources attribute binah to the creativity of talmudic scholars.

I: Davar mi-Davar: Analogical Inferences in Tannaitic Midrash

The expression “davar mi-davar,” “a thing from a thing,” appears for the first time in the tannaitic midrashim composed by the school of Rabbi Ishmael. A mainstay of the dialectical terminology that introduces and rejects hermeneutical possibilities, “davar mi-davar” deflates proposed legal analogies, as though to say, “do not analogize this legal case to that one but to an other, more comparable case.” Throughout tannaitic midrash, analogical reasoning provides a fundamental method for making legal inferences. By establishing an affinity between two legal cases, an inference can be adduced that the two analogues should share further legal properties. But a law can often be analogized to multiple legal cases that have dissimilar laws. In such confounding cases, “davar mi-davar” adjudicates between the opposing legal analogies by demanding that analogies derive from coherent patterns of conceptual resemblances, not merely from formal, lexical resemblances. Hence for these early midrashim, the legitimacy of inferential analogies (inferring that the law in case b is similar to the law in case a because they share similar features) is complicated by the inconclusiveness of analogical reasoning—one can often locate other cases that share properties with the target case but are governed by a different law. In what follows, I will argue that, at its origin, “davar mi-davar” terminology participates in a tannaitic struggle over the legitimacy of inconclusive methods of human reasoning (i.e.,

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analogical and inferential reasoning). By surveying how the logic of “davar mi-davar” remediates epistemological anxieties about the legitimacy of rabbinic reasoning, this section documents the rabbinic techniques of analytical creativity that evolve into and become associated with the discipline of Talmud study.

The function of the rabbinic phrase “davar mi-davar” can be gleaned from a tannaitic midrash on the mezuza. The relevant biblical verse, “...write them on the doorposts (mezuzot) of your house and on your gates” (Deut. 6:9), is ambiguous about the required mode of writing. Are Jews commanded to chisel scriptural words into the stone panels of their doorposts, or to inscribe them onto parchment and affix that to the doorpost? Philo, an Alexandrian Jew living at the beginning of the first millennium, interprets the biblical command as a mandate to engrave the words of the Torah onto the stones of one’s doorpost:

He (God) bids them to write and set them forth in front of the doorposts of each house and the gates in their walls, so that those who leave or remain at home, citizens and strangers alike, may read the inscriptions engraved (ἐστηλιτευµένοις) on the face of the gates and keep in perpetual memory what they should say and do, careful alike to do and to allow no injustice, and when they enter their houses and again when they go forth men and women and children and servants alike may act as is due and fitting both for others and for themselves.5

Philo makes no mention of scribal writing or scrolls that are to be attached to a doorpost. For Philo, the mezuza is made of stone, visible to all who pass by a Jewish home. Ancient Samaritans living in Palestine practiced a similar interpretation of the mezuza. They were known to inscribe the ten commandments onto stone slabs and erect the stones outside their homes.6 This cultural backdrop to our midrash suggests that rabbinic inquiry into the material form of the mezuza was not merely a scholastic exercise. A midrashic argument was required to

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4 “Ἐστηλιτευµένοις normally means engraved on a stone or a hard object since the verb stems from στήλη, i.e. ‘stele.’ Philo almost certainly uses it in that sense here, since he refers to φλίων (doorposts). He does use the verb metaphorically in other places as, for example, "engraved in the heart" or "engraved in nature." More important for this context is that Philo can use it with reference to sacred writings (Heres, 258; Abraham, 4, 177; Virtues, 15, 95), and I have found one place where he employs it with reference to something set forth in a letter (Omnis Probus, 95). But the passage here does appear to mean engraved on a hard surface” (Erich S. Gruen, personal communication). Furthermore, Philo’s description of people reading the mezuza as they pass suggests strongly that it was an inscription on the stone and not a scroll which would necessarily have to be protected by a covering, rendering it non-legible from the outside.


legitimate the rabbinic interpretation of the biblical ritual\(^7\) (to write the mezuzah on parchment) and void the scriptural arguments of competing Jewish practices (to inscribe the mezuzah on stone).

The midrash, with its logical moves enumerated, reads as follows:

“...write them [on the doorposts of your house and on your gates]” (Deut. 6:9):

(1) I hear that one may write these words on stones.

(2) You may reason in the following way: Here “write” is mentioned, and further, “write” (Deut. 27:8). Just as the writing in that passage is to be written on stones, so here “write” means that it is to be done on stones.

(3) Or perhaps pursue the argument in [the following] direction: Here “write” is mentioned, and further, “write” (Num. 5:23, in the setting of the wife accused of adultery). Just as in that latter passage, what is required is writing on parchment with ink, so here too what is required is writing on parchment with ink.

(4) You may reason from the language of the latter verse and I will reason from the language of the dissenting opinion. Here “write” is mentioned, and further, “write” (Deut. 27:8). Just as the writing in that passage is to be made on stones, so here “write” means that it is to be made on stones.

(5) You may, however, propose a distinction. I will learn this from that and compare this to that [דַּבְרָה דְּבַרְבּוֹ אָדָם דְּבַרְבּוֹ]. I will learn the rule from a case that is applicable to all generations from another case that is applicable to all generations, and not learn the rule for a case that is applicable to all generations from a case that is applicable only to a particular moment.

[Therefore] Here “write” is written, and further, “write” (Num. 5:23, in the setting of the wife accused of adultery). Just as in that latter passage, what is required is writing on a parchment with ink, so here too what is required is writing on a parchment with ink.

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Even though there is no decisive proof, there is a least an indication of it: Then Baruch answered them, “He answered them, ‘He himself recited all those words to me, and I would write them down in the scroll in ink’” (Jer. 36:18).9

The polysemous range of the biblical verb for writing, *ketiva*, prompts a midrashic inquiry into the word’s meaning in other biblical contexts.10 In one instance, Moses instructs the Israelites, after they had crossed the Jordan River, to inscribe his revelations onto a stone monument and then enter Palestine without him. The stones, he tells them, are to be coated with plaster, for, “on those stones you shall inscribe (vekhtavta) every word of this Torah most distinctly” (Deut. 27:8).11 The writing that Moses asks for is an everlasting writing. Other biblical verses, however, indicate that *ketiva* is created by inscribing ink onto refined but far from permanent leather parchment. For instance, at the cultic trial for a married woman accused of adultery by her husband, the priest is to “write down (vekhatav) these curses on parchment (sefer) and rub it off into the water of bitterness” (Num. 5:23). Here writing must be dissoluble; the accused woman drinks the priest’s ink to determine her innocence (if she is guilty, the ink magically distends her body).12 Of the numerous models of writing described in the Bible, our midrash cites these two examples, and they could not be more disparate: *ktiva* as chiseling letters onto an everlasting object (etchings on stone), *ktiva* as creating impermanent language (dissolvable ink on parchment). The mission of the Sifrei is to clarify which form of writing Deuteronomy 6:9 demands when it directs the Israelites to “inscribe them (ukhtavtam) on the doorposts (mezuzot) of your house and on your gates.” Is a *mezuzah* to be made of permanent or perishable writing?

The Sifrei dialectically explores these two semantic possibilities, raising and refuting arguments for each interpretation. The logical progression of its argumentation runs as follows: (1) the verse would seem to command writing on stone (likely, because the direct object of the verse’s verb, “writing,” is “the doorpost,” and a mediating material—i.e., parchment—is never mentioned); (2) a lexical analogy from Deuteronomy 27:8 supports this reading; (3) but a lexical analogy can also be made with Numbers 5:23, which would support the opposite legal claim [*mezuzah = parchment*]; (4) but a multiplicity of lexical analogies does not inherently undermine the legitimacy of the first lexical analogy; (5) the two analogies are not equivalent—a lexical

9 Sifrei, Deuteronomy, Vaethanan 36 (ed. Finkelstein, p. 66):


11 For rabbinic approaches to the ambiguities of this verse—whether the plaster was added after the engraving or before and whether the Torah was to be written on the erected altar or on separate rocks—see Saul Lieberman, Tosefta Kipshuta, Vol. 8 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955), pp. 699-701.

12 See Sifrei Naso, 16 [Ed. Horovitz, p. 21].
analogy must be substantiated by formal-legal resemblances between the two analogues, and the mezuzah shares a substantive affinity to the sotah ritual in Numbers 5:23 (both are everlasting laws, whereas Deuteronomy 27:8 is addressed to a singular moment in Jewish history); (6) an episode from the book of Jeremiah that explicitly links writing to parchment offers a non-decisive verification of this position (since it is not about the mezuzah, and it occurs in a non-legal scriptural context). At the structural level, the arguments shift back and forth before reaching a logical enjambment (in steps 3 and 4) that necessitates reorienting the analogical procedure from lexical congruities to legal affinities (step 5). At the methodological level, when a plurality of lexical analogues can be adduced, the Sifrei believes that the legal-interpreter must shift to a higher-order of analogical reasoning, one not based on surface-level, linguistic similarities but on conceptually-principled resemblances. The logical terminology that most concerns us—elmod davar mi-davar v-adun davar mi-davar—signifies this exact methodological claim (step 5): legal analogies must be governed by substantive similarities.

This legitimization of conceptually principled analogies is exclusive to the midrashim composed by the school of R. Ishmael. Only these tannaitic texts entrust human reasoning to generate substantive analogies. The midrashic texts of the R. Akiva school, on the other hand, consistently repudiate analogical reasoning. As a heuristic means to analyze the methodological disparity between the two tannaitic approaches to analogical argumentation, we can examine how Ishmaelian and Akiban midrashim engage in dialectics after an analogy is introduced. Commonly, the phrase “or perhaps pursue (kelakh) the argument in [the following] direction,” appears right after an analogical argument is adduced and introduces a counter-analogy. Our midrashic case-study from the Sifrei makes this move at step 3, where it advances the possibility that the mezuzah is at least as comparable to the priest’s curse as to Moses’ monument. Some thirty other midrashim also employ this rhetorical formula, leading scholars to call this group of midrashim, “the kelakh braitot.” Yet, given its function in all other twenty-nine occasions, the locution functions abnormally in our example from the Sifre. Our example is the only time that a counter-analogy introduces a norm that aligns with the midrash’s legal conclusion; in all other cases, the counter-analogy adduced after the kelakh clause is rejected.

This rhetorical pattern was first noticed by Rabbenu Hillel, an eleventh-century scholar from Byzantine who composed the first commentary on tannaitic midrash. Rabbenu Hillel postulates that, “every time the formula, ‘or perhaps pursue the argument in [the following] direction,’ is employed, the first logical argument supports the conclusion.” Our midrashic

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13 On the rhetorical function of the phrase, “even though there is no decisive proof, there is at least an indication of it,” in tannaitic literature, see Assaf Rosen-Zvi, ”’Even Though there is no Decisive Proof, There is at Least an Indication of It’: The Meaning, Character and Significance of the Phrase in the Tannaitic Literature,” Tarbiz Vol. 78:3 (2009), pp. 323-344 [Hebrew]. Cf. Bacher, ‘Erkhe Midrash (Jerusalem: Carmiel, 1969), 1:36-38.


pericope is one of the very few instances where this rule is broken. Even though the formula “or perhaps pursue the argument in [the following] direction” introduces step 4, the conclusion of the homily at step 6 differs from the initial hypothesis of steps 1-2. Recall the order of arguments in our local example: (1) stone (intuitive hypothesis), (2) stone (lexical-analogy), (3) parchment (lexical-analogy), (4) stone (lexical-analogy), (5) parchment (substantive-analogy), (6) parchment (non-authoritative prooftext). According to Hillel’s rule, we expect the Midrash to conclude that the mezuzah is to be written on stone. But, strangely, the Sifrei arrives at the exact opposite conclusion. Shamma Friedman suggests that this aberration is due to the fact that all other instances of the clause, ‘or perhaps pursue the argument in [the following] direction,’ stem from midrashim composed by the school of R. Akiva. Our midrash on the mezuzah, however, was composed by the school of R. Yishmael. The difference testifies to two orientations to the legitimacy of using logic to construct conceptual analogies and arbitrate between those analogies. This apparent anomaly stems from two orientations to conceptually-principled analogies, as I shall now show.

Take the following example from the school of R. Akiva as paradigmatic of the opposite approach to analogical inferences, one that undermines the very legitimacy of analogical reasoning:

“You shall celebrate it (the holiday of sukkot) as a festival of the Lord for seven days in the year…(you shall sit in booths seven days)” (Lev. 23:41-42).

(1)“Days,” the law seems to only stipulate days, where do I know (that the law applies to) nights?

(2) I will reason: Here it says “seven,” and by the (inauguration of the) tent-of-meeting it says “seven” (Lev. 8:33). Just as “seven” mentioned by the tent-of-meeting refers to both daytime and nighttime, so too “seven” mentioned here refers to both daytime and nighttime.

(3) Or perhaps pursue the argument in [the following] direction: It says “seven” here and it says “seven” with reference to lulav (Lev. 23:40). Just as “seven” mentioned by lulav does not refer to both daytime and nighttime so too “seven” mentioned here does not refer to both daytime and nighttime.

(4) Let us see to whom it is similar (nir’eh le-mi domeh)? We derive seven that are consistent all day long (the obligation to sit in a sukkah) from seven that are consistent all day long (the inauguration of the tent-of-meeting) and let not the seven of lulav, which are not consistently obligated all day long, serve as proof.

(5) Or perhaps pursue the argument in [the following] direction: We derive seven that are an everlasting tradition (sukkah) from seven that are an everlasting tradition (lulav) and

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18 Friedman, “Or Perhaps,” p. 70. Although contemporary scholars largely agree that the Sifrei on Deuteronomy was composed by the Akiban school, Friedman cites a consensus of scholars (p. 70, n. 34) who confirm that the section of the Sifrei on Deuteronomy that contains our expect was composed by the Ishmaelien school.
let not the seven of the tent-of-meeting, which are not an everlasting tradition, serve as proof.

(6) Therefore the verse teaches “you shall sit for seven days” “you shall sit for seven days” for a gezerah shavah. Just as “you shall sit for seven days” mentioned regarding the tent-of-meeting treats the nighttime as the daytime, so too “you shall sit for seven days” mentioned here should treat the nighttime as the daytime.¹⁹

Scripture enjoins the Israelites to live in an impermanent shack (a sukkah) during the seven-day-long, harvest holiday of Sukkot held each autumn: “You shall celebrate it (the holiday of sukkot) as a festival of the Lord for seven days in the year…you shall sit in booths seven days” (Lev. 23:41-42). The verse, however, does not specify the temporal scope of that mandate. Must one sleep in the sukkah at night, or does the scriptural term “days” connote only daytime? With midrashic flourish, the Sifra clarifies a semantic incertitude by citing other biblical verses that use similar temporal terms. What sets our pericope apart from other midrashim, however, is that its dialectical analysis of lexical and substantive analogies, structured around the twice-repeated phrase, “or perhaps pursue the argument in [the following] direction,” does not attempt to ascertain the legitimacy of legal analogies but, rather, to demonstrate the logical imprecision of analogical reasoning.²⁰

In the Sifra, the response, “or perhaps pursue the argument in [the following] direction,” acts as a refutation. It does not initiate a second analogy out of a genuine interest in amplifying the semantic range of scripture. Rather, it shuts down the force of the first analogy. “Oh kelakh,” “or perhaps…” weakens the logic of the first analogy by illustrating the indeterminability of its analogical argument. In this refutational role, it exemplifies Rabbenu Hillel’s rule: the conclusion confirms the first legal analogy, not the second, as the second analogy is a logical ruse. Our example from the Sifra enacts this exact dialectical pattern. In response to the legal query—must one dwell in a sukkah at night?—the arguments follow a precise Akiban pattern: (1) the verse seems to only mention daytime (intuitive hypothesis) (2) day and night (lexical analogy); (3) day (lexical analogy); (4) day and night (logical analogy); (5) day (logical analogy); (6) conclusion: day and night (gezerah shavah). As is evidenced by this structure, the Sifra shuts down both lexical and logical analogies because both are deemed equally indecisive. The polythetic nature of analogies—the ability for analogues to share both fundamental similarities and fundamental differences—illustrates that analogies are interchangeable, arbitrary, and therefore inconclusive. To reach a legal conclusion, the Sifra shifts from human reasoning to the certitude of a

¹⁹ Sifra, Emor, 12:17 [ed. Weiss, 103a]:

scripturally taught analogy, known as a *gezerah shavah*. In this context, that necessitates expanding the lexical breadth of the analogues from “days” to “you shall sit for seven days,” a phrase which only appears twice in all of scripture.

The Sifra’s resistance to analogical reasoning exemplifies what Azzan Yadin-Israel calls the Sifra’s “rhetorical camouflage.” Although the Sifra reads like a midrash, its midrashic rhetoric is veneer for a non-midrashic project: to transform oral traditions into rabbinically sanctioned Midrash. The Sifra engages in exegesis only to link tradition-based laws (*halakhot*) to scripture. Rabbenu Hillel’s insight into how Akiban midrashim adjudicate between opposing analogies can be read as making a similar argument: these midrashim, which adduce logical arguments that confirm the hypothesis, are not examples of exegesis. The Sifra’s *din* (logically-based) arguments affirm the initial hypothesis, as opposed to the more typical tannaitic pattern, wherein initial interpretive hypotheses are rejected by rabbinic exegetical techniques. By affirming the first hypothesis in the conclusion, the Sifra makes clear that the intermediate steps of exegesis are less hermeneutical hypothesis than attempts to void any exegetical alternative.

The Akiban school’s demotion of logically-derived legal analogies accentuates its divergence from the Ishmael school’s approach to analogical reasoning. The Sifrei’s analysis of the *mezuzah*, which shifts toward a substantive analogy (“*adun davar mi-davar*”), turns the table on the initial hypothesis. Once the Sifrei turns from lexical to substantive analogies, the dialectical back-and-forth is terminated. No further counter-analogies are needed, as a single conceptual analogy is enough to arbitrate between the two proposed legal possibilities (stone and parchment). Other midrashim from the Ishmael-school, however, provide data on how this school adjudicates between opposing substantive analogies. In one pericope, the Mekhila generates a plethora of conflicting analogies (some lexical and some substantive) before identifying the legitimate analogue through logic: “I will learn this from that and compare this to that. I will learn a matter that is similar in four ways from a matter that is similar in four ways, and I will not learn a matter that is similar in four ways from something that is similar in one, or

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22 The exact phrase in Lev. 8:35 reads, "יָמִים שְׁבַע וּלְיָמָה יָמִים יְשַׁבָּו*, while that in Lev. 23:42 reads, "יָמִים שְׁבַע יִשְׁבַּו*," while that in Lev. 23:42 reads, "יָמִים שְׁבַע יִשְׁבַּו.*


two, or three ways."

Rather than abandon analogical reasoning once opposing substantive analogies are identified, as the Sifra frequently does, the Mekhilta selects the analogue with the highest number of affinities as the appropriate target case from which one can rationally infer new binding norms.

The philosophical disparity between these two tannaitic stances on the legitimacy of non-lexical analogies is indexed by the presence or absence of one Hebrew phrase—elmod davar midavar v-adun davar mi-davar. Only Ishmaelian midrashim employ “davar mi-davar” terminology, and in each instance the similitude that binds the two davars together (denoted by the “mi” preposition) transcends linguistic likeness. The Akiban midrashim make use of a different phrase to mark discursive shifts from lexical to logical analogies: “nir’eh le-mi domeh,” “let us see to whom it is similar.” As we previously saw, that phrase only functions to camouflage its anti-conceptual methodology. Analogies based on human reasoning are exposed as inconclusive, and Akiban homilies inevitably return to scripture’s linguistic similarities (gezerah shavah) as the only legitimate guide for discovering the unspoken details of scripture’s laws.

The tannaitic sages of Palestine were not the first to express misgivings about the power of analogies to determine the law. Several centuries beforehand, Cicero also struggled with the authority of analogical arguments in juridical debates. On the one hand, Cicero writes, analogies enable jurors to forge direct links between written laws and unprecedented legal cases. But, on the other, the opposing juror can persuasively argue against the validity of all juridical analogies by insisting that,

It is not proper to consider anything except what is written; all laws are put in danger if comparisons are once allowed to be instituted; there is hardly anything which does not seem somewhat similar to something else; when there are many circumstances wholly dissimilar, still there are separate laws for each individual case; and that all things can be proved to be like or unlike to each other (omnia posse inter se vel similia vel dissimilia demonstrari). The common topics derived from ratiocination ought to arrive by conjecture from that which is written to that which is not written; and one may urge that no one can embrace every imaginable case in a written law, but that he frames a law best who takes care to make one thing understood from another. One may urge, too, that in opposition to a ratiocination of this sort, conjecture is no better than a divination, and that

25 Mekhilta Pišḥa 8. See also Sifrei Numbers, Naso 6 and Sifrei Numbers, Behaalotecha 60. Cf. Sifrei Numbers, Korah 118, for the only instance in Ishmaelian midrashim where this style of analogical argumentation is attributed to named rabbis and performed in a narrative genre. Conceptual analogies are not resolved there in typical Ishmaelian fashion. Instead, R. Akiva supports one conceptual analogy by adducing an explicit scriptural analogy (heqesh), which is subsequently refuted as indecisive. At the conclusion of the narrative, R. Ishmael offers a harsh critique of R. Akiva’s hermeneutical methodology (cf. the version in BT Zevahim 67a which heightens R. Ishmael’s rhetoric of critique) and reaffirms the initial conceptual analogy. Thus this narrative can be read as a fascinating dramatization of the dissenting approaches to analogical reasoning proffered by these two founders of midrashic schools.

26 See Bacher, Erkhe Midrash, p. 17.
it would be a sign of a very stupid framer of laws not to be able to provide for everything which he wished to.\textsuperscript{27}

The affinities between Cicero and the Akiban school are substantive (subversive as it may be to compare two traditions that critique the legitimacy of comparativism).\textsuperscript{28} They both deeply distrust analogical argumentation; to determine the law in an enigmatic case, one must believe that the creator of the law has already set-forth “everything which he wished to.” They also both speak to the indiscriminate power of analogies to locate similitudes between a multitude of analogues. What Cicero states as a theoretical principle—“there is hardly anything which does not seem somewhat similar to something else”—the Sifra performs by consistently marshalling counter-analogies to both lexical and substantive analogies.

Given these expressions of Late Antique skepticism about analogical reasoning, internal and adjacent to rabbinic culture, the Ishmaelian phrase, “I will learn this from that and compare this to that (אלפוהב דָּבָר אָדָוָנ דָּבָר),” is a bold assertion.\textsuperscript{29} It entrusts human reasoning to perform cognitive tasks that do not have certain criteria of validity. Even when grappling with divine law—its minutia and applications—human discernment of substantive analogies is legally significant, even though those resemblances are equivocal and inconclusive. The expression “davar mi-davar,” with its demand that inferences be governed by conceptual affinity rather than formal coincidence, ratifies analogical analysis as a sanctioned hermeneutic. The school of R. Ishmael may not give loose rein to the analogical imagination but it affirms that discovering new conceptual relationships between scriptural laws is a core rabbinic practice.

Despite the logical tentativeness of inferential and analogical argumentation, these modes of reasoning eventually became central to the creativity of talmud study. In the following section I trace the evolution of “davar mi-davar” terminology in post-tannaitic literature and examine why it became associated with talmudic reasoning.

\section*{II: “Meivin Davar mitokh Davar” as Talmudic Reasoning in Amoraic and Early Medieval Literature}

After the wane of the tannaitic period, the relational locution, “davar mi-davar,” became untethered from the analogical task of comparing one thing (davar) to another (davar). Instead, it began to signify a mode of inferential reasoning. Whereas the expression originally signifies a

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horizontal relationship between two analogous topics that generates new knowledge of (at least) one of them, for amoraim, “davar mi-davar” signifies a genealogical relationship between a topic, phrase, or object and the new meanings that may be deduced from that entity. Both phases in the locution’s rabbinic history allege that the formation of new connections, affinities, inferences, and conclusions from what is already evident does not merely produce new knowledge. It also extends the concepts and edicts of older traditions. For the Rabbis of Late Antiquity, analytical creativity—be it analogical or deductive—both clarifies the known (davar) and uncovers the unknown (davar).

One of the few attestations of this locution in amoraic midrash31 occurs in a pericope from Genesis Rabbah that depicts Noah as a rabbinic scholar, as someone capable of creating inferences from God’s words:

And he studies (hogeh) the teachings day and night (Psalms 1:1): Because he [Noah] deduced (haga) one thing from another (davar mi-tokh davar). He said, “For what reason did the Holy One, blessed be He, include more pure animals than impure animals [on the ark]? Is it not because He wants sacrifices to be brought from them (the pure animals).” Immediately, “[and Noah built an altar to the Lord] and took of every pure animal” (Gen. 8:20).32

By playing with the semantic range of “hogeh”—which comprises a spectrum of intellectual activities, including “to meditate,” “to reason,” “to study,” and “to argue,”33—Genesis Rabbah links Noah’s cognitive skills to the depiction of a scholar that opens the Book of Psalms: “and he studies (hogeh) the teachings day and night” (Psalms 1:1). That linkage allows the Midrash to fill-in a scriptural lacuna: What prompts Noah to immediately sacrifice some of the animals he rescued from the flood? And why do his gift-offerings so appease God that they convince Him to never again “doom the earth because of man” (Gen. 8:21). The midrash’s answer depicts Noah’s decision as an act of logic, and not as an act of spontaneous devotion. By meditating on the reasons for God’s earlier request (to rescue more pure than impure creatures), Noah infers what God wanted without having to be told explicitly. For this amoraic Midrash, the impulse to infer new conclusions from given knowledge—”deducing one thing from another”—characterizes the Torah student at large, as figured in Psalm 1:1. Noah is cast as a proto-rabbinic scholar precisely because he is able to create deductions and inferences from God’s language.

A related text in Genesis Rabbah adds to the trope of Noah as a thinker:

30 That semantic shift from analogy-making to inference-making is indexed by the substitution of the “mi” proposition for “mi-tokh.” In almost all post-tannaitic uses of the locution, one therefore finds “davar mi-tokh davar.”
31 Cf. Midrash Mishlei 1.
32 Genesis Rabbah, 26 [ed. Theodor and Albeck, p. 244]:

“And Noah built (va-yiven) an altar to the Lord:” It is written, va-yiven, nitbonen, he cogitated. He said, “For what reason did God include more pure than impure animals? It must be to bring from them sacrifices.” Immediately, “and (he) took of every pure animal” (Gen. 8:20).34

Here a verbal root of binah, “nitbonen,” takes the place of “haga davar mi-davar,” used in the previous pericope. By punning on yiven/nitbonen [יָיִן/נתבונן], the exegete addresses the same lacuna as our previous homily only through a different allusion. Noah built (va-yiven) an altar because he cogitated (nitbonen) on the connotations of God’s revelations. The implicit amoraic association of binah with inferential reasoning (davar mi-davar), evidenced here, will become definitive and explicit in all later rabbinic uses of “davar mi-davar’ locutions.

The definitive association of binah with the cognitive processes of inferential reasoning appears in the Babylonian Talmud. In an often cited tradition, Rava, a fourth-generation Babylonian amora, enumerates seven practices that a man is judged by in the afterlife. Rava extrapolates these foci of heavenly judgment from the words of Isaiah 33:5: “Faithfulness (אמונת) to your charge was [her] wealth (עתיך)/ wisdom (חכמת) and knowledge (ודעת) [her] triumph (ישועת), reverence for the Lord—that was her treasure (ידוה היא ות药业) .” Working from the terminology of Isaiah, Rava states:

When a person is brought to judgment (before God for the live they lived), they say to him: “Did you conduct business faithfully (באמונה)? Did you designate set times (עתים) for Torah study? Did you engage in procreation?35 Did you await salvation (לישועה)? Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom (בחכמה פלפלת) or understand one thing from another (דבר מתוך דבר)? And, no matter what, if the fear of the Lord is his treasure (ירהה היא אוצרו), yes (he is judged mercifully), and if not, no, (these accomplishments have no value).36

Unfortunately, Rava gives us few clues as to what type of cognitive practice “understand(ing) one thing from another” is, except that its performance ought to be a core part of every Jew’s life. Given its position in an (implicit) homily on Isaiah 33:5, we can deduce that the rabbinic phrase is meant to mirror “da’at,” though that offers little additional knowledge as to the exact modality of this intellectual practice. The internal structure of Rava’s discourse is more suggestive. The

34 Genesis Rabbah, 34 [ed. Theodor and Albeck, p. 317]:
ורכז תחנה לה: ידוה היא אוצרו, אומרי גלות הנדה להכריע עמה, לא שורשיה להכריע ולא ממעה. מפרץ, ידוה, כל הברחות שמתורהת נמי.
35 Rashi, ad locum, links this locution to “[her] triumph (ישועת)” from Isaiah 33:5:
36 BT Shabbat, 31a:
אמר רבא בשכנתו אמס כל ודין ואמורין ונאשא משכנתו ונהה בהאמרה עמה להכריע עמה לברוח נפעים כジー להכריעה פלפלות ההאמרה חכמת דבר ממעה עמה אומרי גלות היא אומרי גלות היא אומרי גלות היא אומרי גלות היא.
juxtaposition of dialectical studiousness (ב㍑מה פלפלת) with “understand(ing) one thing from another,” intimates that it too entails a form of intellectual virtuosity that goes beyond rote study.

A related association of binah with talmudic learning is evidenced first in the Jerusalem Talmud: “Rabbi Shmuel b. Nahman said, mishnah precedes talmud, and what is the reason? ‘Acquire hokhmah, acquire binah’ (Prov. 4:5).” The curriculum of palestinian amoraim proscribes that the oral-recitation of mishnah precede the analytical practice of talmud. Rabbi Shmuel supports the legitimacy of this curricular formation by citing a verse from Proverbs that advises one to first acquire wisdom and then acquire understanding. Implied, is that study of the mishnah instills wisdom (hokhmah), while talmud study instills understanding (binah).

Working from these talmudic sources, Ashkenazi rabbis in the early medieval period articulate new perspectives on the relationship between havanat davar mi-tokh davar (inferential reasoning) and the practices of talmudic learning. Several passages from Rashi’s eleventh century commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud outline his claim that analytical innovation is an integral component of the discipline of talmud. In a gloss on Proverbs 1:5—“that the wise man (hakham) may hear, and increase in learning, and the man of understanding (navon) may attain unto wise counsels”—Rashi writes that a navon (one who has binah) “exceeds the knowledge of a hakham because he is capable of deducing one matter from another matter (meivin davar mi-tokh davar) and adding to the traditions he hears (shmuato).” One who exercises binah is preferable to one who has hokhmah because the ability to logically extrapolate traditions into novel adaptations exceeds the cognitive conservatism of mnemonics, which Rashi identifies with the self-replicating logic of hokhmah. In comments to Proverbs 4:7—“The beginning of wisdom (hokhmah) is: get wisdom; with all your ability get understanding (binah)”—Rashi further construes the relationship between hokhmah and binah as pedagogical, as one which necessitates a shift from schoolhouse-memorization to personal innovation:

The beginning of your wisdom is to learn from others, acquire oral traditions from a teacher. Afterwards, with all your ability acquire understanding, contemplate (hitbonen) it by yourself in order to grasp the reasons/explanations of one matter from another (davar mi-tokh davar).

Here, Rashi portrays binah (used here in its derivatives: navon, meivin, and hitbonen) as the practice that allows one to transform from being a student to being a self-practitioner of rabbinic reasoning. hakham. The exercise of binah entails searching for the motivating sensibilities

38 yHor. 3:5, 48c.
40 Rashi on Proverbs 4:7:

ראשה תמכה קנה תמכה - חלולה תמכה לمؤ ממאורימ קנה על שמومة מפי הבר, והא' כבל עינן קנה בני, תמכה במקצת
למשכי התUnity מבר מוקד דבר.
(ta’amim, “tastes”) behind a tradition, so that one may, then, creatively adopt and apply its message. We see here that the inferential method of binah may sometimes flow from conclusions backward to implied premises, rather than from premise to probable conclusions.

Rashi’s glosses on a mini-narrative from the Babylonian Talmud further elucidate his stance on talmudic studies as a practice of inferential creativity. The Talmud’s anonymous editor(s) resolve(s) two conflicting traditions about the chronology of R. Meir’s studies by suggesting the following resolution: “There is no inconsistency. He first went to R. Akiva, but when he was unable to follow (along) he went to R. Ishmael and memorized traditions (gēmar gemara). Afterwards, he returned to R. Akiva and was able to understand his reasonings (savār sevara).” Rashi interprets the phrase gēmar gemara as a reference to rote memorization of rabbinic traditions (mishnayot), “as his teacher had orally learnt from his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher.” In opposition to this mnemonic replication of tradition, savār sevara, Rashi explains, entails a more investigative and innovative mode of learning:

To understand the essential reasons of the mishnah, for what reason this is impure and this is pure, this forbidden and this permitted, and upon what does everything depend and upon which verse. And this is the talmud that existed in the times of the tannaim, to deduce one matter from another matter (l’havin davar mi-tokh davar). When there was something new, it was asked in the beit midrash, from where they should derive it and to which mishnah they should compare it.

For Rashi, sevara comprises three creative modes of ratiocination: searching for the reasons behind a law, searching for comparable laws, and deducing legal consequences from those laws. These assertive cognitive practices of binah/sevara made up “the talmud that existed in the times of the tannaim,” and continue to define talmudic reasoning in Rashi’s milieu.

Simḥa of Vitry (d. 1105), one of Rashi’s more prominent students, reinforces Rashi’s pedagogical theory of binah, with the modification that the initial process of acquiring knowledge is now connoted by the cognitive term da’at, rather than by hokhmah.

“If there is no da’at there is no binah, (if there is no binah there is no da’at)” (Pirqe Avot 3:17). What he learns from his teacher is called da’at, and what he understands on his own (meivin mi-libō) is called binah. “If there is no da’at,” this refers to one who has not learnt via traditions. “He has no binah,” he has no independent understanding (binat ha-lev) in matters of Torah. For what will he comprehend in his heart if he has not heard

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41 BT Sotah 20a.
42 Rashi on BT Sotah 20a, “ve-hadar ata.” Compare Rashi’s comments on the same story cited in BT Eruvin 13a. See also Rashi on BT, Horiyot 2b, “ve-saver.”
43 For other instances where Rashi equates sevara with searching for the operant ta’am (legal motive), see BT Shabbat 63a, “ve-hadar lisvar;” BT Yoma 33a, “sevara lo yadana;” BT Sukkah 28a, “gemara;” and BT Bechorot 20a, “talmud.”
anything. “And if he has no binah,” if he has no inner capacity (binat ha-lev) to understand and perform logical reasoning (sevara) by himself and to add onto what he has heard. “There is no da’at,” meaning, what benefit is all his learning to him, for he cannot master the topic if he does not add on to what he has heard.  

Binah is defined here as an additive mode of logic, capable of extending one’s teacher’s traditions toward new insights. Playing off a mishnaic tradition that characterizes binah and da’at as codependent faculties—“If there is no da’at there is no binah, if there is no binah there is no da’at” (Pirqei Avot 3:17)—Simḥa of Vitry stresses that acquired knowledge (da’at) is only valuable if it can then become fodder for innovation, “for he cannot master the topic if he does not add on to what he has heard.” Cognitive creativity (binah) is not merely an advanced stage of scholarly life. In its absence, even the basic level of understanding (da’at) eludes the rabbinic student. For Simḥa of Vitry, the practices of binah are a core part of the rabbinic curriculum, as their creative aims challenge students to deduce the ramifications of received rabbinic traditions.

When, a century later, Maimonides’ portrays talmud study as an analytical praxis of “mitbonen b-da’ato l-havin davar mi-davar,”46 “contemplating in his mind to deduce one thing from another,” he is embracing a long lineage of rabbinic sources that align verbs of binah and practices of deduction (“davar mi-davar”) with talmudic analysis. This section analyzed how binah came to be aligned with talmudic reasoning in Late Antiquity and how early medieval Ashkenazi sources, which slightly predate Maimonides, conceptualize the creative imperative of binah.

III: “Sod mi-tokh Sod”: A History of Inferential Esotericism

Before binah became synonymous with talmudic creativity, it was often associated with the

45 Mahzor Vitri, 3:517 (Berlin, 1893):

46 Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Talmud Torah 1:12.
ability to decipher enigmas and mysteries. The claim that *binah* is integral to Jewish esotericism originates in the late biblical period, several centuries before the development of rabbinic Judaism and its methodologies of analytical study that became associated with *binah*. This section focuses on when and where the two models of *binah* converge (*binah* as decipherment; *binah* as deduction), a largely unexplored history that is critical for understanding how methods of talmudic speculation became methods for discovering secrets.

Throughout its opening Aramaic chapters, the book of Daniel uses the terms *hokhmah* and *binah* interchangeably, as is the case in all other wisdom literatures of the biblical period. But in the book’s later, Hebrew chapters, *hokhmah* disappears. For Daniel to understand the apocalyptic visions he receives in these later chapters, he needs one specific intellectual power: *binah*. At the close of his second vision, Daniel recounts: “While I, Daniel, was seeing the vision, and I asked for *binah*, there appeared before me one who looked like a man” (Dan. 8:15). *Binah* is thus singled out as a cognitive capability that Daniel can acquire only with angelic assistance. Similarly, when Daniel writes of his visitation by the angel Gabriel, he emphasizes the gift of *binah* that Gabriel bestows upon him: “He made me understand (*יבן*) by speaking to me and saying, ‘Daniel, I have just come forth to give you *binah*. A word went forth as you began your plea, and I have come to tell it, for you are precious; so examine (*בין*) the word and understand (*בן*) the vision” (Dan. 9:22-23). And again, in his final vision of the man dressed in linen and gold, the man tells Daniel: “I have come to make you understand (*להביןך*) what is to befall your people in the days to come, for there is yet a vision for those days” (Dan. 10:14). In each of these examples *binah* is the cipher to apocalyptic enigmas that cannot be otherwise cracked through ordinary cognition. For the author of Daniel, *binah* is a mode of interpretation that is as difficult to execute as it is necessary to make meaning out of mysterious signs and visions.

Moshe Idel, in a short survey of *binah*’s role within Jewish esotericism, highlights the presence of this motif—*binah* as an aptitude necessary for understanding Jewish mysteries—in *The Manual of Discipline*, *The Scroll of Thanksgiving*, and *The Apocalypse of Levi*, texts from or preserved by the Qumran community. As per Daniel, in these scrolls, only God can grant man *binah*, a “prophetic enlightenment of the (Qumran) community by its priestly leaders and by God.” By the rabbinic period, however, *binah*, as a prerequisite for understanding secrets, is no longer associated with mantic wisdom, with transcending human cognition. For the rabbis, *binah* is the sine qua non of achievable intellectual excellence. The famous Mishnah in Haggiga (2:1) states that the secrets of the *merkavah* may not be taught to a student at a time unless they are already wise and able to understand on their own (“*hakham u-mevin mi-da’ato*”). Here, *binah* (in

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the verbal form, “mevin”) is connected to the two other modes of human cognition—hokhmahand da’at—and no claim is made that the attainment or exercise of binah is dependent on supernatural aid.  To receive secrets, according to the mishnah, one has only to prove that they have reached a high level of cognition.

Several decades later, we begin to find sources that identify the cognitive flourishing necessitated of students before they may be taught scripture’s secrets with inferential creativity. A stammatitic gloss on a phrase from Isaiah (3:3), “expert enchanter (נביאים לlashes),” transforms the verse’s meaning to refer to one who is able to apply binah to the realm of whispers, i.e., charms. “Expert’ ( carro): this is one who can deduce one thing from another; ‘Whisper’ (רashi): this one who is worthy to be taught words of Torah that are given in whispers.” The talmudic gloss transforms the referent of והלש to one who speaks in whispers (an enchanter) to one who receives wisdom by way of whispers. Similarly, the stam shifts the meaning of לעבר מבר from someone with magical expertise to someone with intellectual expertise. To the Talmud’s final redactors, a navon is a cognitive searcher, a person who cherishes the cognitive skill that are emblematic of rabbinic reasoning—mevin davar mi-tokh davar.

A responsum of Hai Gaon (939-1038) elevates the analytical skills of inferential creativity to a new theological register:

And these [matters concerning the stature and form of God] are secrets and mysteries that

51 Cf. Idel’s assessment (Absorbing Perfections, p. 207) that, “understanding, being a requirement for the reception of the most esoteric kind of knowledge in Judaism, somehow transcends the kind of elementary comprehension that comes from having an ordinary intelligence (da’ato).”
53 For another late-rabbinic text that designates esotericism to binah and inferential creativity, see Kallah Rabbati 5:2:

52: ‘Mine is counsel and comprehension’ (Proverbs 8:14): This is spoken by the prince of Torah. And she says, “I am binah.” And if you wish, she says (the whole verse) - “even though I am not close to my counsel and wisdom, this counsel is mine, and from my name they derive their wisdom, but my essence (gufi, lit. “my body”) is binah. And even though men are combative, there is no man except one who exists through me…” “and the secrets of the Torah are revealed to him:” one thing from another… “and like a river that does not stop:” for every day a new reasoning is made new for him.” On the complicated issues involved in dating Kallah Rabbati, see David Brodsky, A Bride Without a Blessing: A Study in the Redaction and Content of Massekhet Kallah and Its Gemara (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), pp. 179-421; and B. de Vries, “The Date of Compilation of the Tractate Kalla Rabbati,” Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies, Vol. 1 (1965), pp. 131-132.
Hai Gaon weaves together several strands of rabbinic esotericism into a three-stage paradigm for the transmission of secrets: (1) A teacher transmits only the generalities of an esoteric topic, its “chapter headings;” (2) the student applies his intellect (binah) to deduce the details; (3) God illumines the essence of the matter in the student’s heart. Although the third stage is the most unprecedented part of this responsum, what interest us here is the relation between the first and second stage. How exactly does the student engage with the esoteric traditions of his teacher? How creative is the student’s necessary exercise of binah? One 19th century edition, based on an unidentified Italian manuscript,55 carries a variant verb for binah that emphasizes the student’s creativity. Where most editions read, “and they whisper to him in whispers, and give him generalities, and he understands them (במהן בן והוא),” this edition substitutes the cognitive verb for understanding (ובן) with a more active verb: “ויחם рай בם,” “and he runs with them.”56 “To run with whispers’ seems to connote a highly agentic and creative model of esotericism. Before God will reveal the essence of the secret in the student’s heart, the student must embellish the brief allusions he receives. The three-word image of a student running with secrets narrates a more emboldened creative process than clarification of what was alluded to by the teacher’s chapter headings. A student of whispers must show that he can enhance his teacher’s esoteric traditions. After these acts of esoteric expansion, God reveals the essence of the secret, blurring the epistemic boundaries between origin (teacher), augmentation (student), and essence (God).

Hai Gaon’s citation of the talmudic midrash on Isaiah 3:1—“expert at whispers; ‘expert:’ this is one who can deduce one thing from another”—as a prooftext illustrates that he views his esoteric model of reception, transformation, and illumination as analogous to the rabbinic model

54 Otsar He-Geonim: Thesaurus of Gaonic Responsa and Commentaries, ed. B. M. Lewin (Jerusalem, 1931), 4:12:


56 Ibid., 29, p. 12:
of me'vin davar mi-tokh davar, which concludes that midrash. In a sense, then, Hai Gaon’s theological addendum to the talmudic approach to esotericism—wherein the process of esoteric creativity comes to a conclusion with a mantic revelation—is itself a performance of inferential esotericism, the very praxis necessary to enter into the realm of esoterica.

A fuller integration of rabbinic practices of inferential reasoning into esoteric education and theosophy begins in late-thirteenth-century Castile. Moses de Leon (1240-1305), one of the central figures involved in composing and circulating zoharic texts aligns with Moshe Idel’s thesis that thirteenth-century Spanish Kabbalah was comprised of two competing elites: A primary-elite made up of ruling-intelligentsia, who were communal leaders, halakhic authorities, and conservative kabbalists (averse to kabbalistic innovation, systemic kabbalistic hermeneutics, and writing-down the traditions of Kabbalah at any depth); and a secondary-elite, made of “educated individuals who were uncomfortable with the more ‘mainstream’ intellectual stance into which they had been educated, and were in more or-less continuous search of new types of thought.” These secondary-elites developed what Idel calls “innovative Kabbalah,” as their social position allowed them to experiment and try out new systems of thought without seeking legitimacy from the ruling rabbinic authorities of Spain. While de Leon, like most of the Castilian secondary-elite, did not compose halakhic treatises, he frequently appropriates rabbinic tropes for new kabbalistic purposes. One notorious example is de Leon’s involvement in editing Sha’arei Teshuva, a collection of geonic legal responsa. Not only did he edit the collection, De Leon also forged and inserted several legal responsa in the geonic style. Drawing on a contemporaneous Provencal trend, these responsa depart from standard geonic jurisprudence and arrive at legal conclusions based on dreams and heavenly epiphanies.

More pertinent to our context, de Leon composed an eclectic esoteric commentary to the


thirteen rules of rabinic hermeneutics. Ronit Meroz, who recently published this commentary for the first time, characterizes de Leon’s aims as an attempt to identify God, “not only with the written and oral Torah, as is common among all kabbalists, but also with everything the sages invented over the course of all generations through the analogical techniques (kallalet ha-heikesh). This is a mythic glorification of Jewish logic.” De Leon reinterprets the principles of rabbinic logic as exemplars of heavenly processes (connected to both the ten sephirot and the thirteen attributes of divine mercy) and alchemical transformations of the elements. Toward the end of the treatise, De Leon transforms the third of R. Ishmael’s hermeneutical rules, binyan av, wherein an exegete derives a general legal principle from a biblical verse, into a theosophical relationship between binah (=binyan) and hokhmah (=av). Finally, in one of his Hebrew kabbalistic monographs, de Leon stresses that esoteric creativity is modeled after rabbinic illation, a practice of inferring new concepts from older allusions:

You should know that when you enter the Pardes of the marvels of wisdom, you will be able to attain the core of its contents with the help of a few hints of the great and lofty things. And from a subtle hint you will be able to infer one thing from the other (לבניי דבר) (מלוחドレス). (מהورية דבר)

Just as with Hai Gaon, the difference between recovery (of what is hinted at by the esoteric davar) and discovery (of a new davar) is undone by a theory of illation wherein inferential reasoning both extracts and extends the core of a tradition. For de Leon, Pardes is an epistemic space where a concept’s core (והוא) and its corollaries (הרמניק דבר) are indistinguishable; to attain one, one must actively search for the other.

A similar theory of esoteric creativity is alluded to in The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets, a recently published manuscript that is likely connected to the early

61 Meroz, “Kabbalah, Science and Pseudo-Science,” p. 140:

“Contemplate this topic…. hokhmah is (the) head and the first, and from there everything emerges. (It is) called av, “father,” in other words, av to all existence, av to everything, meaning that it is the motivating force of all, and it gives to everything through the power of the pure ether...And contemplate: this av becomes a binyan, “a building,” to build from it, and it (binyan) is the eighth sphere that sustains all….when hokhmah expands, binyan emerges from it. And this is the act of building (bi’niya), and it is binyan av. This is what is called binah and it is father to them all.”
62 Moses de Leon, Ha-Nefesh ha-Hakhhamah (Basle, 1601), par. 12:
stages of zoharic composition (i.e., *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*). As is common in many zoharic narratives, the anonymous chapters describe an intimate group of students as they attempt to persuade their elder teacher to reveal to them scriptural secrets. In one narrative, an especially enigmatic exchange between teacher and students is presented:

When we reached the verse in *Hayyei Sarah,* “food was set before him” (Gen. 24:33), we asked the elder, our teacher, what is the nature of these *יודין,* as it is written, and why is it written in an enigmatic manner? And why is it not written *ללאכול לפניו ויישם,* as it does by Joseph, as it is written, (Gen. 43:22)? He said to us, “our sages have already shed light on this matter, and they hinted to us a great matter when they said, ‘a drug was placed on a plate.’ And see, how far their true tradition reaches, for they invented it with their great dialectics, and from their tradition which illumines a secret from a secret.

Leaving the content of this exegetical discussion aside, the elder’s statement at the conclusion of our citation undoes the boundary between talmudic reasoning and esoteric hermeneutics. The rabbis extrapolate new secrets from their esoteric traditions not by means of epiphany or contemplation but by means of dialectical acumen, here figured as *pilpul.* Use of the term *pilpul* is surprising and rare in a theological, let alone esoteric, context. Its appearance here figures the rabbis of the Talmud as masters of multiple disciplines, as innovators who did not refrain from applying models of legal innovation to theological topics. Highlighting this methodological hybridity, the elder reformulates the classical talmudic phrase, “*davar mi-tokh davar;*” *(inferring) one thing from another,* as “*sod mi-tokh sod,*” *(inferring) a secret from a secret.* As is true for de Leon, here too the reach of an esoteric tradition is determined only by how far it can be extended through analytical creativity—“and see, how far their true tradition reaches, for they invented it with their great dialectics.” Talmudic dialectics provides a method for producing new esoteric knowledge because it allows one to infer the unknown from the known.

Despite living some three centuries beyond the historical circumference of this chapter, Moses Cordovero, the great sixteenth-century synthesizer of medieval Kabbalah, helps us percieve and weave together the concerns at the heart of inferential esotericism more clearly and emphatically than earlier authors. Commenting on *Sefer Yetzirah*’s appeal to its reader to apply *binah to hokhmah* and visa versa, Cordovero addresses the necessary interrelation between the two cognitive modalities when it comes to the study of esotericism:

Now we will explain…the language of the Mishnah (in *Sefer Yetzirah*) that says, “*haven

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64 Wolfson, “The Anonymous Chapters,” p. 222:
**b-hokhmah v-hakem b-binah** (“understand with knowledge and know with understanding”). It seems to me that *hokhmah* is the esoteric tradition (*kabbalah*) and the teachings that a person learns from his teacher. (This is) in line with “we give him chapter headings” (BT *Haggiga* 13a). *Binah* is the investigation (*iyun*) and expansion (*tosefet*) that a person performs by himself through the principles and chapter headings that were given to him. This is what they referred to when they said, “haven b-hokhmah,” “understand with knowledge.” In other words, thoroughly investigate what you learnt from your teacher regarding the wisdom of the (divine) attributes (*hokmat ha-middot*), which are not transmitted except through chapter headings. A person must infer one thing from another (*yavin davar mi-tokh davar*), as they said, “one does not teach this except to a wise person who can understand on their own” (BT *Hagiga* 13), for a person must compare one thing to another and infer one thing from another so that he attains a procreative intellect (*sekhel molid*) and not a barren intellect (*sekhel ‘akar*).

Although “Kabbalah” means reception, Cordovero emphasizes that merely receiving and gathering esoteric traditions is an inappropriate way to master the Kabbalah. Because Jewish secrets (*hokhmah*) are only transmitted through hints and chapter headings, they demand of the student a high level of investigation and cogitation (*binah*). If the student cannot analytically expand the secrets they are taught, their intellect remains barren (*sekhel akar*). Only by deducing inferences from the teacher’s allusions can the student’s mind become a generative intelligence (*sekhel molid*) capable of birthing esoteric knowledge. In this pedagogical schema, Cordovero refracts the analytical creativity of *binah* through the prism of theosophical Kabbalah. *Binah*, the third of the ten sefirot (divine powers), is commonly associated with the maternal: she is the divine mother who births and nurses the lower seven sefirot.

Cordovero thus proposes that the praxis of creative reasoning, long associated with *binah* before the rise of theosophic Kabbalah, engenders a maternal mind. Only the practices of generative cogitation associated with *binah*—comparing one thing to another and inferring one thing from another—enable the male kabbalist to birth new secrets. Hence, for Cordovero, the study of esoteric knowledge demands analytical creativity. Only by inferring/birthing new esoteric knowledge can the kabbalistic disciple properly unite *hokhmah* and *binah*—collected and original esoteric wisdom.

Cordovero’s insistence on the importance of understanding “*davar mi-tokh davar*” may be the boldest source to adopt techniques of inferential reasoning for purposes of esoteric learning. But, given the other sources analyzed in this section, it is far from an outlier. The

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65 *Sefer Pardes Rimonim*, 1:6:


association of *binah* with esoteric decipherment originates with the only ancient Jewish apocalypse included in the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Daniel. Later sources then adopt the amoraic association of *binah* with “*davar mi-davar*” forms of inferential reasoning as a critical practice for esoteric learning. By mapping these evolving discourses of *binah*, this section highlighted the range of pre-modern Jewish sources that argue that generating inferences is a core practice not only of talmud study but also of the study of Jewish secrets.

**IV: Celestial Inferences: Binah as a Method of Cosmogony in Midrash ha-Ne'lam**

For the author(s) of *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*, humans are not the only ones who can generate inferences. On the second day of creation, God creates the celestial realm through a process of “*meivin davar mi-tokh davar,*” “inferring one matter from another.” In this schema, cosmogony, the primal genesis of the cosmos, is bound to the same creative processes as rabbinic reasoning. The latter is to concepts what divine creativity is to the cosmos—a method of generating something unprecedented from pre-existent entities, be they material or ideational. This section builds upon our exploration of *binah* as a nexus of talmudic-esoteric interdisciplinarity to demonstrate that *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* transforms *binah* from a model of generative cognition (wherein rabbis infer new concepts from traditions) into a model of cosmogenesis (wherein God “infers” the heavens from a more ethereal luminescence).

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, *binah* is never ascribed to God; *binah* is solely a human faculty. To describe divine understanding, biblical authors employ *tevunah*, a cognate of *binah*. Oddly, the term is found in three disconnected verses that portray God as stretching (*נטה*; Jer. 10:12), making (*עשוי*; Ps. 136:5), and establishing (*כונן*; Prov. 3:19) the heavens through His *tevunah*. What motivates this linkage between the heaven’s creation and *tevunah*? After all, the claim that God does not necessarily create through words—a thesis that counters the first chapter of Genesis’ emphasis on God’s creative speech and the testament of Psalm 33:6, “by His word the heavens were created”—is typically formulated as an acknowledgment of the role of Wisdom (*hokhmah*) in cosmogenesis. If God does not create heavens and earth through His language, He does so through His Wisdom. The famous paean to Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8 celebrates Wisdom (*hokhmah*) as God’s first creation and His confidante/creative artisan. Similarly, the Wisdom of Solomon (especially in 6:22-10:21) uses the Greek word for wisdom, *sophia*, to formulate a Middle-Platonic sapiential cosmogony in which *sophia* is God’s artificer (*technitis*) of the cosmos. To be sure, the Bible seems to use wisdom and understanding indiscriminately (in twenty-one biblical verses *tevunah* appears alongside *hokhmah* in semantic parallelism) and hence it may be little more than coincidence that three extra-pentateuchal verses attribute the

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69 In the Septuagint *hokhmah* is typically translated as *sophia*, while *binah/tevunah* is typically translated as *phronesis*.

establishment of heaven to *tevunah*. But with midrashic verve and surety that there are no biblical coincidences, *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* crafts an ingenious thesis for why *tevunah* is often associated with the celestial realm, and for why the sole biblical verse that differentiates between *hokhmah* and *tevunah* (Proverbs 3:19) assigns *hokhmah* to the creation of the earth and *tevunah* to the creation of the celestial sphere.

These scriptural queries motivate an extended homiletic investigation into the inferential modalities of cosmogenesis, worth examining *in toto*. The exegetical question is framed as follows:

Rabbi Yehudah said, “May the Name of the supreme King of Kings—the blessed Holy one—be praised and exalted! For He is the first, and He is the last, and aside from Him there is no God. He created the world through the mystery of three great and magnificent things—Knowledge, Wisdom, and Understanding—as it is said: YHVH founded the earth by wisdom (*hokhmah*); He establishes the heavens by understanding (*binah*) (Proverbs 3:19), and it goes on to say: By His knowledge (da’at) the depths were split (Proverbs, 20). “Why did the blessed Holy One create the earth—the lowly world—by the mystery of Wisdom and the heavens—a more sublime world—by Understanding, which is a lesser quality than wisdom? We have already learned: When is a person called ‘wise in wisdom’? When he is asked about anything and he duly answers and replies, grasping all, then he is called ‘wise in wisdom’—which is greater than understanding or knowledge. Then, He (may He be praised) ought to have made the heavens by Wisdom, and the earth, which is lower than them, by Understanding!”

What perplexes R. Yehudah is the word-choices made in Proverbs 3:19: “YHVH founded the earth by wisdom (*hokhmah*); He establishes the heavens by understanding (*binah*).” If Wisdom is a nobler cognitive faculty than Understanding, why does God “found” the earth through Wisdom and “establish” the heavens through Understanding? Given the superiority of the heavens over the earth, God should have created the heavens through Wisdom and the earth through Understanding, the lesser cognitive category.

“R. Yehudah’s” solution advances an unprecedented correlation between the cognitive model of *tevunah* and a cosmogonic model of *tevunah*:

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71 See BT *Shabbat* 114a, and BT *Qiddushin* 40b.

72 *Zohar* Hadash, 4a; trans. by Nathan Wolski, ed. Pritzker (p. 15):

The fundamental thesis proffered by the author(s) of Midrash ha-Ne'lam (speaking as R. Yehudah) is that the heavens were not created ex nihilo. Rather, God’s first creation was the form of the angels, a foundation from which all the heavens derive. R. Yehudah identifies the original angelic form with Elohim, one the ten angelic spheres enumerated by Maimonides. That identification opens the radical hermeneutical possibility that Gen. 1:1, now interpreted as “In the beginning Elohim created Elohim” (Genesis 1:1)—that is to say, He (may His name be praised) created the form of the heavens, a form from which the heavens derive. R. Yehudah identifies the original angelic form with Elohim, and they are the foundation of all other creations. From this foundation (yesod), the heavens were created afterwards through the mystery (sod) of understanding. Just as understanding signifies deducing one thing from another, so the heavens were created one thing from another: from the mystery of light of the angelic form—that is to say, they are a binyan, a construction, from a foundation (yesod). Therefore: He establishes the heavens by understanding (Proverbs 3:19)—one thing from another. The heavens were created from the same light emanated to Elohim, and He fashioned them one thing from another.74

The blessed Holy One (may His name be praised) created the heavens by the mystery of Understanding (tevunah), as per the meaning of Binah—derived from a foundation (yesod). In the beginning all creations, He created the form of the holy angels—the first of all creations, emanated from the radiance of His majestic light. In their mystery they are called by ten names, and among their names they are called Elohim. Therefore Scripture comes to teach: In the beginning He created Elohim (Genesis 1:1)—that is to say, He (may His name be praised) created the form of the angels called Elohim, and they are the foundation of all other creations. From this foundation (yesod), the heavens were created afterwards through the mystery (sod) of understanding. Just as understanding signifies deducing one thing from another, so the heavens were created one thing from another: from the mystery of light of the angelic form—that is to say, they are a binyan, a construction, from a foundation (yesod).

Therefore: He establishes the heavens by understanding (Proverbs 3:19)—one thing from another. The heavens were created from the same light emanated to Elohim, and He fashioned them one thing from another.

74 Zohar Hadash, 4a; trans. by Nathan Wolski, ed. Pritzker (pp. 15-16):

75 See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah 2:7-8.
semantic linkages between binah (understanding) and boneh (building), and element/foundation (yesod) and mystery (sod). The purpose of these linkages is elucidated in the homily’s middle paragraph, where R. Yehudah describes binah as a cognitive faculty that is constructive. When a rabbinic scholar exercises binah, he “infer(s) one thing from another...in other words, when he sees the foundational principles (yesod), he is able to build (boneh) upon them.” The generative practice of deriving a concept through the faculty of binah, according to R. Yehudah, is isomorphic to the generation of the heavens, which were also derived from a foundational entity (yesod). In both cases, something is created from something, a process closer to construction than innovation.

R. Yehudah then grounds his cosmogonic vision in the verb Proverbs 3:19 uses to describe how God made the heavens with tevunah: “He establishes (כונן) the heavens by understanding.” In the Bible, to establish (konen) is to complete or solidify, not to create. Accordingly, R. Yehudah depicts the person who uses binah as one who is able to fill-out a concept from a mere allusion. The creation of earth, on the other hand, is described in the same verse in Proverbs by a different verb—“YHVH founded (יסד) the earth by wisdom.” Given the function ascribed to this verb throughout the homily—to serve as a formal substratum—perhaps R. Yehudah is suggesting that the earth was not constructed from a substratum, as were the heavens, but was created ex nihilo; the earth is its own element, its own yesod. If this is a correct interpretation (otherwise, it is hard to comprehend the proposed cosmogonic relationship between Wisdom and the earth), R. Yehudah is associating hokhmah with yesod, parallel to the association he fashions between binah and binyan. Although the comprehensivity that Wisdom bestows may have a higher social value in rabbinic culture, the generative processes of Understanding more closely resemble how God composed the celestial sphere from angelic light. For our purposes, R. Yehudah’s homily transforms a method of cognitive creativity, which had previously been only ascribed to proactive rabbinic minds, into a method of divine creativity. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I investigate the medieval debates, esoteric

76 This etymological connection, which we already encountered in Genesis Rabbah 34 (on Noah), is also attested to in the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4Q372 (=4QapocrJoseph), frag. 2:5.


78 Zohar Hadash, 4a.


80 Cf. BT Hor. 14a and Ber. 64a for the famous rabbinic debate on which is preferable: intellectual breadth (“sinai,” i.e., someone who knows the whole Torah as it was given at Sinai) or intellectual creativity (“oker harim,” “an uprooter of mountains,” i.e., someone with creative intellect). For an account of why this question emerged in the amoraic period, see Marc Hirshman, The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture, 100 C.E. - 350 C.E.: Texts on Education and Their Late Antique Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 109-120.
traditions, and anonymous texts that inform and elucidate Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s equation of talmudic logic with cosmogenesis.

It is appropriate that R. Yehuda’s cosmogony of derivation is itself derived from a mythologoumenon in Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer, a late-rabbinic text whose influence on the Zohar runs deep:81

Wherefrom were the heavens created? From the light of His garment. He took some of it, stretched it like a cloth, and thus they were extending continually until He said, “enough” (dai). Therefore He is called Shadai, for He told the heavens “enough” (dai), and they stood. From where (do we know) that it was created from the light of His garment? As it is said: “Who covers Thyself with light as with a garment. Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain” (Ps. 104:2). Wherefrom was the earth created? From the snow under the throne of His glory. He took some of it and threw it to the water, as it is said: “For He says to the snow, be thou earth” (Job 37:6).82

To be sure, Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer’s claim that cosmogenesis is engendered by means of a divine textile is a revision of an even earlier midrash. In Genesis Rabbah, a Palestinian Midrash from the fourth century, R. Simeon ben Jehosadaq challenges the notable homilist (ba’al haggadah), R. Samuel ben Nahman: “As I have heard that you are a master of Haggadah, tell me whence the light was created.” To answer, R. Samuel whispers back a tradition he received by way of whispers: “The Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself in a white garment, and its splendor shone forth from one end of the world to the other.”83 Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer borrows

81 David Luria’s commentary to Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer (Warsaw, 1851) highlights many parallels between Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Zohar, though he does not note this intertext.

82 Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer, 3:

83 Genesis Rabbah 3:4:

this image of God’s garment acting as an agent in the creation process. However, it adds its own spin by substituting the heavens for the primal light as the entity generated from the luminosity of God’s garment. Midrash ha-Ne’lam then further modifies the motif of God’s garments of light. In our homily, R. Yehudah assigns the generative substratum of cosmogenesis to an angelic form, not a divine garment. The significance of Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s adaptation and alteration of this rabbinic model of cosmogenesis, can be evaluated by canvassing the medieval reception-history of the myth that God created the heavens with the luminescence of His garment.

As should be expected, the cosmogony of Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer, with its unabashed anthropomorphism and materialism (i.e., God creates by means of textile material), incited Maimonides’ philosophical ire. In the Guide of the Perplexed, Maimonides offers a sharp criticism of this materialistic approach to creation:

Would that I knew what that sage believed! Did he believe that it is impossible that something should come into being out of nothing (trans. Alharizi, לא כי מאמין ההאם הוא דבר ומכים דבר ולעומת דבר ומכים דבר and that there must necessarily be matter from which that which is generated is produced. Did he for this reason seek to find wherefore were created the heavens and earth?...If, however, he wished to signify by the light of His garment an uncreated thing and similarly by the throne of glory something uncreated, this would be a great incongruity. For he would have admitted thereby the eternity of the world, if only as it is conceived according to Plato’s opinion...All in all, this statement will confuse very much indeed the belief of a learned man who adheres to the law.84

For Maimonides, the claim that God created the heavens through the intermediation of a luminous garment is too close to Plato’s position in the Timaeus that the cosmos was fashioned from a primal matter, a Hellenistic cosmogony that both asserts the eternity of materiality and deflates the capacity of God to be a true creator (i.e., one who makes a world ex nihilo).85 Maimonides is bewildered that R. Eliezer does not believe it possible that “something should come into being from nothing,” a phrase that, in its Hebrew translation by Yehudah Alharizi86—“davar mi-lo davar”— runs directly counter to R. Yehudah’s claim in Midrash ha-Ne’lam that God created the heavens out of something else (davar mi-davar). Yet we would be mistaken to read R. Yehudah’s homily as a direct response to Maimonides’ critique of Pirqe de-Rabbi

85 The doctrine of creatio ex nihilo emerges among the Early Church Fathers as a way to differentiate between human and divine creativity. See Athanasius, De Decretis IV: 77: “God creates and to create is also ascribed to men...yet does God create as Men do?...Perish the thought; we understand the terms in one sense of God, and in other of men. For God creates, in that He calls what is not into being, needing nothing thereunto; but men work some existing material.” Cf. J. C. O’Neill, “How Early is the Doctrine of ‘Creatio ex Nihilo’?” The Journal of Theological Studies, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2002), pp. 449-465. For a feminist exploration of the history and politics of creatio ex nihilo, see Catherine Keller, Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming (London: Routledge, 2003), especially, pp. 43-64.
86 Gershom Scholem, in Studies in Kabbalah (1) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 1998), p. 28, n. 82, claims that many Spanish kabbalists during the thirteenth century used Alharizi’s translation of the Guide of the Perplexed, including Nahmanides, Ezra of Gerona, and Jacob ben Sheshet.
Eliezer. Several texts from thirteenth-century Spain, which, historically speaking, stand between Maimonides and Midrash ha-Ne'lam, help pinpoint the stakeholders in this disagreement, and bring to light the precise author of our zoharic homily.

A famous thirteenth-century letter from R. Ezra of Gerona to R. Abraham ben Isaac singles out Maimonides’ criticism of Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer as the occasion where Maimonides most explicitly deviates from the theology of Kabbalah. Unlike Maimonides, Ezra of Gerona endorses the Platonic conception of God as an artisan who reworks primal materiality (hyle) into new formations. Rather than discard the rabbinic trope of “God’s garment of light,” he reinterprets it as a theosophic symbol, as the sefiarah of hokhmah, from which celestial entities such as God’s glory and throne are emanated. Ezra of Gerona encapsulates his kabbalistic model of cosmogony, in which formation and emanation take on a more central role than creation ex nihilo, as, “the essences were in existence; the emanation was innovated.” Nahmanides, a Catalan contemporary of Ezra, offers a modified version of this kabbalistic theory: primal matter is the sole entity that God created from nothing; “henceforth He did not

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87 Gershon Scholem, Studies in Kabbalah (1), pp. 28-29:

שחאלת הרבייתא באיהי דרב אobar מיש שאג נסכנו הקדצל. לקרא תחייכ יד תבריו יאליגו נגונר בחרים באמרות השמש. בתווכי זרבא ההואenery התהורא אולם דע עמת ראפורט האמר כנני תשוואות/schema הבוחר דרב אobar דלי חות מנה לא שי חוצר תנמא.

תאטר על כך של בורא אין פֶּנֶה פֶּנֶה. חכול ממינת ריב, מושב בכרסי בךulen שועט פרק שים בך או מקדומא. פֶּלשל על זה האמר שמלות הנריך ושלא מצה בך הקדצל שמלות עם בֶּלך שמעתי בהבראת והלחם📍. לברוח זוכא חוכל. האפריפיוו ראי בבדבר אמוי אמא או צמא נאמה עד התהריית שאא באא📍. זוכא להשליאד טאואר לבוש.

מדוכי בברא שיאני טל לדרו ח valida דרדרים עם בך שאה הקבולה והтопוס...האמות כyorחוי גיו אלול האפיפילור מוחדים.

“The fourth question: Where does our teacher Moses ben Maimon come into conflict with the Kabbalah? Know that the words of R. Eliezer the Great are absolutely correct in saying, "from where were the heavens created, and from where was the earth created?" For this is the opinion of Plato, who said that it is impossible that the creator should produce something from nothing (yotzi davar mi-lo davar), because matter has always been in existence. By means of a parable, this is like the clay to a potter, or the iron to a blacksmith who can fashion from it whatever he wishes...all this is in accordance with what Maimonides wrote in the second volume (of The Guide of the Perplexed), in the chapter (13) on the various opinions of the creation of the world. With regards to this King Solomon said, “King Solomon made him (a palanquin of the wood of Lebanon)” (Song of Songs, 3:9). This refers to Holy one, blessed be He, onto whom is the peace (shalom), “Wood from Lebanon,” from the luminous emanation of Wisdom (hokhmah) which is His garment (livush)...“A palanquin,” means His Glory or Name or Throne, which was emanated from Wisdom (hokhmah), which is in the Nought (ayin)...The truth is that the essences were in existence; the emanation was innovated.” On this passage, see Moshe Idel, “The Sefirot Above the Sefirot,” Tarbiz 51 (1982), pp. 241-43 [Hebrew]; and Daniel Matt, “Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism,” in ed. Lawrence Fine, Essential Papers on Kabbalah (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 77-80. For an extensive bibliography on Maimonides’ reputed relation to Kabbalah, see Eli Gurfinkel, “An Annotated Bibliography on the Linkage between Maimonides, the Kabbalists, and the Kabbalah,” Da’at No. 64/66 (2009), pp. 417-485 [Hebrew].

create anything, rather He materialized something from something.”

Nahmanides thus interprets “God’s garment of light” as the primal matter (hyle) from which the heavens and earth were endowed with form and figure.

Given that these theories of cosmogenesis orient the majority of subsequent thirteenth-century meditations on the origins of the cosmos, the specificities of Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s cosmogenic model stand-out. R. Yehudah’s claim that God’s first creation was the angelic form, and from it the heavens were “inferred,” aligns neither with Maimonides and Nahmanides’ interpretation of “the light of His garment” as primal matter, nor with Ezra of Geronia’s interpretation of the locution as a reference to the divine potency of hokhmah. To locate the exact (pre-kabbalistic) sources behind R. Yehudah’s homily, we turn now to the early-writings of Joseph Gikatilla and Moses de Leon, two Castilian authors closely connected to the production of zoharic literature.

Several scholars have detected conceptual affinities between Gikatilla’s treatise on linguistic cosmology, Ginat Egoz, written in 1274 when he was twenty-six, and Midrash ha-Ne’lam. For our investigation, three features in Ginat Egoz stand out as probable sources of

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89 Torat ha-Shem Temimah, in The Writings of Nahmanides (Jerusalem, 1963), Vol. 1, pp. 156-157:


90 See Nahmanides on Gen. 1:8. Menahem Recanati (1250-1310), in his comments on Gen. 1:8, highlights the difference between this position and that held by the majority of kabbalists. After citing Nahmanides position, he writes:

"His words accord well with the literal meaning, but the opinion of the sages of Kabbalah is that the light of His garment alludes to the divine wisdom, and the supernal heavens were created from there.” On Nahmanides’ theological divergence from the main school of Geronese Kabbalah (centered around Ezra and Azriel of Gerona), see Moshe Idel, “Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah, and Spiritual Leadership,” in eds. Moshe Idel and Mortimer Ostow, Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the Thirteenth Century (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 15-96.


Midrash ha-Ne'lam’s theory of inferential cosmogony: (1) the unusual phrase, “the form of the angels,” central to R. Yehudah’s cosmogony, also appears in Ginat Egoz\textsuperscript{94} (and I have yet to locate earlier evidence of this locution); (2) R. Yehudah’s ontological scheme of yesod (element/foundation)/binyan (building) is axiomatic to Ginat Egoz,\textsuperscript{95} so much so that the work’s final section, on the ontology of the Hebrew vowels, is divided into three sections, titled: “yesod;” “binyan;” and “tenuah;” (3) Gikatilla’s own interpretation of Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer’s celestial cosmogenesis leads him to a position that is almost identical to “R. Yehudah”:

The truth is that the heavens were brought into existence from the true being of the separate intelligences, which are called “the light of His garment,” for the heavens are a second-order, below the intelligences. Behold, the heavens were created “from the light of His garment,” for this refers to the form of the simple intelligences. He had to say, “wherefrom were the heavens created?” because the angels, which are called “the light of His garment,” precede the heavens in terms of innovation, just like the form precedes materiality. And behold, he explained that materiality is generated from the truth of the form...And in truth, the words of master of the Guide, may his memory be blessed, are more difficult to me than the words of R. Eleizer, may his memory be blessed, were difficult to him (Maimonides)!\textsuperscript{96}

Gikatilla’s comments presuppose an Aristotelian tri-part cosmology (as described in the Hebrew Ginat Egoz (Jerusalem, 1988), p. 192.

\textsuperscript{94} These terms occur on almost every page of the treatise. For a particularly suggestive parallel, see p. 71, where Elohim is referred to as התחלתי הבנין (“the beginning of the buildings”). In the same context, Gikatilla criticizes both the Aristotelian and Platonic models of creation, and stipulates that the first yesod was not created from something else, but rather:

When there was not matter, He needed to bring the elements into existence, and afterwards, He drew them out from each other (davar mi-davar).

Joseph Gikatilla, Ginat Egoz (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 166-167:

writings of Maimonides97) comprised of the separate intelligences, the celestial spheres, and the sublunar realm. Working from this ontic schema, Gikatilla is able to reformulate the mythic tones of Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer into a more philosophically coherent cosmogony. The “light of His garment” is neither primal materiality nor a divine potency (i.e., the sefirah of hokhmah), but the form of the separate intelligences. Those intelligences are called separate because they stand above the heavenly spheres, both temporally and ontically speaking.98 Since the intelligences (i.e., “the angels,” in medieval parlance) are pure form and the heavens are a mixture of form and matter, Gikatilla argues that, “the angels, which are called ‘the light of His garment,’ precede the heavens in terms of innovation, just like the form precedes materiality.”99 In opposition to earlier medieval Jewish theories of materiality (such as Ibn Gabirol and Nahmanides), which assume that matter already exists within the world of forms, Gikatilla affirms that emanation of the forms is the initial stage of creation, followed by the matter of heaven and of earth, each of which is emanated from the first (angelic) form.100 Akin to R. Yehudah in Midrash ha-Ne’lam, Gikatilla’s cosmogony speaks of processes of derivation, in which God fashions the heavens out of a more sublime form. Yet, one essential component of R. Yehudah’s cosmogony is not explicitly addressed in Ginat Egoz: the role of Elohim, one of the ten angelic forces which operates as the foundation (yesod) through which the power of tevunah constructs (boneh) the heavens. For evidence of this trope, we can turn to the early writings of Moses de Leon, who many scholars believe to have been the author of Midrash ha-Ne’lam.101

De Leon’s Or Zarua, a pre-kabbalistic commentary to the first chapters of Genesis written circa 1274, has numerous affinities to both Ginat Egoz and Midrash ha-Ne’lam.102 His comments of the heavens’ genesis suggest an even more radical model of R. Yehudah’s cosmogony. De Leon’s remarks are worth quoting in full:

97 See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah, 2:3.
99 On the medieval understanding of the intelligences in Islamic Peripatetic thought, an influence on Gikatilla mediated mainly through Maimonides’ writings, but possibly through others as well, see Alexander Altmann, “Ibn Bâjja on Man’s Ultimate Felicity,” in Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 74: “the [Aristotelian] denial of self-subsistent Forms (even though assumed to reside in some supernal hypostasis) enforces a shift of the object of ultimate knowledge to a different plane. Instead of the supernal Forms it is now the separate intellects to which the quest for ultimate felicity is directed. These separate intellects or intelligences are not the essences of the sensible things, as the Platonists maintained, but conceived as simple, i.e., immaterial substances of an ontological order.”
Weaving together diverse medieval cosmologies, De Leon generates a wide-ranging chain of resemblance: Elohim = the beginning of emanation = the form of the intelligences = the Active Intelligence = Metatron = the entity from which the heavens were emanated. These associations testify to both the vibrancy and eccentricity of Castilian cosmological and cosmogonic speculation even before Gerondese Kabbalah rose to popularity among the kabbalists of central Spain. As Asi Farber-Ginat highlights, “the identification of the active intelligence with the angel Metatron, was accepted in various circles in the thirteenth century, such as the circle of the Cohen brothers and the circle of R. Abraham Abulafia. The combination of these two concepts, which are taken from different conceptual schema, with the variety of meanings and associations that are linked to each (concept), created one of the richest and most interesting concepts in early Castilian Kabbalah.”

103 Moses de León, Or Zarua, ed. A. Altmann, pp. 259-260: 

De Leon furthers this hybridization by assigning a cosmogonic function to Elohim/Metatron/the Active intelligence. The thesis that the Active Intelligence is not solely an epistemological functionary (which guides the human intellect to actuality), had already been made popular by Alfarabi and Averroes, who asserted that the Active Intellect also emanates the sublunar forms. De Leon bundles these motifs together in order to assert that Elohim/Metatron/Active Intelligence was the initial emanation, while the heavens, an effulgence from the first emanated hypostasis, were the second emanation. Does this cosmogonic schema stand behind Midrash ha-Ne'lam’s theory that the heavens emerge from the form of the angels known as Elohim? In other words, is there evidence within Midrash ha-Ne'lam to prove that R. Yehudah’s “form of the angels,” which he equates with Elohim and the generative substratum of the heavens, is a synonym for Metatron and the Active Intelligence? If we can answer in the affirmative, we will be able to establish Moses de Leon as the author of R. Yehudah’s homily and refine our understanding of this theory of inferential cosmogenesis.

Late in Midrash ha-Ne'lam, Metatron is indeed referred to as the “first of God’s creations,” but no mention is made of Metatron as an active participant in the creation of the cosmos. Metatron’s place in Midrash ha-Ne'lam’s cosmogony is more fully spelled out

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105 Asi Farber-Ginat, “On the Sources,” p. 85. Gikatilla’s approach to this association in Ginat Egoz differs in small but substantial ways; see Ginat Egoz (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 315, 365-368. Farber-Ginat, “On the Sources,” pp. 84-86, stipulates that Gikatilla identifies Metatron with the last of ten intelligences, while de Leon identifies Metatron with the first of the ten intelligences. Cf. Elliot Wolfson, “Letter Symbolism and Merkavah Imagery in the Zohar,” in ‘Alei Sefer, Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought, ed. Mosheh Halamish (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1990), pp. 196-197, n. 5. As Altmann points out (“Moses de Leon’s Or Zarua,” p. 226), already in the fourteenth century, R. Yehudah Binyamin Roqesh criticizes de Leon for equating the Active Intelligence with the First Intelligence, for, in the words of Roqesh, “he did not know that the theologizing philosophers agree that he is the tenth of the separate intelligences.” However, this seems to be a mistaken reading of Or Zarua (or, perhaps Roqesh had a different version of Or Zarua), for de Leon’s consistent opinion therein is that the Active Intelligence is the last of the intelligences. See Altmann, “Moses de Leon’s Or Zarua,” p. 284, n. 253. Further evidence supporting this claim is found in Sefer ha-Ne’lam, another early treatise of de Leon, where the “prince of intelligence” is equivalent to the letter yud (the tenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet); see Bar-Asher, “Sefer ha-Ne’lam,” pp. 235-236 [Hebrew].


107 See, Herbert A. Davidson, Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 29-30. As Davidson points out (p. 14), Alexander of Aphrodisias (De Anima 89) already linked Aristotle’s Active Intelligence (Aristotle, De Anima, 3.4.429a) to Aristotle’s ever-thinking cause of the universe (Aristotle, Metaphysics 12). The emanatory schema attributed to the Active Intelligence, however, originates with the Islamic Peripatetics.


109 Zohar 1:126b: [Hebrew]

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elsewhere, in one of the work’s first rabbincic narratives. There, the arch-angel Metatron is equated with both the primal light and the Active Intelligence.

Rabbi Hizkiyah said, “I was in the regions of the Arabs and I saw men who used to conceal themselves among cliffs—in caves among the mountains—but every Shabbat eve they would return to their homes. I inquired of them, ‘What is it that you do?’ They replied, ‘We are hermits and we engage in Torah every single day’...I said to them, “My children, by your life, what new insight did you innovate today?’ They replied, ‘Concerning this verse: ‘God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light’ (Gen. 1:3). Rabbi Kruspedai taught, “Greater is the addition than the light, unlike any other, a light without peer. This is the light of the Great Intellect, formed from the light of His resplendent splendor; and this is who resides behind the curtain. As we have learned: What is the meaning of the verse “He wraps in light as in a garment” (Psalms 104:2)? It teaches that the blessed Holy One made the other angels with that primordial light, from

110 A reference to the arch-angel, Metatron. This unprecedented locution depends upon the talmudic phrase, “one who hears behind the curtain” (BT Ber, 18b; Yoma 77a; Hag. 15a), which refers to the angels or ghosts who hear the goings-on in heaven that pertain to the future. Cf. Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer, 4: “seven angels created in the beginning serve Him before the veil which is called paragod.” In 3 Enoch, Metatron has a special relationship to the celestial curtain (paragod). See Peter Schafer et al., Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981) §672, where, after Elisha ben Abuyah declares that Metatron is an independent Godhead, the text states, “immediately they brought out Metatron to outside the Curtain (paragod)...” Also see Synopse §64-65, (3 Enoch 45), where Metatron reveals to R. Ishmael the secrets of the curtain (paragod); and Hugo Odeberg, 3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928; repr., New York: Ktav, 1973), p. 141. Andrei Orlov, The Enoch-Metatron Tradition (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 115-116, also notes that “Metatron’s service behind the heavenly Curtain, Paragod, recalls the unique function of the earthly high priest, who alone was allowed to enter behind the veil of the terrestrial sanctuary.” On the paragod, see David J. Haperin, The Merkabah in Rabbincic Literature (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1983), p. 169, n. 99; and Moshe Weinfeld, “Partition, Partition; Wall, Wall, Listen ‘Leaking’ the Divine Secret to Someone Behind the Curtain,” Archiv für Orientforschung 44/45 (1997/1998), pp. 222-225. Sefer Ha-Iyun, a 13th century Spanish text that slightly predates Midrash ha-Ne’lam, depicts Metatron as standing on the outside of the paragod:

It is impossible to determine whether the Arabic setting of this narrative is meant to foreground the Arabic origins of its claim that the “Great Intellect,” an almost certain appellation for the Active Intelligence, is both the first entity to emerge from God’s splendor and the source of all other angels.111 We can be certain, however, that De Leon’s description of Metatron as a creative intelligence is substantiated by R. Kruspedai’s depiction of “the Great Intellect.”112

Additionally, there are further affinities between De Leon’s cosmogony and Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s model of the creation of the heavens. At one point in Midrash ha-Ne’lam, R. Yehudah claims that “the Holy One, blessed be He, made one raqiyyah and from it the heavens were formed.”113 A few lines later, R. Yehudah identifies this cosmogonic raqiyyah with the raqiyyah that appears above the celestial chariot in Ezekiel’s vision. That the raqiyyah (of Genesis and Ezekiel) is Metatron is then spelled out in a third text: “R. Eliezer inquired of Rabban Yoḥanan son of Zakkai. He asked him, ‘The raqiyyah created on the second day, what is it?’ He replied, ‘It is a supernal mystery. The blessed Holy One created an archon beneath him, and chose him—

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111 Zohar Hadash, 8d, (trans. Nathan Wolski, with modifications, pp. 47-48):

112 The Arabic Theology of Aristotle and Al-Ghazali’s The Niche of Lights offer the closest parallel to the range of motifs employed here: divine light, angels, the incorporeal intellect as a cosmogenic mediator. See Davidson, Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect, pp. 131-137. It is also possible that the narrative’s setting provides an alternative, apologetic history wherein the theological schemas of Islamic Arabs actually derive from Jewish hermits who live in Arab provinces. That aim would also explain the emphasis on the hermits’ innovation: R. Kruspedai (one of the hermits) offers his cosmogonic teaching in response to to the query, “what new insight did you innovate today?” On the Zohar’s relation to Arabic and Islam, see Gil Anidjar, "Jewish Mysticism Alterable and Unalterable: On Orienting Kabbalah Studies and the Zohar of Christian Spain," Jewish Social Studies 3:1 (1996), pp. 89–157; and Moshe Idel, "Orienting, Orientalizing or Disorienting the Study of Kabbalah: ‘An Almost Absolutely Unique’ Case of Occidentalism," Kabbalah 2 (1997), pp. 13-48.


114 Zohar Hadash 10a:
granting him dominion over all the hosts of heaven.”

Put together, these traditions in Midrash ha-Ne'lam on the creation of the heavens from the raqiyyah/metatron/Elohim closely parallel Moses de Leon’s cosmogony in Or Zaruah. In this instance, then, the evidence is strong enough to corroborate that the author of R. Yehudah’s homily on the role of tevunah in the creative process is either Moses de Leon or someone deeply familiar with his early treatises.

At the heart of these thirteenth-century theories of inferential cosmogenesis is a new philosophical approach to the modalities of divine creativity. Earlier Judeo-Arabic authors, such as Isaac Israeli and Maimonides, contrast two types of creativity: innovation (ibdā; davar mi-lo davar) and coming-to-be (davar mi-davar). The former is exclusive to God, while the latter defines the causal processes of nature and the artifice of man. Hebrew sources from the thirteenth century, however, differentiate between three modes of creativity: creation (beriyah), formation (yetzirah), and making (asiyah). Earlier medieval Hebrew writers (such as Ibn Ezra, Abraham bar Hiyya, and David Kimhi) employ the first two terms to differentiate between creatio ex nihilo and giving new form to a preexisting entity. When making is then added as a third mode of creativity, acts of fixing, completing, and reshaping, which once seemed accidental to creation, are given a more exalted place in the hierarchy of divine creativity. To close this section, I will contend that Midrash ha-Ne'lam and the early writings of Moses de Leon thematize binah/tevunah/meivin davar mi-tokh davar as a practice of making, a mode of modifying and completing the formal properties of an antecedent creation.

Medieval Jewish theologies of making emerge from an exegetical quandary. Why in Genesis does Elohim first speak the raqiyyah into existence (“va-yomer Elohim, yehi raqiyyah;” Gen. 1:6) and then make the raqiyyah (“va-yas Elohim et ha-raqiyyah;” Gen. 1:7)? What type of creative action is making, and why is it necessitated after the raqiyyah has already been spoken into being? Medieval scriptural commentators such as Rashi contend that “making” means modifying, “tiqno al ondo,” i.e., the raqiyyah required a second round of alterations after it was first created. Nahmanides uses the occasion to propose a more global thesis: “the term making always means the fixing (tqqun) of something.”

The fact that this exchange is in Aramaic (all other citations from Midrash ha-Ne'lam in this section are in Hebrew) may suggest that the identification of the cosmogonic raqiyyah with Metatron only becomes explicit in a late stratum of Midrash ha-Ne'lam. On the Aramaic of Midrash ha-Ne'lam as a subsequent literary stratum, with its own theological project, see Shifra Asulin, “Midrash ha-Ne'lam to Genesis—Hebrew and Aramaic,” in eds. Maren R. Niehoff, Ronit Meroz and Jonathan Garb, Ve-Zot le-Yehudah: Qovetz Ma’amarim ha-Muqdash le-Haverenu Prof. Yehuda Liebes (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2012), pp. 222-253 [Hebrew].

115 Zohar Hadash, 9d, (trans. Nathan Wolski, p. 56):

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118 Nahmanides, Gen. 1:7:

The equation of making with tikkun informs Midrash ha-Ne'lam’s fascinating dramatization of thirteenth-century critiques of Maimonides’ cosmogony:

Rabbi Tanhum opened, “Thus says God, YHVH, who creates the heavens and stretches them out… (Isaiah 42:5). When the blessed Holy One created His world, He created them from nothing, bringing them into actuality, imbuing them with substance. Wherever you find בורא (bore), create, it refers to something He created from nothing and brought into actuality.” Rav Hisda asked, “But were the heavens really created from nothing? Weren’t they created from the light above?” Rabbi Tanhum replied, “It is so—the matter of the heavens came from nothing, but their form from an entity of substance; similarly with the human being. Concerning the heavens you find בריאה (beriyah), creating, and afterwards עשה (asiyah), making. Creating—”who creates the heavens” (Isaiah 42:5); in other words, from nothing. Making—”who makes the heavens with understanding (בתבונה) (Psalms 136:5), from an entity of substance, from the light above.” Rabbi Tanhum also said, “Asiyah, making, refers to the enhancement (תיקון) of something in terms of its value and stature—compared to how it was before—as it is said: ‘David ויעש (va-ya’as), enhanced, [his] name’ (2 Samuel 8:13).”

R. Tanhum’s position advances Maimonides’ theory of creatio ex nihilo. And like the medieval kabbalists who criticize Maimonides’ model of cosmogenesis, R. Hisda challenges R. Tanhum and adduces the opposing tradition (as presented first in Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer): the heavens were created not ex nihilo but from a supernal luminous form. R. Tanhum responds to this critique by introducing a modified Maimonidean position: “the matter of the heavens came from nothing, but their form from an entity of substance.” In principle, this modified position is aligned with R. Yehudah, who emphasizes that the heavens were formed from the form of the angels. This debate thus demonstrates that Midrash ha-Ne’lam does not reject Maimonides’ orientation to cosmogenesis but merely limit his claims for creatio ex nihilo to the realm of materiality. The world of forms, however, does not emerge from nothingness but from other, loftier, forms.

R. Tanhum then maps these two modes of cosmogenesis onto a distinction between two modes of creativity: creating and making. The material substance of heaven is created (from nothing), while its form is made (from other forms). To prove that the heavens were made “from the light above,” R. Tanhum adduces Psalms 136:5, “who makes the heavens with understanding (בתבונה).” I would argue that this exegesis is also aligned with R. Yehudah’s equation of tevunah

with how the heavens were fashioned from the first angelic form. The psalmists’ linkage of making (oseh) to understanding (tevunah) encapsulates R. Yehudah’s model of cosmogenesis, wherein the heavens are forged from other entities in a celestial process that mirrors talmudic inference-making (binah). If these two texts may be read in tandem, then Midrash ha-Ne’lam is proposing that talmudic reasoning is a mode of making, rather than one of creating. And making, as per the closing words of R. Tanhum, is “an enhancement (תיקון) of something in terms of its value and stature—compared to how it was before.” According to this logic of making (in which cosmogenesis and cognition are parallel processes), to infer one idea from another idea is a creative act of enhancement, a practice of t'iqun that augments an antecedent tradition into an unprecedented configuration, “compared to how it was before.” Midrash ha-Ne’lam would then be introducing not only a theory of divine creativity modeled after rabbinic creativity (meivin davar mi-davar) but a theory of rabbinic creativity modeled after divine creativity (t’iqun/making). If there be no proof of the matter, certainly the texts adduced provide a hint in that direction, or as the tannaitic rabbis were wont to say, “even though there is no decisive proof, there is at least an indication of it.”

**Conclusion: The Logic of Binah**

Practices of inferential reasoning—analogizing, deducing, inferring—comprise a unique mode of cognitive creativity as they entail generating new relationships between multiple concepts, objects, or laws. Rather than interpret the meaning of one datum, these complex forms of reasoning advance arguments through relational thinking: they generate knowledge about one datum from or as another datum. The ablative syntax of “davar mi-davar” underscores the generativity of rabbinic relational thinking. When a rabbinic scholar learns one thing from another, they generate a new affinity between two data-points that has conceptual or legal consequences.

As the opening section of this chapter (as well as the whole second chapter) demonstrated, the claims generated by inferential reasoning are epistemologically tenuous. Despite enabling a high-level of analytical creativity, analogizing and inference-making depend upon forms of argumentation that are inconclusive. This logical weakness is stressed by a passage from a late stratum of zoharic literature:

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120 Further evidence of an equation of tevunah/binah with making can be adduced from Or Zarua (ed. Bar-Asher, p. 284), where de Leon states that man is exalted above all other creatures because he is endowed with creating, forming, and making, which are aligned with da’at, sekhel, and binah, respectively; cf. Bar-Asher, “Sefer ha-Ne’lam,” pp. 211-212. On De Leon’s unique theory that making is of a higher divine status than creating, see Gershom Scholem, “An Inquiry in the Kabbalah of R. Isaac ben Jacob Hacohen, II. The Evolution of the Doctrine of the Worlds in the Early Kabbalah,” Tarbiz 3 (1931), pp. 54-55 [Hebrew].

A prophetic vision (hezyon) is like a nighttime vision, (full of) imaginings and apparitions, like one who infers one matter from another matter and one who compares a matter to another matter.\(^{122}\)

Within the epistemological economy of this passage, the dimness of prophetic insight is comparable to dreams, inferences, and analogies. Like “a nighttime vision,” inferences and analogies are less forms of logic than forms of “imagination and apparition.” Employing an analogy of its own making, this Zohar passage compares the analytical innovator—the “meivin davar mi-tokh davar”—to a dream interpreter, one who makes meaning through hermeneutical principles that cannot provide absolute clarity. This zoharic claim as to the imaginative underpinnings of inferential reasoning also makes explicit that its author believes that inferences and analogies are forms of cognitive creativity because they integrate the imagination into analytical and interpretive practices. While this Zohar passage denigrates that creativity as lackadaisical, most of the sources explored above celebrate inferential creativity as a necessary component of talmudic and esoteric reasoning.

The legitimacy of the logic of binah—a mode of creative reasoning that is “meivin davar mi-tokh davar”—is addressed by another late zoharic homily. The relevant pericope draws on the theosophical schema of the sefirot, wherein binah, the third and maternal divine power (“sefira”), births the lower seven powers by extending the influence of hokhmah, the second and paternal power:

The commandment, “thou shalt not steal,” corresponds to the supernal mother, binah, who nurses from hokhmah. And one who has (binah) is called meivin davar mi-tokh davar, like one who steals and takes what is in the heart of a hakham...and even though it is permitted for binah to nurse from hokhmah, when the other side (sitra ahra) (nurses from hokhmah) there is stealing, which is forbidden. And scripture wrote, “thou shalt not steal,” without specification.\(^{123}\)

One thing is clear from this recondite passage: the capacity of binah to deduce new knowledge from the repositories of wisdom is either thievery or God-like. Because binah derives its powers from hokhmah through inferential processes (meivin davar mi-tokh davar), this passage insists that binah often “steals” from hokhmah. Drawing on the notion that there exist two sets of sefirot, one belonging to the demonic sitra ahrah and one belonging to the face of divinity that is worthy of worship, our passage argues that when the demonic binah “infers” its divine influx from hokhmah it is guilty of theft. However, when the non-demonic binah “infers” its power

\(^{122}\) Zohar 2:280b, Rayah Mehemnya:

ויין דבניוה איה ב_binsון פלחקה, דымויות והשונותقطع המבק נשות דר ומעלמה צרכ לייחזק (אלא מראם דריאי בין השלום

אורי כאר דנהר חכ_score)

\(^{123}\) Zohar Hadash, 44d:

לא תנהוב ל.localPosition אשת זלאת בינה דניקת מתכופפתgrow דאלא דאלא אנקי ע� דניקת גלא דניקת דבך המבך עבד נועי דאן דאלא

דניקת דאלאלי היניקת מתכופפת אורויתא אורא על געל השחרי לכיי בינה לניקת מתכופפת גינהא איה משימה כתומ בחItemCount

עת קדם.

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from *hokhmah*, “it is permitted.” By deifying the epistemological tenuousness of *binah*—a cognitive process that teeters between fabrication and faithful deduction—this passage emphasizes that inferential creativity is methodologically delicate. Even among the divine powers, an inference is sometimes illegitimate. At other times, it is a method of creativity that is definitive of the godhead.

How did *binah* come to be canonized (as a core practice of rabbinic learning), apotheosized (as a core mode of divine creativity), and criticized (as logically dubious)? This chapter’s excavation of the logic of *binah* in pre-kabbalistic sources points to a possible answer. As *binah* came to be identified with “*davar mi-davar*” formulations and the inferential practices of talmudic reasoning, it also absorbed the epistemological weakness of inferential reasoning. Even when *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* associates *binah* with a mode of divine creativity, it associates it with cosmogonic derivation—fashioning the heavens from angelic light—rather than with the sublimity of *creatio ex nihilo*. This ability to derive newness from older things, which may be ontologically inferior to creating newness out of nothing and epistemologically inferior to demonstrable logic, is also the pedagogical upside of *binah*. By modeling a mode of generativity that is closer to building (*binyan*), making (*asiyah*), adding (*hosafa*), and completing (*binyan*) than to innovating (*yesh mi-ayin/davar mi-lo davar*) or creating (*briyah*), *binah* provides an exemplar for the modes of creativity that are encouraged by textual communities. Even when talmudic study does not begin by reading a page of Talmud, it begins by cogitating on a *davar*, an older tradition that the student develops through deductive reasoning. Hence Jewish texts that adapt this model of rabbinic creativity, either as a technique for expanding esoteric knowledge or as a paradigm of divine cosmogenesis, are enacting the very ethos of the phrase, “*meivin davar mi-tokh davar*.”

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Chapter Four

The Temporalities of Sevara:
Talmudic Models of Innovation in Midrash ha-Ne'lam

I: The Talmudic Elements of Midrash ha-Ne'lam

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that Midrash ha-Ne'lam fashions an analogy between divine creativity and talmudic creativity. This chapter shifts from the celestial to terrestrial realms to analyze Midrash ha-Ne'lam’s representation of the human search for secrets and the role that talmudic reasoning plays in that process. I will thereby expand on the data gathered in the third section of the last chapter, on inferential esotericism (“meivin sod mitokh sod”), to examine whether Midrash ha-Ne'lam also claims that one should apply inferential reasoning to esoteric knowledge. But, rather than focus on *binah*, as per the last chapter, our inquiry will revolve around *sevara*, an Aramaic term that, much like *binah*, became associated with a talmudic mode of “creative reasoning.” I will argue that not only does Midrash ha-Ne'lam advocate for using *sevara* to learn secrets (*sod*), but, in one instance, *sevara* also operates as a compositional style modeled after the Babylonian Talmud.

Not all thirteenth-century Jewish esoterics were enthusiastic about applying the creative powers of *sevara* to expand upon learnt secrets. Nahmanides, a prominent voice in thirteenth-century Spain, actively differentiates between talmudic and esoteric reasoning, based on a distinction between “open” and “closed” knowledge, to borrow Moshe Halbertal’s terminology. Halbertal argues that Nahmanides views only the discipline of Talmud/halakhah as open knowledge, in which “innovations arise through the power of reasoning.”125 In esoteric matters, however, Nahmanides warns against the application of *sevara*,126 thus ensuring that esoteric knowledge remain “closed knowledge.”127 However, if we do not extrapolate from Nahmanides to all other forms of medieval Jewish esotericism, is there evidence of others who resist Nahmanides’ project of disciplinary division and develop a more intimate relationship between the study of secrets and the study of rabbinics? Were there those who chose not to uphold a distinction between a talmudic relationship to rabbinic knowledge, which encourages inference-making and other practices of talmudic logic, and a more mimetic relationship to esoteric knowledge, which only permits faithful transmission of received secrets?

Maimonides provides a starting-point for answering these historical queries. As chapter two demonstrated, not only did Maimonides transform the practices of talmud study, he also constructed a scholastic relationship between esoterica and talmud at odds with the one Nahmanides would come to formulate seventy years later. This chapter claims that core literary elements of Midrash ha-Ne'lam are best understood as expansions of the Maimonidean model.

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126 Nahmanides, Commentary on the Torah, introduction

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Those elements expand upon Maimonides, because, for reasons well explored, Maimonides did not use rabbinic rhetoric in his writing. He sought to revive a practice of rabbinic thought and not a practice of rabbinic writing. While Maimonides did resist the medieval textualization of Talmud by transforming Talmud back into a project of thought that everybody should practice, he did not view talmudic rhetoric as part of that project. What makes Midrash ha-Ne'lam such a unique medieval text is that it exhibits not only talmudic forms of thinking (sevara) but also talmudic forms of rhetoric and composition.

In Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, Scholem underscores Midrash ha-Ne'lam’s unique relationship to rabbinic rhetoric: “In Midrash ha-Ne'lam, his (de Leon’s) literary method is more dependent on the genuine older Midrashic literature than in the later parts (of Zohar)...In the Midrash ha-Ne'lam, the use of direct quotations from Talmudic sources is much more open than in later writings.” Offering an insight that he would, unfortunately, not develop, Scholem stresses that a literary historiography of Zohar would do well to notice the shifts in rabbinic rhetoric and practices of intertextuality that occur between different sections of Zohar. Similarly, Daniel Matt has identified the rhetorical phenomenon of “tnan” as a symptom of how Midrash ha-Ne'lam conceptualizes tradition. Tnan, “we have taught in a Mishna,” is a talmudic term, which serves to signal a temporal shift, as well as authoritative status: What will be cited belongs to the past, even as it is brought into new usage and effect. Matt concludes that the term functions differently in early and late Zohar. In Midrash ha-Ne'lam the term often signals the citation of an actual rabbinic source, whereas in later Zohar what is cited tends to be fictive or come from a contemporary medieval source. The difference in the term’s function highlights that, unlike the Zohar, which is willing to fabricate the sources it cites as tradition, Midrash ha-Ne'lam is, if creative in its handling of sources, nonetheless more dialectically tethered to rabbinic texts. Scholem and Matt, thus, encourage us to place the peculiarities of Midrash ha-Ne'lam’s talmudic rhetoric at the core of its rabbinic renaissance.

Daniel Matt also highlights a broader literary relationship between the Babylonian Talmud and the Zohar at large. He suggests that, “in effect, the composer of the Zohar has assembled an alternative rabbinic literature, including Midrash ha-N’elam, Matnitin and Tosefta. In a certain sense, the main body of the Zohar is like a Talmud to the brief and cryptic passages of the Matnitin.” For Matt it is specifically the Talmud’s style of commentary that is imitated, a literary technique where historical differences between the texts in play are highlighted by rhetorical or compositional features (the Babylonian Talmud has many ways of signaling the differences between “texts” that derive from tannaitic times from “texts” that derive from amoraic times, and between both of those and later, anonymous textual layers). Alongside this

128 For one exploration of this topic, see Jacob Elbaum, To Understand the Words of the Sages: Medieval Perspectives on Aggadah and Midrash (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2000) pp. 146-168 [Hebrew].
129 On the medieval history of Talmudic textualization, see Fishman, Becoming the People of the Talmud.
commentarial feature, five other formal elements familiar to the Babylonian Talmud appear throughout *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*: (1) a pervasive rhetoric of attribution (*d’amar x, azlah ha miltah k’ha d’amar x*, etc.); (2) advanced forms of argumentation; (3) anonymous glosses (*mai ka mashmah lan, v’ha taninan*, etc.);133 (4) narratives whose heroes are the “marei d’matnitin,” masters of the Mishnah (and point to a whole other ensemble of Rabbis who come after these masters of Mishnah, i.e., amoraim or something analogous); (5) the usage of Hebrew and Aramaic to create a temporally stratified text. (The concluding chapter of this dissertation analyzes the first three of these talmudic forms.)

One hypothetical approach to *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*’s dependence on talmudic discourse would claim that these features are mere “talmudisms,” since, after all, by thirteenth century Spain, the Talmud had become the book through which others were read and written.134 Given that cultural context, it is plausible that a revival of a weaker form of rabbinic literature—Midrash (the explicit genre of zoharic literature)—would look to the stronger cultural capital of Talmud for support.135 Under this model, *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* is uninterested in how talmudic forms of thinking and composition actually work; the Talmud is only an external resource, brought in to add literary authority to a project of midrashic revivalism. I do not think, however, that this model is capable of explaining the variety and ingenuity of the talmudic features of *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*. This chapter will therefore demonstrate that the author(s) of *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* locate(s) in the Babylonian Talmud formal literary features that are worth recuperating and reviving. The specific intertextual feature that *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* borrows from the Babylonian Talmud is one I call “asynchronous intertextuality,” the use of and dependence on other texts in ways that explicitly foreground the multiple temporalities at work. Just like the Babylonian Talmud makes explicit the temporal disjunctions between its various literary strata, *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* also often brings to the fore the belatedness of some traditions and the newness of other traditions that grow out of those older traditions. At the conclusion of this chapter, I will suggest that *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*’s renewal of talmudic models of temporal intertextuality complicates how we theorize the “renaissance” of zoharic literature.

II. Sevara and Esoteric Creativity

Nowhere in *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* are talmudic modes of composition more explicit than in the passages woven together in *Zohar Hadash* 25c-26a (ed. Margaliot). Structured like a page of Talmud, this microform is composed of an expansive, Aramaic narrative surrounded by a terse, Hebrew homily. This intriguingly layered text has already received attention in recent articles by

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134 On the rise of Talmud to cultural hegemony (pedagogic and normative) in the medieval period, see Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud*; and Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book*, pp. 90-128.
135 See Elbaum, *To Understand the Words of the Sages*. 103
Wolski and Asulin. Building upon their contributions, I will excavate a still undiscussed trope in the narrative, sevara—a term that functions similarly to binah and can be defined roughly as deductive reasoning—and argue that the narrative and homily interact in a literary act of deduction that is best described as talmudic. I will suggest that the Hebrew and Aramaic of this composition are less historically distinct strata than the artifice of a literary strategy, one that underscores that the Aramaic is less a fabrication than an adaptation of an “earlier” esoteric tradition. This compositional method exemplifies how sevara operates in Midrash ha-Ne’lam—less as a method of creative innovation than as a method of extrapolating new esoteric insights from antecedent traditions.

Among the many literary features of the long narrative-homily, found on folios 25c-26a, one of the most unexpected is the role of sevara in the narrative section. The significance of sevara is notable already in the inauguration of the Aramaic narrative, where it serves as the sole criteria for who may visit an esoteric master:

Our Rabbis have taught:
One time, Rabbi Dostai went to see Rabbi El’azar ben Arakh and he encountered Rabbi Hagai.
He said to him, “May the master tell us: the way that is arrayed before him, to whom is he going?”
He answered him, “To behold the countenance of the face of days (savar apei yomin).”
He asked him, “Who is that?”
He answered him, “The one before whom the supernal mighty ministers of the blessed King descend.”
He asked him, “Does it please the master that I will go with him on the way?”
He answered him, “If you will be able to comprehend and deduce from what you will hear (iy tikhol l’misbar sevara l’mai d’tishma), come. If not, turn back that you will not be punished.”
He said to him, “Let the master be not concerned about this, for I have heard a word of the supernal mystery, and have contemplated and comprehended (v’istaklit beh, v’savrit

136 See Nathan Wolski, “Metatron and the Mysteries of the Night in Midrash ha-Ne’lam: Jacob ha-Kohen’s Sefer ha-Orah and the Transformation of a Motif in the Early Writings of Moses de León (Zohar Hadash, Lekh Lehka, Midrash ha-Ne’lam 25c-26a),” Kabbalah, Vol. 23 (2010); and Shifra Asulin, “Midrash ha-Ne’lam to Genesis: Between Hebrew and Aramaic,” in eds. R. Neihof, R. Meroz, and J. Garb, And This For Yehudah: A Collection of Essays Dedicated to our Friend, Prof. Yehuda Liebes, Upon His Sixty Fifth Birthday (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2012), pp. 222-253 [Hebrew].

137 Two other recensions exist of this composition: Perush Shir Ha-Shirim le-R. Yizhak ibn Sahula, ed. Arthur Green, in Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, 1987, 5:3-4, pp. 413 and 439-440 and Zohar 1:89a-90a (Sitrei Torah). Manuscript witnesses to this narrative include Oxford, Merton 1(77.H.22); Oxford, Bodleian 1564; Vatican 68; Vatican 186; Paris 780; Munich 217; Vatican 504; and London Gas. 773. I am indebted to Yonatan Benarroch and the Pritzker Project for making these manuscripts easily available to me.
R. Hagai is a minor figure in Midrash ha-Ne'lam; this is, by far, his largest narrative role. The reason he is cast for this narrative is rooted in a text from the Jerusalem Talmud—one of the very few rabbinic texts to attribute any character traits to R. Hagai. In that talmudic text, R. Hagai and R. Haninah argue about the legal validity of a marriage in a case where the husband claims that the given marriage document was a conditional contract (a simpon) and the wife claims it was a marriage contract without conditions:

R. Haninah said: “It is only a conditional contract.” R. Hagai said in the name of R. Zeira: “It is a valid betrothal (free of conditional fulfilments).” R. Haninah argued vehemently against R. Hagai. R. Hila said to him: “Accept Hagai, for Hagai is a man of sevara [inshi sevorah].”

In Midrash ha-Ne'lam the very first criteria for R. Hagai’s admission into the narrative drama is whether he is capable of sevara: “He asked him, ‘Does it please the master that I will go with him on the way?’ He answered him, “If you will be able to comprehend and deduce from what you will hear (iy tikhol l’misbar sevara l’mai d’tishma), come. If not, turn back that you will not be punished.” As intertextual readers of rabbinic literature, we know that R. Hagai is indeed renowned for his capacities of sevara and hence is well chosen for our narrative of rabbinic pilgrimage. An additional early allusion to the importance of sevara may be found in the set-up of the narrative, where R. Dostai uses the odd locution, “l’mehmei savar apei yamin,” “to behold the countenance of the face of days,” to explain his destination. The locution does have a rabbinic precedent, as in Genesis Rabbah 35, but is still an odd choice of language that plays with the semantic range of savar and possibly hints to the narrative’s preoccupation with the meanings and functions of sevara.

What exactly does it mean to create inferences, “l’misbar sevara,” in a context of esoteric theology? To answer this philological question, a brief genealogy of the term, sevara, needs to be mapped. The verbal form—savr—already appears in Palestinian Aramaic, while the noun form—sevara—is a Babylonian locution. As a noun, sevara simply means “a new idea,” and stands in semantic tension with gemara, with a lowercase “g,” which denotes “a memorized tradition-idea.” A short narrative from the Babylonian Talmud exemplifies this usage:

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138 This is primarily Nathan Wolski’s translation (from his 2010 essay), with my own modifications to translations of “sevara,” which are substantiated in the body of the chapter. Zohar Hadash 25c:

139 JT, Kidushin 3:2, as per MS Leiden:

140 See entries for “savr” and “sevara” in Sokoloff’s dictionaries to Jewish Palestinian and Babylonian Aramaic (Ramat-Gan and Baltimore: Bar Ilan University Press and The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).
Rav Hisda said to them, to the Rabbis: “I wish to tell you something but I am afraid of you that you will leave me and go.” He told them, “Anyone who learns Torah from one master will never see blessing.” They left him and went to Rava. Rav Hisda took offense. He said to them, “What was stated refers to reasoning [sevara], but concerning received traditions [gemara] from one master is preferable, so that the formulations will not diverge.”

Rav Hisda fears that his students will abandon him if he tells them the truth—that “anyone who learns Torah from one master will never see blessing.” Despite his premonition, he teaches them this tradition, and, unsurprisingly, they leave to study with another rabbinic sage. Only then does he clarify the precise meaning of his teaching: while a student’s cognitive skills (sevara) are best sharpened by studying with multiple masters, a student’s memorization of oral tradition (gemara) is best facilitated via a single teacher so that competing oral versions don’t overcomplicate a student’s memory. Sevara is presented here as a technique of reasoning that is applied to a gemara, once the latter has been established via oral transmission. Rav Hisda seems to affirm that, by studying with different masters, a student will develop multiple styles of reasoning (sevara) and bring renewed blessing to his Torah studies.

A millennium later, sevara emerged as its own rabbinic discipline in some regions of Aragon, taught as a method for sharpening a student’s intellect and for proliferating novel talmudic interpretations. Yonah of Gerondi (1200-1263), a Spanish sage who spent time studying in the French schools of the tosafot and whose involvement in the composition of the Zohar has been argued for by Israel Ta-Shma, testifies to this trend in a fascinating interpretation of an aphorism from the *Ethics of the Fathers*:

“One who increases wisdom increases yeshiva (lit. “sitting,” and a metonym for study”): This refers to the wisdom of sevara and pilpul, for through it he increases yeshiva. For the students will come to hear his [i.e., the teacher’s] new insights, to become sharpened with him, and to learn the mode of sevara that is innovative, for it is its own form of wisdom.”

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141 BT *Avodah Zara*, 19a-b:

אפור להו רב חסדא לרבנן בראשנו דואמניא דultimo מלתא ומשהפו לארוקו כיל אוליאו כיל הלמד מברך ברך ארוחא וראנה מברך שעריא


142 Rashi, *ad locum*:

סبرا - ל metodo בחומש והוזדו חליא יאמד לשמודה במכה וכרחיה הלמדו.


144 Rabbeinu Yona, *Commentary to Mishnah Avot* 2.7:

מרבד התכון מראב ישישה; רבי התכון המרבדה הספרדות עליה דינו אמר רבדה ויהב כי יאמד יבושב כי יאמד ההלמודיらい לשומע דריה ודריה דריה

ולהלמודו עניי יאמד על הספרדות יאמד ההלמודיらい לשומע דריה ודריה דריה

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The development of *sevara* and *pilpul* as primary methodologies for teaching and studying Talmud is a defining feature of late-medieval rabbinic culture in Spain (primarily in Castile). But even by the mid thirteenth century, Rabbeinu Yona attests that *sevara*, as “its own form of wisdom,” was popular among students and could serve as a means to draw more students to a *yeshiva*. While Rabbeinu Yona does not offer too many details about the practices of *sevara* that form this emerging discipline, he does stress their creative nature (*sevara ha-mithadeshet*): *sevara* seems to have operated as an analytical method through which students would innovate insights on classical rabbinic subjects.

I cite this intellectual background to demonstrate that when R. Dostai asks R. Hagai if he is capable of *sevara* he is not simply asking about his ability to understand secrets, but about his logical capacities to generate new meanings from the secrets that are shared with him. The point of this scene, then, is to stress that citation and transmission are not the principal craft of

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esotericism; rather, these are practices that unaccompanied by sevara are looked down upon and may even lead to sin.\footnote{146}

The subsequent section allows us to see sevara in exegetical action. After R. Hagai declares that he is capable to do more than merely listen to esoterica, he is asked to share the supernal secret he heard:

He [Rabbi Dostai] said to him, “What is it?”

He replied, “I have heard the mystery of this verse, “Behold the bed of Solomon” (Song of Songs 4:7). This is the Throne of Glory of the King who possess all peace (shalom).

“Sixty warriors surrounding her”—these are the sixty princes, supernal holy ministers, ministering before the Throne of Glory of the supernal King;

“Of the warriors of Israel”—for they are appointed under the authority of the holy prince Michael, guardian of Israel. Since they are beneath him, they are all guardian-princes of Israel, as is written, “of the warriors of Israel.”

Rabbi Dostai said to him, “You are more worthy than I to go and behold the Countenance of Days!”\footnote{147}
The crucial question here is the status of R. Hagai’s transmission: Is this a verbatim recitation of the secret he heard, or a performance of his ability to contemplate and recompose the secrets he receives into new forms? R. Dostai’s jubilant response indicates that the latter is the case, for it would make little sense for R. Dostai to warn against the mere listening to and memorization of esoterica and then immediately praise R. Hagai for being capable of only those limited capacities.

Is it possible to locate formal features in R. Hagai’s homily that would allow us to divide between a cited layer and a creatively composed layer? This is not a question of source-history, but one of rhetorical representation, i.e., does the text construe sections of the homily as though they were the product of deduction (sevara) and not mere mnemonics (shemua). One possibility is that the final line exhibits R. Hagai’s powers of sevara: “Since they are beneath him, they are all mighty guardians of Israel, as is written, of the warriors of Israel.” Formally, this line juts out. The operant style in this homily is to quote a section of the verse and then add a gloss. But in this line, the gloss concludes with a reference back to the verse, “as is written, of the warriors of Israel.” This line serves to rationally explain a real problem in the previous gloss on those words — “Of the warriors of Israel” — which link these words to the archangel Michael. The key word here, “warriors,” is in the plural and thus cannot refer to the angel Michael. But if “warriors” refers to the sixty princes, how is it that they are “of Israel?” R. Hagai’s gloss on the gloss neatly dissolves this problem by proposing that since the angels are under Michael’s sovereignty and he is the guardian of Israel, all the princes have become supernal politicians of the Jews. If this suggestion has legs to stand on, then an added lens is given onto Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s concept of the cogitation and contemplation of esoterica. These techniques denote a form of textual reason that uses the very verse to which a secret is linked to exegetically renew it into fuller form.

III. Contesting Sevara

The application of sevara to matters of Jewish esoterica was a fiercely debated matter in thirteenth century Spain. At the beginning of rabbinic reflection on esotericism, a millennium earlier, a high level of cognitive capacity (binah) was posed as the precondition for receiving certain scriptural secrets. Such a precondition is established in the famous Mishnah (Haggiga 2:1), which declares that Ezekiel 1 (ma’aseh merkavah) may only be interpreted before a single student who is already able to understand on his own what he is taught (meivin mitokh da’ato). The main shift in medieval esotericism is the emergence of esoteric literature, which shifts the regulatory norms of transmission. Literary circulation of esoterica in the thirteenth century thus posed new problems and questions, as different esoteric authors debated how to regulate this new

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148 This sentence is present in all manuscripts, as far as I can tell.
149 For a more detailed history of Jewish esotericism, see Moshe Halbertal, Concealment and Revelation.
150 “In the Kaufmann and Parma manuscripts the text reads hakham vehevin mida’ato (“wise and understood of his own knowledge”). The reading mevin mida’ato (“wise and understands of his own knowledge”) refers to the student’s capabilities, whereas the reading vehevin mida’ato is a statement of fact. One may only transmit to one who knows the secret on his own, who already understood of his own knowledge” (Moshe Halbertal, Concealment and Revelation, p. 101).
As our last chapter explored, Moshe Idel proposes that a deep social schism existed in thirteenth century Spain with regards to these new questions of esotericism. The rabbinic elite of Barcelona (Nahmanides, Rashba, and Isaac ben Todros) advanced a conservative theory of exclusive oral transmission: Kabbalistic secrets could be circulated in written form only via hints [remez] that require a student to find an expert teacher to unpack their tantalizing contents in an intimate face-to-face encounter. Afraid that human creativity might taint the traditions of Kabbalah, the elite Rabbis argued that the primary social role of the Kabbalist was to curate Judaism’s esoteric lore, not to innovate. Simultaneous to this conservative culture of esotericism, there arose a secondary rabbinic elite throughout Spain comprised of educated Jews who did not hold positions of pastoral power. These rabbis propagated new hermeneutical systems (techniques and examples) by which anyone could extract secrets from scripture without the mediation of an oral transmission. These were “educated individuals who were in search of new types of thought and often uneasy with their intellectual starting point.”

Nahmanides definitively set out the conservative position in the introduction to his Commentary to the Torah, one of the first literary works intended for a wide audience to include kabbalistic allusions.

I bring into a faithful covenant and give counsel to all who look into this book not to reason [l’misbar svara] or entertain any thought concerning any of the mystical hints which I write regarding the hidden matters of Torah, for…my words will not be comprehended nor known at all by any reasoning [sekhel] or contemplation [binah], except from the mouth of a wise kabbalist speaking into the ear of an understanding recipient.

Nahmanides is willing to collate and allude to secrets in his groundbreaking commentary, but he also wishes to emphasize that his method of presentation is intended to exclude the creative up- and cognitive expansion of these traditions; his esoteric hints are designed less as

151 See Halbertal, Concealment and Revelation, pp. 69-76.
154 Idel, Absorbing Perfections, p. 397.
155 Nahmanides, Commentary on the Torah, introduction:
information than as an invitation to enter the social intimacy of pedagogy.

To overcome the Nahmanidean critique of esoteric deduction, the innovative Kabbalists had Maimonides to lean on. In the introduction to the third section of The Guide of the Perplexed, Maimonides confesses that he received no tradition on ma’aseh berieshit and ma’aseh merkavah, but, rather, he explicated these esoteric realms based on rational sensitivity to scripture. Ibn Tibon’s translation, which these kabbalists would have used, marks the key phrase, “that which has occurred to me with regard to these (esoteric) matters, I followed conjecture and supposition” as ba’al sevarah b’mah sheh noda’li, thus providing a semantic and theoretical antipode to Nahmanides’ refusal to allow reason [l’misbar svara] to cultivate an interpretive reading practice of scripture’s secrets. Of course, the very reading practice that Nahmanides critiques, “l’misbar svara,” is the exact one we find in our narrative, although here it is less a matter of reading than a condition of entrance into esoteric circles. If our narrative’s representation of sevara is not Nahmanidean, it is not a strictly Maimonidean one either: sevara is presented as a technique not for reinventing old secrets that have been lost but for amplifying old secrets that have been received (i.e., sevara is applied to an esoteric shemua).

Taken as a whole, Midrash ha-Ne’lam to Genesis does not contain a single model of esotericism. Rather it incorporates multiple theories of esotericism and mentions multiple techniques for acquiring esoteric knowledge: oral transmission, esoteric books, pneumatic exegesis, sleep, vision, contemplation/histaklut. Indeed, it is especially hard to argue that a single theory of esotericism reigns throughout Midrash ha-Ne’lam, since several of its pericopes record dissenting opinions over the politics of esotericism, and perform that dissent in

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156 Nahmanides’ position also stands in opposition to “Rabbi Ya’akov bar Sheshet(‘s) understand(ing of) kabbalistic knowledge as knowledge of an open nature, paralleling that found in the Oral Law in general” (Halbertal, Concealment and Revelation, p.81). For further research on the creative approach of Ya’akov bar Sheshet and the other early-thirteenth century kabbalists of Gerona, see Jonathan Dauber, Knowledge of God and the Development of Early Kabbalah (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 27-60. Dauber, however, links the creative approach in early Kabbalah to a broader philosophical ethos and not to a similar approach in matters of Halakhah and Talmud, as per Halbertal. In a future expansion of this chapter, I hope to integrate more of Dauber’s historiography of early kabbalah, so to better understand the complex relation between philosophical creativity and talmudic creativity in thirteenth-century Spain. I imagine that the relation revolves around how post-maimonideans understood the practical relationship between Maimonides’ two great projects – Mishnah Torah and The Guide for the Perplexed.


158 In the original Arabic: “hads.”

159 Later on in the narrative, though, R. Dostai does produce secrets from his own self—“Rabbi Dostai heard, pondered the matter within himself (istakel b’nafsheh milhah)”—without reference to any previous tradition. While the text never explicitly claims that El’azar ben Arakh’s riddles are of an esoteric nature, the general context suggests as much. Nevertheless, the verb sevara is not used in this context.

160 Zohar Hadash 18c.
161 Zohar Hadash 28b.
162 Zohar Hadash 28b.
163 Zohar Hadash 28b.
164 Zohar Hadash 12c.
good talmudic fashion.\textsuperscript{165} Instead of resolving dialectical oppositions, these sections impute different cultural positions to different rabbis. But to a historian’s chagrin, there is no means to determine whether these disputes reflect actual tensions within a circle of authors responsible for Midrash ha-Ne’lam, or whether this is an author’s rhetorical strategy to defer from resolving a tension he is still struggling over (and is perhaps only resolved with the shift to later styles of Zohar). With regards to our local concern—Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s position on sevara and its relationship to Nahmanides’ conservative concept of esotericism—some insight can be gleaned from an earlier section of Midrash ha-Ne’lam, one which perhaps most fully develops Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s reflections on esotericism.

I refer to two interconnected homilies on Adam’s sin. While the two homilies deserve broad analysis, especially for the ways that these excerpts engage with the surrounding exegesis, four interconnected moments stand out as particularly relevant to our context:

Rabbi Beroka said, “He [Adam] was commanded about the Name—and he sinned with the Name. He was commanded about the Name—the unique name [YHVH], as it is written: “the tree of life…” (Gen. 2:9). He sinned with the Name—the polysemous Name [YHVH ELOHIM], as it is written: “the tree of knowledge, good and evil” (ibid.)…Rabbi Yitzhak [Rabbi Yehudah]\textsuperscript{166} said, “We see that three [four] of the Companions were punished for this! Rabbi Yehudah said, “Concerning what Rabbi Beroka said—one must not ponder this portion further. For I have heard something similar from my father and now recall. From here on, conventional interpretation (drashah) is required!…”

Rabbi Yoḥai said, “Look, our companion R. Yehudah said that conventional interpretation (drasha) is required here, yet you are expounding the Account of the Chariot (ma’aseh merkavah)! Rabbi Alexandri replied, “It is even greater than the Account of Chariot (ma’aseh merkavah), for I see that supernal secrets [razin ila’in] were revealed here…

Rabbi Yehudah said, “For how long will the Companions amble among the supernal mysteries of the King? Rabbi Alexandri said, “We have learned: Secrets of Torah are divulged to the disciples who are worthy—like us and the Companions like us!”

These fascinating passages construct and rhetorically perform a four-tiered hierarchy of esoteric

\textsuperscript{165} See especially Zohar 1:134a-136a.
\textsuperscript{166} As per MS Munich 217.

\textit{Zohar Hadash}, 18c-d (translation, Wolski, pp. 190-192):

\textit{Zohar Hadash}, 18d (translation, Wolski, pp. 303-304):

\textit{Zohar Hadash}, 19c (translation, Wolski, pp. 208):
engagement with scripture: *drasha* (exegesis), *hirhur* (contemplation), *ma’aseh merkavah* (speculation on Ezekiel 1), and *razin ila’in* (supreme secrets). Within this hermeneutical economy, R. Yehudah functions as the text’s internalized critic, persistently silencing the other fellows’ exegetical escapades that push past the borders of *drasha*. It is unclear, though, if *drasha* means a formal method of interpreting scripture or a realm of reference, limited to human history and natural events. The latter seems more likely, both because one would be hard pressed not to call what R. Yehudah critiques midrash, and because *drasha*’s opposition, *ma’aseh merkavah* and *razin ila’in*, are less hermeneutical methods than celestial referents. R. Dostai’s comment in our narrative, “not for a *derashah* have I come here, for I have already heard the incident of Jesse and his sons. But, if you have heard the essence of the matter, speak,” reinforce this reading of *drasha* as a realm of reference and not as an exegetical practice.

R. Yehudah’s critique makes a clear and familiar claim about esotericism. Because he has now remembered the tradition that R. Broka alludes to (transmitted to him by his father), he warns against any further engagement in esoteric explication. *Drasha* and no further, R. Yehudah tells, once a deeper point of reference has been reconstructed through the memory of previous transmission. This position is remarkably close to that of Nahmanides.

The premises of R. Yehudah’s critique are limned a few lines later, when the narrator chooses to testify on the nature of R. Broka’s tradition:

> We have learned there: Rabbi Yehudah son of Rabbi Simon said, “I have pondered the word that Rabbi Beroka spoke and inquired of him; and I found that he possessed the essence of the tradition (*ikar kabbalah*) in his hand, and that thus was decreed in the first book of the Mishnah of Rabbi El’azar ben Arakh (*b’sifra kadmah d’matnita d’r ‘Eliezer ben Arakh*).\(^{170}\)

This text wants the reader to know that the esoteric teaching of Adam’s onomastic sin has three sources: the ancient book of R. El’azar, R. Broka, and R. Yehudah’s father. The text also posits three different media through which this tradition circulated: a book, a father-son transmission, and a homily by R. Broka. Given this excess of citation, we need to ask a basic critical question. If this is all a fabricated source-history, woven together by the author(s) of *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*, what rhetorical aim is achieved by underscoring the plural transmisions and mediations of this tradition? I believe that it works to enforce the Nahmanidean position voiced by R. Yehuda’s critique. Since the Rabbis have already received an *ikar kabbalah*, a quality verified both by an ancient book and a memory of R. Yehuda’s father, they surely don’t need to further use their own imaginative prowess. Even so, the rhetorical flow of the composition works against R. Yehudah, since both times that R. Alexanderai speaks he is given the final and uncontested stance, an unsurprising fact since he supports what *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* is—a refusal to halt productive engagement with scripture after the reception of an *ikar kabbalah*. Taken as a whole, then, various compositional strategies work against each other to provide the sense that the author(s)

\(^{170}\) *Zohar Habad*, 18c (translation, Wolski, p. 192):

> אתגזר והי בידוי
> ההוה קבלה דאיקאר ואשכחנא, ליהושאיל, ברוקא ר"ד מלה בהאי אשגחנא, סימון ר"ב אמר, התם תנן ערך בן אלעזר דר דמתניתא קדמאה בספרא זהמה ברודר והו אנתור
> הספרא קדמאו, דמותיוו דר אלעזר בן עך.
of this pericope equivocate(s) over the relation between interpretation and esotericism. But with beautiful poise, that theoretical equivocation is raised to the level of composition and is almost allowed to settle into a position of pluralism.

*Midrash ha-Ne’lam*’s nuanced and non-singular approach to esoteric innovation reinforces Elliot Wolfson’s claims about thirteenth-century Jewish esotericism. In several articles, Wolfson pushes back against Idel’s thesis that a social binary was regnant in late thirteenth century Spanish theories of Jewish secrets. He proposes, instead, that it would be more appropriate to theorize the tension between the conservation and poetic innovation of esoterica as a dialectic, present in every kabbalist to different degrees. More recently, Wolfson published an anonymous text, previously only found in manuscripts, which he titled, “Gates of the Elder.” In his introduction, he aduces this text as further evidence of his esoteric model. In that context, Wolfson offers two theses, each significant for this essay. His first argument situates this text within the same literary circle that produced *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* in the late 1270’s, both because the anonymous text dramatizes an esoteric fellowship between a teacher and his students, like much of the *Zohar*, and because each of the five times the text cites the Zohar, that passage can be located in *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*. His second argument stresses that this text’s position on esotericism embodies an intermediate platform within the Idelian antitheses of conservation and innovation. While the master repeatedly warns against the loose dissemination of his secrets and even performs elaborate dramas to resist their diffuse transmission, he also invites the students to elucidate and augment his teachings through their exegetical prowess. Though it is not acceptable for the students in the master’s circle to invent secrets ex nihilo, it is expected that they will cultivate his secrets into new adaptations. This distinction is alluded to in the following passage:

And take this principle in your hand, that all the hints that are hinted to in this book did not emerge by happenstance but only after research (*diyuk*). And we already hinted to you that *sevara* in these realms will cause great damage and will not help until you have received an oral tradition.

This passage differs from Nahmanides because it does not refuse applying *sevara* to esoteric hints; it only warns against *sevara* as a mode of generating new secrets. A similar model seems active in our pericope from *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*. *Sevara* is used there not to fabricate new secrets but to expand received secrets. Hence the emphasis that R. Dustai and R. Hagai place on

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173 Section 15, p. 204:

**ניקוה יהא כלכלה ברי בך שמל תרבות מדרים משמית הנמר והא למל הזקורת אלא לזרアイ. חכומ רמא בזקורה ודיעים שמכברא**

**בצקורה זקולה ח taraf מאיו לזרアイ תרייל על שיצפרא והפי אפי**.
applying sevara to a shemua, a received tradition. When R. Dustai asks R. Hagai if he can perform acts of sevara, he states: “(only) if you will be able to comprehend and deduce from what you will hear (iy tikhol l’misbar sevara l’mai d’tishma), come.” Similarly, R. Hagai answers with a similar sequence of verbs: “I have heard a word of the supernal mystery, and have contemplated and comprehended it (shamit milah d’raza ila’ah v’istaklit beh, v’savrit sevara).” Both rabbis emphasize the importance of inferential esotericism, of adding sevara to secret traditions, an esoteric position that mediates between the conservatism of Nahmanides and the innovativeness of Maimonides.

IV. Sevara as a Literary Form

In the context of our original narrative-homily, inferential esotericism functions not just as a cognitive practice but as a form of literature, as the compositional structure of our text. That structure is built of a Hebrew homily encapsulating an Aramaic narrative. What exactly is the interaction between these two literary modes? To provide a local answer to a question that pertains to the crafty mingling of narrative and homily found throughout much of zoharic literature, it will helpful to first return to the narrative as a whole.

Once the two rabbinic pilgrims arrive at the precipice of their destination, R. El’azar sends his servant out to first test their theological acumen with two riddles. Only after they have figured out the correct answer (and proven themselves worthy of receiving further esoteric instruction) does R. El’azar formally welcome them into his home:

Rabbi El’azar...went out to them.
He said, “You are heads of the supernal academy, discord and harmony. Come to me and you will see and live—what has never been revealed, as is written, for a person may not see Me and live (Exod. 33:20), but you will see and live!”
They sat before him. He was silent and they were silent. He went up into a chamber and heard a voice saying, “Tell them all that they desire, for they are righteous.”
Before he descended, night dusked. They ate. While they were eating, he was silent and they were silent. After they ate, they arose to lie down.
He said to them, “If one of you has heard a word, tell me.”
Rabbi Dostai opened, saying, “We shall comprehend and deduce (anan sevarah nisbor), and what is good to know, you will tell us.”

The narration builds to a climax. After R. El’azar welcomes his tested guests into his home with encomium and spiritual promises, the narrative performs a series of deferrals via a rapid succession of verbs, which give the reader a rising expectation of a climatic event: they sit; they...
are silent; R. El’azar ascends to his room; he hears a voice directing him to tell the rabbis what they have come for (this emphasis on oral teaching stands in opposition to R. El’azar’s promise to provide a visionary experience); he descends; they eat; they get up to go to sleep; R. El’azar asks his guests if they have any traditions to tell him; R. Dostai retorts that, instead, R. El’azar should teach them and they will use *sevara* and try to understand. Finally, after all of this dramatic build-up, R. El’azar begins to teach them a tradition that, as his guests profess, they have not heard before. This moment of esoteric education functions as the climax of the Aramaic narrative.

The centrality of R. El’azar’s teaching is reinforced by the text’s compositional form. The very tradition that R. El’azar transmits serves as the Hebrew header to our whole text. But the two recitations are not identical. The following chart displays the difference (Hebrew in bold; Aramaic in regular font):
In the initial Hebrew presentation, the tradition’s connection to Song of Songs 3:7 is constructed in response to a definitional question posed (in Aramaic) by R. Aybo—“What is fittingly (mai k’taqana)?” R. El’azar, however, skips the whole rhetoric of question and answer (mai…ta shma) and simply cites the verse from the canticles as a prooftext: “…as is written, ‘Encircled by sixty warriors of the warriors of Israel (Song of Songs 3:7)?’” They answered him, “Let the master say.” He said to them, “In the recitation of the Shema there are sixty known letters until and in your gates (Deut. 6:9). On each and every letter there is a precious mystery of holy kingship, of the supernal ruler. The worship of a human being before Him must be that he draw his mind near to the Throne of Glory of holy kingship. At that time, the Prince of the Countenance, whose name is like his Master’s, takes them from his mouth and raises them aloft, along with the souls of the righteous, before the precious altar above. There, sixty angels surrounding the Throne of Glory receive them, each and every one a single letter and they sing with them the entire night. This is what is written, The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of YHVH your God (Deut. 26:4). “The priest shall take – Metatron. “The basket, ha-tene – the sixty letters of the night-time recitation of the Shema.”

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letters of the nocturnal prayer (*kriyat shemah*) engenders a heavenly drama, wherein Metatron plucks these liturgical letters from the meditator’s mouth and shuttles them to the sixty throne angels, who then sing those letters all night long. Asulin cites this narrative as evidence of her larger thesis on *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*’s compositional history: the Hebrew stratum—which often has an anti-mystical, anti-heavenly-ascent agenda—precedes the Aramaic stratum—which often proposes a less divisive distinction between humans and angels, earth and heaven.

In our local context, I tend to side with Nathan Wolski’s claim that there exists a deliberate literary strategy to fashion a layered text via Hebrew and English, and not two historically distinct texts. Wolski writes:

> Here, the Hebrew portion of the unit serves as a kind of Mishnah (though this word is not used), with the Aramaic story functioning as kind of aggadic Gemarah to the opening teaching. Assuming one didn’t know anything about the authorship of this work, one could easily reach the conclusion that this unit is composite, comprised of an earlier Hebrew layer, and a later Aramaic addition. While current trends in Zohar scholarship favor multiple authors across numerous generations, and even *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* itself may well turn out to be the product of numerous hands, this unit requires no such conclusion. *In my view, we have here a deliberate strategy on the part of the author to create a new Talmud, so to speak, that is, a thickly textured work with its own internal layers.*

Nevertheless, Asulin’s claim that there exist ideational differences between the linguistically distinct sections is an important and productive thesis. For the purposes of this chapter, Asulin’s reading makes visible that the Aramaic version of R. Yitzhak is represented as a later modification of the Hebrew version. R. El’azar does not simply transmit the Hebrew “Mishnah.” He augments its meaning toward new theological directions by incorporating Metatron as an active agent in the nocturnal *shema* ritual. By temporally marking the first R. Yitzhak tradition as older—both via choice of language and compositional structure, which resembles the Talmud’s relationship to a Mishnah—our text brings to the fore its project of reviving older traditions into new form.

As we have been arguing, that renaissance project looks to the Babylonian Talmud for a model of creative interaction with older sources, one which hides neither the creativity nor the interaction. There exist no better Jewish term to describe this creative practice than “sevara.”

**V. Midrash ha-Ne'lam and the Zoharic Renaissance**

Yehuda Liebes, one of the most important scholars to transform Zohar studies after the passing of Scholem in the early 1980s, has proposed that zoharic literature is best read as a literature of renaissance. Liebes’ wide-ranging corrective to Scholem’s historiography of the Zohar centers

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176 Wolski, “Metatron and the Mysteries of the Night.”

177 R. Yitzchak’s tradition does not have a known rabbinic correlate. The closest allusion is to *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, 3:7, where R. El’azar b. Yosi interprets the verse of “*shishim giborim*” as referring to the sixty letters of the priestly blessing.
Liebes proposes not a new dating of Zohar, but rather a new periodization that links the literary sensibilities of late thirteenth century Castile—as exemplified by the Zohar—with early fourteenth century Italy—as exemplified by Dante and Petrarch. Liebes uses this model to forge a more nuanced literary history of the Zohar. He views Tikkunei Zohar’s dissimilarity to Guf Ha-Zohar (the main body of zoharic texts published in Mantua and Cremona in 1558-1560) in terms of their relationship to rabbinic revivalism. Only the latter is a true rabbinic renaissance, while the former abandons the zoharic passion for the rabbinic past and advocates for a more messianic cultural revolution (akin, Liebes argues, to mid-twentieth century Communism). I would like to extend Liebes’s historiography of zoharic renaissance backwards, to the literary time(s) right before Guf Ha-Zohar, namely, the time of Midrash ha-Ne’lam. Although the literary unit found in 25c-26a (ed. Margaliot) exhibits few of the renaissance virtues that Liebes identifies in Guf Ha-Zohar, it exemplifies Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s engagement with a different set of renaissance-like questions: queries into the nature of tradition, literary creativity, historical consciousness, and the techniques of knowledge transmission. This Spanish text therefore offers literary responses to the emerging problematics of the late-medieval period in ways that differ, crucially, from the later, more Christian, Renaissance of Italy.

To provide a theoretical framework for thinking through the rhetorical strategies of rabbinic renaissance found in zoharic literature, it will prove helpful to introduce a strand of contemporary scholarship on the role of rhetoric and time in the Renaissance. Thomas Greene’s The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry has reoriented how scholars talk about the emergence of a renaissance sensibility in the early fourteenth century. For Greene, and many of his readers, “Renaissance” names the emergence of new structures of intertextuality, meant to overcome new problems of temporality, anachronism, and historical consciousness. Renaissance literature, in other words, was initially a new strategy of writing, which grappled with new problems of time. For Greene, it was specifically new strategies of imitatio that enabled the emergence of the Renaissance: “Imitatio produced a vast effort to deal with the newly perceived problem of anachronism; it determined for two or three centuries the character of most poetic intertextuality; it assigned the Renaissance creator a convenient and flexible stance toward a past that threatened to overwhelm

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him.”  

Renaissance imitation, then, was not a form of citation or reproduction, but a complex technique of rhetoric that authors used to achieve an intimacy with their textual past at the same time as they submitted to the divisive mediations of time. This dialectical model of imitation (which Greene differentiates from “reproductive,” “eclectic,” and “heuristic,” models of imitation) highlights and dramatizes a text’s “intertextual makeup as a constitutive structural element” and thereby allows language to “reflect an awareness of (its) historicity and build upon it.” Unlike Medieval authors, Greene tells us, Petrarch and others around him created new dialectical models of imitation, models of literature that create intimacy between two times of language (the imitated and the imitation), even as they highlight and reflect upon the historical distance between the two. Greene describes this shift from medieval literary culture to that of the Renaissance as a shift from a “metonymic intertextuality” to a “metaphoric intertextuality,” metaphoric because the latter usage of texts underscores and builds upon the disjunctures of literary history, gaps that metonymy always ignores.

Do zoharic texts present themselves as naive metonymic extensions of rabbinic literature or as more dialectically self-conscious imitations of rabbinic literature? To a degree, this question has already been broached. In his article on the Zohar as a renaissance literature, Liebes highlights the Zohar’s heightened self-awareness as one of the many features that makes it a renaissance text: “(While) the Zohar is no less daring than the Talmud, its method is no longer primitive (in other words, originary) and self-evident in the eyes of its creators, as is the case in the Talmud and Midrashim. The method of the Zohar is more reflexive, in other words, self-aware as to its path and its daringness.”  

According to Liebes, the Zohar exhibits a new historical consciousness that is absent from rabbinic literature. Given that the Zohar’s midrashic method was no longer self-evident in the medieval period as a genre of creativity, its authors must have been highly self-conscious of their creative endeavors.

Instead of explicating the Zohar’s reflexive poetic in opposition to a more “originary-primitive” poetic of talmud and midrash, this chapter highlighted the ways that the former is dependent on the latter, at the least, in certain sections of *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*. More specifically, this chapter argued that *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* uses the Babylonian Talmud as a rhetorical template for its medieval revival of rabbinic literature. My reading, therefore, extends the claims of previous scholars who note *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*’s close rhetorical relationship with earlier rabbinic literature, to formulate a hypothesis about *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*’s rhetorical reliance on the Babylonian Talmud to negotiate new problematics of time, tradition, and creativity.

Long before the European Renaissance, the Babylonian Talmud offered Jews a complex

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184 Throughout his “Zohar as Renaissance” essay, Liebes equivocates over the nature of amoraic culture. At times he explicitly claims, “from the tannaitic period, Judaism has been characterized by legalism, via literalism and rationalism, cold and sterile, which murders the life of religion, which is to say the mythos.” But at other times he parenthetically includes the amoraim as a continuation of tannaitic culture - “According to the Zohar, the innovation which characterizes it, which is to say the original mythic-exegetical creativity, which was born from a live discourse, from intense dialogue within a cohort surrounding a teacher, this is the way of the Tannaim (and perhaps also the Amoraim).”
model of intertextuality capable of integrating cultural change within its compositional structure. By fashioning an apparatus that allowed generations of Jews to argue with and rewrite past traditions at the same time as they partook in those traditions, the Talmud became a central media of Jewish intergenerational creativity. As recent scholarship has reminded us, one fundamental feature of the Talmud is memory, so much so that it may be best to approach the Talmud as a comprehensive praxis for cultivating rabbinic cultural memory. Sergey Dolgopolski’s recent monograph, *The Open Past: Subjectivity and Remembering in the Talmud*, strikingly describes the mnemonic practices of the Talmud as “thinking in the service of remembering”—in other words, Talmud is the site where Jews think and debate how to best remember the past. For Dolgopolski, this is precisely how talmudic thinking differs from ancient rhetoric and philosophy, which either use memory in the service of thinking (philosophy) or in the service of persuasion (rhetoric). The talmudic past is, in Dolgopolski’s locution, “an open past,” because Talmud constructs a rabbinic past that calls for a persistent inquiry into how it should be properly remembered. By constantly issuing its own reexamination, the past retains some openness, some withdrawal from its determinants.

This unique mnemonic structure of talmudic intertextuality evades Greene’s historiographical binary of metonymic and metaphoric intertextualities. *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*‘s relationship to the Renaissance—in Greene’s sense of the term as a new structure of intertextuality—is therefore a complex one that invites further research and scholarly conversation. When we talk of a medieval Jewish renaissance, we have to remember that late thirteenth century Jews had, for the most part, a very different canon, library, and literary praxis than coeval Christians. In the Talmud, Jews already had access to models of intertextuality that cope with the cultural and literary distances that accrue with the passage of time. *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*‘s reliance on the Talmud to fashion its relationship to the rabbinic past eschews, then, any straightforward sense of literary continuity or discontinuity, but rather points toward a concept of tradition and time that is still in need of a name. Not exactly “milin haditin atiqin,” “new ancient words”—a phrase that (only) later sections of Zohar use to describe their renaissance poetic—*Midrash ha-Ne’lam* is perhaps better portrayed as *milin hadatin v’atiqin*, “new and ancient

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words,” where the *and* does not create an addition, but diagrams a talmudic tension between new and old words, Aramaic and Hebrew, innovation and imitation.

In the subsequent and final chapter of this dissertation, I analyze an additional function of talmudic textuality within *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*, namely, the importance of talmudic rhetoric to *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*’s representation of rabbinic community. While this chapter concluded by demonstrating that the author(s) of *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* occasionally adopt(s) the compositional form of the Babylonian Talmud, the next chapter argues that the social rhetoric of the Babylonian Talmud is pervasive throughout much of *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*. What follows seeks to determine the literary and cultural importance of that talmudic rhetoric.
Chapter Five

Scholastic Sociality: 
The Talmudic Rhetoric of Midrash ha-Ne'lam

Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.

--Benedict Anderson¹

I: Jewish Collectivities and Zoharic Literature

Commencing in the early thirteenth century, rabbis in Christian Spain, France, and Germany began to study, create, and circulate esoteric knowledge in communal hubs. Centers of rabbinic learning (the beit midrash) and informal confraternities (the havura) became places where educated Jews could go to share and discover Jewish secrets.² The emergence of these social enclaves of esotericism was a seismic shift from the models of Jewish esotericism active in the Islamicate. Jewish philosophers active in Islamic regions during the eleventh and twelfth centuries tended to produce and uncover Jewish esoterica through practices of seclusion and introspection. Maimonides, Bahya ibn Paquda, Abraham Ibn Ezra, and Yehudah Halevi—all exemplars of Jews who primarily lived in Islamic societies—pursued their affection for Jewish esotericism as a solitary enterprise (in large part because they did not believe that other Jews were stewards of oral esoteric traditions).³ The subsequent social turn in Jewish esotericism participates in what Susan Reynolds calls “the communal movement” of twelfth and thirteenth-century Christian Europe, during which laypersons, scholars, and devotees established

³ This regional contrast is made by Dan, “A Re-Evaluation.” Dan claims that Maimonides inaugurates the social trend of thirteenth century esotericism. However, while Maimonides is known to have tutored individual students in medicine, logic, and astronomy, he only provided esoteric instruction within the confines of the written medium. Cf. Moshe Idel, “Leadership and Charisma: Maimonides, Nahmanides and Abraham Abulafia,” Journal for the Study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry 1 (2008), pp. 10-11. On documents from the Cairo genizah that refer to Maimonides’ beit midrash, see Mordechai A. Friedman, “Notes by a Disciple in Maimonides' Academy Pertaining to Beliefs and Concepts and Halakhah,” Turbiz Vol. 62 (1992/3), pp. 523-583 [Hebrew]. Based on these and other primary documents, Herbert Davidson concludes that, “while it is certain that Maimonides taught rabbinic texts in one format or another, the meager information does not justify conclusions about the venue in which he did so”; see his Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 64-66. On the role of spiritual isolationism in the writings of twelfth-century Jewish philosophers, see Howard Kreisel, “Asceticism in the Thought of R. Bahya Ibn Paquda and Maimonides,” Da'at 21 (1988), pp. Vii-xiii; and Paul Fenton, "Solitary Meditation in Jewish and Islamic Mysticism in the Light of a Recent Archeological Discovery," Medieval Encounters 1 (1995), pp. 271-279.
‘collectivities’ in unprecedented numbers. Reynolds defines a collectivity as a community of voluntary, reciprocal, and unmediated relationships. Despite the stronghold of Christian monarchies in medieval Europe, “medieval society seems to have been full of groups of laypeople who acted together, or thought of themselves as acting together, sometimes over long periods, and who appear to have done so—as far as the records show—at least partly on their own initiative and with a relatively small amount of formal regulation and physical coercion.”

The narratives of Guf ha-Zohar evoke a similar sense of community, of a group of Rabbis whose singular passion is to discover and teach the secrets of scripture to each other. Page after page, Guf ha-Zohar recounts stories of ten rabbinic friends who amble across the Palestinian countryside together, teach one another scripture’s kabbalistic mysteries, and experience epiphanies in the luminous faces of the fellowship. Woven together, these narratives make for a strong argument against the notion that a spiritual experience could be an asocial experience; zoharic spirituality is zoharic sociality. To be sure, Guf ha-Zohar’s fiction of spiritual community was not made from whole cloth, as earlier strata of Sefer ha-Zohar preserve cognate models of rabbinic sociality. To trace the emergence and evolution of these zoharic imaginings of rabbinic community, this chapter turns to representations of the social in Sefer ha-Zohar’s earliest section, Midrash ha-Ne’lam to Genesis.

While the rabbis of Midrash ha-Ne’lam also search for scripture’s secrets together, their interactions are more scholastic than mystical. In place of an intimate community (hevraya) emotionally bound to a single master teacher, an amorphous network of rabbis debate each other’s esoterica, often in non-narrative settings that carry the tone and rhetoric of a talmudic composition. Compared to the affirmations offered by zoharic sages to their friends’ exegetical performances, “shapir ka’amart” (“you have spoken beautifully”), common throughout later strata of Zohar, the homilies of Midrash ha-Ne’lam sustain a more disputatious tone and contain a higher percentage of rabbinic argumentation. Motivated by a new theosophical understanding of communal disagreement as a slippage from divine harmony, later strata of Zohar become more averse to a culture of mahloket (dissensus).

To historically situate Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s model of sociality—how it represents social life—this chapter begins with a survey of previous Jewish representations of social esotericism.

5 Reynolds, Kingdoms and Communities, p. 2.
9 See Zohar 1:17a-b; and 3:186b.
Against that backdrop, the chapter’s central section argues that *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*’s representations of esoteric community depend upon amoraic and stammaitic rhetoric, i.e., rabbinic discourses developed by post-mishnaic sages referred to as amoraim and the anonymous redactors of the Babylonian Talmud referred to by many modern scholars as stammaim. It has long been noticed that many of the Rabbis that populate the imagined world of *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* are amoraic rabbis who lived long after R. Shimon bar Yohai, the reputed author of the Zohar. In what follows, I will demonstrate that *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*’s anachronism runs deeper than previously detected—namely, that its social rhetoric derives from amoraic and stammaitic discourse. If talmudic rhetoric formalizes its style of sociality, *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*’s talmudic anachronisms can be appreciated as constitutive of its literary project rather than as ahistorical gaffes.

II: Social Esotericism: A History of the *Hevraya*

At the heart of the semantic range of “*sod,*” the Hebrew term for a secret, is a correlation between secrecy and the social sphere. Throughout the Bible, *sod* primarily means a council, a fellowship of men or angels.\(^\text{10}\) For instance, in the term’s sole appearance in the Pentateuch, Jacob laments the violent tendencies of his sons, Levi and Simeon, by swearing, “let not my person be included in their council (*b’sodam*) / let not my being be counted in their assembly (*b’kehillatam*)” (Gen. 49:6). Jacob equates “*sod*” with “*kehilla*,” creating a parallelism that only underscores the communal connotations of “*sod*.” The Septuagint captures this social sense by translating “*sod*” (on three occasions) as *synhedrion* (the Hellenistic origin of the Jewish term “*sanhedrin*”) and (one time) *synagoge*. In the prophetic books of the Bible, “*sod*” refers to the divine council—“*sod YHVH*”—to which only prophets have privy.\(^\text{11}\) When the term is then employed in Proverbs to designate a secular secret (Proverbs 11:13, 15:22, 20:19), this meaning still participates in the term’s broader sense of social intimacy. A “*sod*” is both a fellowship and the knowledge engendered by that fellowship. By extension, the term also came to denote any knowledge that is not public. These two meanings (“an exclusive council” and “private knowledge”) collide in Amos 3:7, where the prophet declares, “My Lord YHVH does nothing without having revealed His *sod* to His servants the prophets.” Here, *sod* connotes both esoteric knowledge, something which must be “revealed,” as well as a social formation in which God only reveals His *sod*, the propositional outcomes of His celestial council, to His chosen prophets. These linguistic origins of *sod* underscore the social powers of secrecy. A shared secret both


solidifies the bonds of fellowship and divides the social sphere into those who do and do not have access to privileged knowledge.

The relational implications of secrecy are, of course, not exclusive to ancient Israelite society. Michel de Certeau, in his monograph on early-modern mysticism/esotericism, speaks of a comparable dynamic.

Secrecy is not only the state of a thing that escapes from or reveals itself to knowledge. It designates a play between actors. It circumscribes the terrain of strategic relations between the one trying to discover the secret and the one keeping it, or between the one who is supposed to know it and the one who is assumed not to know it... (The secret) is the center of the spider web spun around it by lovers, traitors, jealous protagonists, pretenders, or exhibitionists. The hidden organizes a social network.¹²

A secret is not a static fact that eludes accessibility. As de Certeu emphasizes, secrets also generate new social relationships. Both the withholding of knowledge and its disclosure act as fulcrums around which a social network coheres into a stable set of power-relations, affects, and encounters.

The ability of secrets to constitute and strengthen social bonds plays a central role in one of the more queer depictions of rabbinic friendship. Offering an embellished explanation of Yehoshua ben Peraḥiah’s ambiguous mandate to “acquire for yourself a friend” (Ethics of the Fathers, 1:6), Avot De-Rabbi Natan, a late rabbinic treatise, outlines its own vision of friendship:

‘Acquire for yourself a friend,’ how so? It teaches that a person should acquire a friend for themselves—that he should eat with him, drink with, read scripture with him, recite oral traditions with him, sleep with him, and reveal to him all his secrets, the secrets of Torah, and the secrets of derekh ereẓ (“the ways of the land”).¹³

To elucidate the mishnaic advice to acquire a friend, Avot De-Rabbi Natan proposes concrete strategies for building a rabbinic friendship. Its model of friendship is expansive: it integrates daytime and nighttime togetherness, culinary, and scholarly activities. Yet the queer crux of this rabbinic friendship is not its capacious vision of homoscholasticism, but its call for comprehensive self-revelation, for revealing all of one’s secrets to one's close-friend. Avot De-Rabbi Natan specifies the genres of esoteric knowledge divulged to one’s friend as secrets of the Torah and secrets of the “ways of the land,” an ambiguous rabbinic locution that, in this context, can be a euphemism for erotic practices or a reference to practical wisdom.¹⁴


¹⁴ On the meaning of “derekh ereẓ” in this context, see Shmuel Safrai, “The Term Derekh Ereẓ,” Tarbiz 60 (1990), p. 155 [Hebrew].
text to link secrecy (setarim) and friendship (haver), *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* frames the sharing of secrets as a friend-building practice, a way for Rabbis to develop brotherly bonds that transcend the space and practices of the *beit midrash*.

The esotericism depicted in *Avot De-Rabbi Natan*, however, is exclusive and non-communal. One does not share one’s secrets among a cohort of friends but with a specific, singular rabbinic friend. The first Jewish sources emphasizing the importance of secrecy for group-solidarity are pre-rabbinic and testify to a sectarian notion of community. The late-second-temple community living at Qumran fashioned their sense of social identity and hierarchy around secrets dealing with nature, law, and history. Among the fragments of their many scrolls, a “sod ha-yaḥad” is frequently mentioned, a phrase which likely means “the secrets of our community,” as “ha-yaḥad” was a common self-designating name used by the ascetics living at Qumran.15 Similarly, Josephus reports that the Essenes swear oaths “to conceal nothing from the members of the sect and to report none of their secrets to others, even though tortured to death.”16

The earliest depiction of a Rabbi revealing secrets to a fellowship is found in *Heikhalot Rabbati*, an enigmatic text written in the late talmudic period.17 In a narrative that almost certainly served as a model for zoharic representations of similar assemblies (in the *Idrot*),18 R. Nehunia ben HaQanah calls together a cohort of rabbis and discloses to them the secrets of celestial ascent and descent—the mysteries of *ma’aseh merqavah*:

R. Ishmael said: When R. Nehunia ben HaQanah saw that wicked Rome was holding a council against the eminent ones of Israel in order to destroy them, he stood and revealed a secret counsel of eternity...He said to me: Son of majestic ones...stand and bring before me all the mighty men of the association (ḥavurah) and all the magnificent ones of the academy and I will recite before them the mysteries, the things made secret and preserved...R. Ishmael said: At once I stood and I assembled the whole great Sanhedrin...and there came Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel, R. Eliezer the Great, R. Elazar d ben Dama, R. Elazar ben Shammua, Johanan ben Dahavai, Hananiah ben Hakhinai, Jonathan ben Uzziel, R. Akiva, and R. Judah ben Baba. We came and we sat before him,

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16 *The Jewish War* 2.141.
and they were a whole crowd of associates standing on their feet, because they were seeing to the pans of fire and torches of light that they had set as a barrier between us and them. And R. Nehuniah ben HaQanah sat and set out in order all the matters of the chariot: descent and ascent, how one who descends descends, and one who ascends ascends.\(^{19}\)

At a moment of escalating tension between Roman forces and the rabbis of Palestine,\(^{20}\) R. Nehuniah chooses to bypass the rabbinic prohibition against teaching the secrets of \textit{ma’aseh merqavah} (“all the matters of the chariot”) to more than one student at a time, which was a norm that likely inhibited the exact sort of social esotericism we are currently investigating.\(^{21}\) R. Nehuniah directs R. Ishmael to gather “all the mighty men of the association (\textit{havurah}) and all the magnificent ones of the academy” so that he may share with them “the mysteries, the things made secret and preserved.” Two sub-groups comprise this climactical assembly: the \textit{havurah}, made of ten rabbis, and “the magnificent ones of the academy,” a more inchoate rabbinic association. R. Nehuniah’s semi-public divulgence of secrets to these rabbis inaugurates the first, but by no means the last time that a rabbinic confraternity—a \textit{havura}—became the site of esoteric disclosure.

The social structures of rabbinic collectivities (\textit{havurot}) changed dramatically throughout Late Antique and Medieval Jewish history. In tannaitic sources a “\textit{havura}” describes a rabbinic cohort gathered for cultic purposes. The Mekhilta, a tannaitic midrash on Exodus, refers to a “\textit{havura shel hakhamin oh shel talmidim},” “an assembly of sages or students” who must converse about Passover until midnight because they have congregated together to consume the paschal sacrifice.\(^{22}\) Only in Palestinian amoraic sources does “\textit{havura}” begin to denote a rabbinic

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\(^{19}\) \textit{Hekhalot Rabbati} §98-103 [translation by James Davila, \textit{Hekhalot Literature in Translation}, pp. 97-102]:

\(^{20}\) On the importance of this narrative framing for the \textit{havura}-account, see Ra’anan S. Boustan, \textit{From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism} (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 248-251.

\(^{21}\) See Mishnah \textit{Haggiga} 2:1.

\(^{22}\) \textit{Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael}, \textit{Nezikin} 8.
study circle that gathers for the primary purpose of studying Torah together. Catherine Heszner convincingly argues that these were informal associations, devoid of any institutional or spatial structure, and typically made up of no more than two-to-five rabbis who had formed a scholarly alliance. At a time when the rabbinic movement did not have an internal social organization, the “havura” was emblematic of the rabbinic affiliations that emerged within a fragmented rabbinic network. A passage from the Sifre that is likely of amoraic origins highlights the variety and specificity of rabbinic study-circles: “the havura of those who study scripture...the havura of those who study Mishnah...the havura of those who study the Talmud.” Each of these cohorts formed a “social cluster” based on ties of friendship, comparable to contemporaneous Roman associations of philosophers.

As institutions of rabbinic higher learning rose to hegemony in the geonic period, they began to be referred to as havurot. Soon after, yeshivot in Palestine, Egypt, and Italy also began to be called havurot, and the yeshiva’s students haverim. This trend is prominent throughout “The Chronicle of Ahima’az” (1054), where the fellows of the yeshivot of southern Italy are consistently referred to as haverim. Similarly, Rabbenu Hananel’s Yeshiva in Kairouan, active in the early eleventh century, was known as the Yeshiva of “Rabbeinu Hananel and all his haverim.” While it is less common for a yeshiva to be called a havura in Medieval Spain, Mordechai Breuer claims that it was not uncommon for Spanish Jews to study Torah in

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26 Cf. “Reish Lqish said: We do not rely on any mishnah that did not enter a havura” (JT Eiruvin 1:6).

27 Sifre, Deuteronomy 355:5.


29 Heszner, The Social Structure, p. 320.


31 See Breuer, Oholoi Torah, p. 16.


33 Breuer, Oholoi Torah, p. 16.
havurot. He suggests that the eventual surge of rabbinic havurot in early-modern Tzfat was stimulated by the influx of Spanish Jews after the Spanish expulsion.  

Rabbis were not the only Jews to form collectivities in the medieval period. By the mid-thirteenth century, lay Jews in Spain began to create their own confraternities. Often referred to as havurot, these groups focused on pressing issues of community welfare, class tension, educational instruction, and professional guilds. The popularity of these informal social associations attests to a surge in lay Jewish collectivities that thrived alongside the rabbinic class and institutions of synagogues. At the same time as these confraternities gained eminence and power, Spanish kabbalists in Gerona also began to form havurot. Nahmanides and Ezra of Gerona reference a “kat ha-haverim,” “a cohort of fellows,” centered around the transmission of esoteric knowledge. Rabbi Shlomo Montpellier, a noted critic of Maimonides, writes to the kabbalists of Gerona, “And therefore my lord and his holy fellowship (havura), take care to…” And slightly later, David ben Yehudah ha-Hasid, a collector and translator of zoharic texts, will also make mention of havarim and a rosh havurah.

These fragments of Spanish social realia offer a tantalizing context for reading representations of the zoharic hevraya as dramatizations of an actual kabbalistic confraternity

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active in late-thirteenth-century Castile. Yet the current lack of evidence of castilian confraternities of kabbalists inhibits the construction of direct correlations between these Geronese social trends and the confraternity described in zoharic texts, written in Castile. More importantly, it would be a misnomer to speak of “the zoharic hevraya” in the singular; the different strata of zoharic literature imagine rabbinic sociality differently. For instance, as Gershom Scholem points out, in Midrash ha-Ne’lam “the author likes to scatter his opinions and sayings in the mouths of numerous sages, and does not delimit their count to the smallness of the hevraya.” This chapter’s next section adds further evidence of the specificity of Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s sociality. I will argue that the model of community portrayed by the non-narrative sections of Midrash ha-Ne’lam depends upon talmudic rhetoric and is more akin to the informal cohorts of amoraic rabbis than to the intimate havurot of medieval kabbalists.

III: The Amoraic Anachronism: Amoraic Rabbis and Rhetoric in Midrash ha-Ne’lam

Midrash-ha-Ne’lam does little to masquerade as a second-century Palestinian midrash. Of the eighteen rabbis that appear on its pages most frequently, exactly half are amoraim, and half of those are Babylonian amoraim. Given this high distribution of amoraim in its rabbinic cast, it’s not surprising that questions about Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s authorship and authenticity began to be voiced immediately after it was published as part of Sefer ha-Zohar (1558-60), a book whose title page claims it to be the work of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, a second-century Palestinian rabbi of the tannaitic period. Azaria de Rossi’s Meor Eynayim, published in Mantua in the 1570’s, just ten years after Sefer ha-Zohar was printed in the same Italian city, recounts his bewilderment at encountering amoraim in a midrash that is allegedly authored by a tanna.

Know that your eyes will see oddities...in the books of the kabbalists and in their attribution (of those books) to the holy R. Shimon bar Yoḥai. For anybody who has a palate will taste for himself the places where the language is not of the flavor and style of the (alleged) author. And I was amazed to find that the Midrash ha-Ne’lam in the Zohar, on the pericope Toledot Yizhak, on the verse, ‘Once when Jacob was cooking a stew,’

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42 Tannaim = R. Yehudah, R. Yitzhak, R. Yosi, R. Elazar, R. Shimon, R. Yoḥanan, R. Aqiva, R. Broka, R. Elazar ben Arukh. Amoraim = R. Aba, R. Abahu, R. Zeira, Rav (almost always cited by Rav Yehudah), Rav Nahman, Rav Huna, Rav Yosef, R. Ḥa’ya bar Yaakov. Roughly forty percent of all references to these eighteen rabbis in Midrash ha-Ne’lam are of the amoraim.
43 The Rabbinic period divides into two periods: tannaitic (70-210) and amoraic (210-500). The two periods are separated by the composition of the Mishnah in the early 3rd century. Another way, therefore, to configure the two periods is that a tanna is a Rabbi who appears in the Mishnah or lived before its completion, while an amora is a rabbi who taught anytime between the completion of the Mishnah and the beginning of the completion of the Talmud (in Palestine, in the early 4th century; in Babylonia, in the early sixth century).
contained quotations from Rav Nahman, Rabbah, and Rav Yosef. And it is not ancient as we thought.  

De Rossi does not specify the stylistic anachronisms that expose the inauthenticity of the Zohar, only because he believes them to be too obvious to an experienced reader of rabbinic literature. Instead, he expresses his astonishment that the Zohar’s author could be so careless as to commit anachronisms of names (Rav Nahman, Rabbah, and Rav Yosef all lived centuries after R. Shimon bar Yoḥai). This inexcusable error in Midrash ha-Ne'lam forces him to conclude that the Zohar cannot be as ancient as its alleged author.

An identical critique was voiced a century earlier by another Italian-Jewish humanist, Elijah Del-Medigo (1458-1493). Del-Medigo writes in his Behinat ha-Da’at (Crete, 1491):

(It is obvious that R. Shimon did not write the Zohar because) the people mentioned in this book lived many years after R. Shimon ben Yohai, as is clear to anyone who knows their names from the Talmud.

Del-Medigo does not specify Midrash ha-Ne'lam as the target of his critique only because it was still uncommon in the fifteenth century to differentiate between Midrash ha-Ne'lam and other sections of the Zohar. Christian humanists like Julius Scaliger, who also believed the Zohar postdates the Talmud, provide inspiration to Del-Medigo and de Rossi. In humanist style, they foreground the amoraic anachronism of Midrash ha-Ne'lam as the philological crux around which they conclude the Zohar is a rabbinic forgery.

Two centuries later, in the aftermath of the Sabbatian crisis, Jacob Emden (1697-1776) excludes Midrash ha-Ne'lam from the authentic core of the Zohar, primarily because it indiscriminately references amoraim and tannaim. By redefining the authentic corpus of the Zohar he sought to repress the cultural preeminence of the Zohar among sabbateans. As a response to these criticisms of the Zohar voiced by Emden (as well as the critiques of several other rabbis), David Luria (1798-1855) circulated a point-by-point defense of the Late Antique, rabbinic origins of the Zohar, entitled The Antiquity of the Zohar. Luria argues that most of the

44 Azaria de Rossi, Meor Eynayim (Mantua, 1573), 86b.
45 Behinat ha-Da’at, ed. Ross, p. 91.
47 See Boaz Huss, The Zohar: Reception and Impact, trans. Yudith Nave (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016), p. 251. In the mid-seventeenth century, Leon Modena reiterated this criticism in his Ari Nohem (ed. Libowitz, 1929, p. 67), as part of his effort to weaken the cultural hegemony of Zohar in early-modern Italy. See Yaacob Dweck, The Scandal of Kabbalah: Leon Modena, Jewish Mysticism, Early Modern Venice (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 87-94. Modena’s colleague, Joseph Solomon Delmedigo, offers a comparable critique in his letter, Miktav Ahuz: “Ignorant of how to conceal their machinations, they say that the Zohar was written by Rabbi Shimeon ben Yohai. But traditions are mentioned there in the name of amoraim who came several centuries after him. Who is foolish enough to come this way, without his eyes growing dim!...And there is no wisdom, insight, or understanding in upholding these falsities;” published in Ari Nohem (ed. Libowitz, 1929), p. 142.
48 See Huss, The Zohar, p. 262.
Zohar was in fact written in the tannaic period by the students of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai (beit midrasha d’rashbi). However, he adds,

I also found passages in the midrash of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai that were arranged by the students of his students, who lived during the amoraic period. They would recite traditions in the name of R. Shimon and add to his words...as is common in all the tannaitic works that are in our hands. And (this is) especially (true regarding) Midrash ha-Ne'lam, where the majority of those who speak are amoraim. Surely most of it was arranged (nisdar) during the time of the amoraim.\(^49\)

The amoraic characters that populate Midrash ha-Ne'lam are not anachronisms, according to Luria. Their presence, rather, testifies to the belated production of all tannaitic treatises. Witnessing amoraic agency—noticing evidence of amoraic rearrangement of and addition to tannaitic traditions—in tannaitic texts is the norm, not the exception.\(^50\)

A similar apologia for Midrash ha-Ne'lam’s amoraic anachronism is offered by David Neumark (1866-1924) in his idiosyncratic treatise on the history of Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah.\(^51\) “My heart tells me,” he asserts, “that the editors of the earliest sections of Zohar intended to only refer to the confraternity during the generation of Rashbi. The truth is, most of the late names (i.e., amoraim) are found in Midrash ha-Ne'lam and in the other late sections of Zohar.”\(^52\) However, he believes that these late names attest to a range of belated additions that do not change the literary authenticity of the Zohar. Generational accretion is also common to the Talmud; each generation of later Amoraim added new language to the Talmud’s discourse. “And this was the intention of the later, contributing editors (of the Zohar): the tradition of Kabbalah was not sealed in the generation of the bevraya, rather it continued and widened through each generation of the sages of the Talmud.”\(^53\) The Zohar’s authors (Neumark is an early proponent of

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\(^49\) David Luria, Kadmut Sefer ha-Zohar (Königsberg, 1855), 26b.

\(^50\) Several centuries earlier, Abraham Zacuto (1452-1515) outlined a similar compositional theory in his Sefer Yuḥasin (Constantinople, 1566), 41B-42A: “Sefer ha-Zohar, which illumines the whole world and is called Midrash Yehi Ohr...was called by his name (R. Shimon Bar Yoḥai) even though he did not make it, since his students, and his son, and his students’ students made it from what they received from him, just as they say that the Mishnah, Sifra, Sifrei, and Tosefta are all according to R. Aqiva, even though these books were made many hundreds of years later.”


\(^53\) Neumark, The History of Jewish Philosophy, p. 209.
the multiple-author hypothesis wished to suggest that there are two Jerusalem Talmuds: one exoteric, which was revealed many years ago, and one esoteric Talmud—the Zohar—which was only revealed in the Middle Ages. The Zohar too would be composed slowly over several generations, just as the amoraim added material to their tannaitic tridents. The desire of the Zohar’s authors to present the Zohar as a new Talmud, Neumark concludes, motivated their choice of Aramaic as their language of craft.

My own research on Midrash ha-Ne’lam revealed that the amoraic condition of Midrash ha-Ne’lam runs deeper than these amoraic attributions. Not only are many of its rabbinic characters amoraim but even its midrashic discourse is frequently amoraic. Historically speaking, this does not mean that Midrash ha-Ne’lam is amoraic, any more than the presence of tannaitic rhetoric in Guf ha-Zohar means it is tannaitic. Evidence of amoraic rhetoric, rather, urges us to ask a literary question: why are the author(s) of Midrash ha-Ne’lam so invested in amoraic discourse?

To address this question and to better understand Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s medieval revival of amoraic rhetoric, I will survey each of Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s two most prevalent forms of amoraic discourse: disputational [masah u’matan] and connective [d’amar] rhetoric. Masah u’matan names the characteristic give-and-take of rabbinic debate, a literary form that doesn’t quite generate narrative progression, but propels dialogue forward through dialectic, negotiative, and argumentative rhetoric. As it is more generally studied as a feature of the legal discourse of the talmuds, the exact role of masah u’matan in midrashic literature is a topic that has only recently begun to be studied. The few studies on the issue that do exist highlight a range of discursive differences between the argumentative styles of tannaitic and amoraic midrash: each performs masah u’matan in a rhetorically distinct manner. When early, tannaitic midrashim represent rabbinic disputes, they tend to be short and non-dialogic. Two dissenting opinions are placed beside each other without any argument or negotiation, much like how the Mishnah records legal dissensus (x says a, y says b, z says c). The brunt of masah u’matan in tannaitic midrash is therefore orchestrated by an anonymous editorial voice, who generates and deflates possible scriptural interpretations with terms like יכול (“you might claim”), אתה אומר (“you would say”), and והלא (“is it not the case”). While this rhetoric of debate does create an atmosphere of intellectual discussion, these dialectical terms are anonymous and tentative, phrased as an “if” or an “I might have thought.” They do not fashion a scene of exegetical conversation or a sense of scholastic sociality. It is only in later amoraic midrashim that we find frequent and robust disputation, often carried out in multiple steps of back-and-forth.

54 See Neumark, The History of Jewish Philosophy, p. 204.
argumentation. This feature characterizes Talmud, that other genre of the amoraim, but is also widely present in *Genesis Rabbah*, the authentically amoraic midrash to Genesis.  

Like *Genesis Rabbah*, *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* contains very few legal discussions. Rather, its rhetoric of disputation structures *aggadic* deliberations on topics of cosmology, eschatology, and the nature of the soul. Yet unlike *Genesis Rabbah*, its *masa u’matan* frequently uses dialectical rhetoric that is specific to the Babylonian Talmud. Furthermore, *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*’s homilies often employ the editorial rhetoric of the Babylonian stammaim. How then, may we interpret *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*’s discursive dependency on the Babylonian Talmud?  

Gershom Scholem was the first to point out a connection between *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* and Babylonia. In his 1945 article, “A New Chapter from *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* in the Zohar,” Scholem published an important fragment from MS Cambridge 1023 that is stylistically akin to other sections of *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* but was never printed as part of the Zohar. Toward the end of the fragment, a narrative about the mishaps of rabbinic, geo-cultural migration is introduced as follows: “when Rav Safra traveled to there (*kad salik l’hatam*), they did not know who he was.” Scholem rightly notes that the Aramaic phrase, *kad salik l’hatam*, can only mean, “when Rav Safra traveled from Babylonia to Palestine.” The odd phrase signals to the reader that Babylonia and not Palestine is the context for its world of midrash, or, at least, that its imagined rabbinic culture exists at the intersection of Babylonia and Palestine.

To assess the literary relationship the author(s) of *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* forge with the Babylonian Talmud, it is important to address a complicated but pertinent question. Does *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* transplant the dialectical rhetoric of the Babylonian Talmud’s legal discussions into the realm of Aggadah, or is *masa u’matan* (amoraic or stammaic) already prevalent in the *aggadic* portions of the Babylonian Talmud? In other words, is *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* imitating a talmudic form of discourse (dialectical Aggadah) or transforming its original scope by applying it to Aggadah?

Joseph Heinemann’s thesis on the topic can help clarify the nature of this literary

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58 Representative examples include:

א"ל, ולא יא, ואל א"ל, לא"ל Меמה משמא, אל ממא; יא ר"ז צ"א, ופייר ק"א, ר"פ מע"א, דנה"ו דנה"ו, עני"א עני"א, על ד"ו, ד"ו.

א"ל וידא, ולא יא, לא"ל יא, בא"ל מ"א, בא"ל מ"א, בא"ל מ"א, בא"ל מ"א.

59 Representative examples include:

א"ל ממקה וממקה, ממקה; ממקה; ממקה, ממקה, ממקה, ממקה, ממקה, ממקה, ממקה.

א"ל ממקה וממקה, ממקה; ממקה; ממקה, ממקה, ממקה, ממקה, ממקה.


relationship. He claims that the Babylonian Talmud engages with Halakhah and Aggadah with equal epistemic seriousness and therefore employs similar rhetorical techniques to compose legal and extralegal sections:

Babylonian amoraim and the editors of the Talmud Bavli ask questions in matters of Aggadah, bring proof from Aggadah, deduce from Aggadah, make distinctions in Aggadah, and rely (somhin) on Aggadah—in complete opposition to the rules and theories that the Geonim established. For the Geonim declared that the words of Aggadah and Midrash are merely approximations ("umdinah ninhu"), that “each person interprets as it arises in his heart,” and that “we may learn from whatever is reasonable in these interpretations, but the rest we do not rely upon.”

In contradistinction to the early-medieval disdain of Aggadah engendered by the geonim, the Babylonian Talmud treats agadic discussions as they treat legal discussions—with analytical rigor, creativity, and debate. Heinemann notes that these forms of agadic masa u’matan are exclusive to the Babylonian Talmud; in the Jerusalem Talmud, it is rare to find a debate on matters of Aggadah. Only Babylonian sages approached agadic traditions as empirical truths and were therefore compelled to reconcile contradictory aggadot. Palestinian sages, on the other hand, approached Aggadah as a purely creative endeavor ("yitzira hophshit") in which making distinctions or deductions would be misplaced.

Heinemann’s claims lead to two conclusions. First, the Jerusalem Talmud could not have served as a helpful literary model for Midrash ha-Ne’lam, given its paucity of agadic dialectics. And second, Midrash ha-Ne’lam’s use of amoraic and stammaic rhetoric from the Babylonian Talmud extends the original character, function, and scope of that talmudic rhetoric toward the midrashic genre. Yet, Midrash ha-Ne’lam is not merely a midrash on agadic topics. It is a midrash dedicated to explicating esoteric doctrines of cosmogony, angelology, psychology, and linguistic magic. To assess the triangulated relationship between Midrash ha-Ne’lam, the

62 Joseph Heinemann, Aggadah and its Development (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), pp. 168 [Hebrew]. A similar argument is adduced by Louis Jacobs in his Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), p. 43: “Although the sugya is agadic, it consistently utilises halakhic argumentation. . . . I would maintain that a careful examination of other aggadic passages in the Babylonian Talmud exhibit similar forms, so that the style of presentation of Aggadah, as distinct from its content, differs little from that which is to be seen in the purely halakhic sugyot.”

Babylonian Talmud, and medieval Jewish esoterica, therefore, we must first examine the function of masa u’matan in medieval Jewish esotericism.

Sefer ha-Bahir is the earliest Jewish source to integrate debate and dialectics into its presentation of esoterica. According to Ronit Meroz, Sefer ha-Bahir includes a tenth-century Babylonian layer that situates its secrets within an atmosphere of confrontation between teacher and disciple: “At times this dialogue becomes a form of mild intellectual dueling, in which the disciples turn and challenge their teacher’s answers, by either citing a biblical verse that contradicts his words or by noting contradictions between his present words and earlier ones.”64 These duels act as initiations, opportunities for a student to prove worthy of receiving his teacher’s secrets. While the debates tend to be short and rarely exceed a single step of masa u’matan,65 they establish a generic precedent that a later author could imitate and amplify.66

By the late thirteenth century, it is not uncommon to find the term “masa u’matan” in kabbalistic discourse, though it has lost its original meaning. The term now denotes an internal cognitive process rather than a dialogical exchange.67 In an epistle to R. Yehudah Salmon of Barcelona, Abraham Abulafia references kabbalists who would “give-and-take only with themselves,” ("משתתף оформ הוא לשabilitéם").68 The nature of this spiritual practice is clarified a few lines later: “they begin to illumine with the light of life and from there they ascend from light to light through the give and take of their minds”.69 Moshe Idel describes these Abulafian forms of masa u’matan as autoscopic experiences in which one speaks to oneself as though they were an other.70 Concurrent with the composition of Midrash ha-Nelam, Abulafia’s transformation of masa u’matan into a solitary, spiritual practice moves in the opposite direction of the interpersonal debates of esoterica depicted in Midrash ha-Ne’lam.

To my knowledge, the one thirteenth-century application of the term masa u’matan to refer to actual esoteric debate occurs in an early treatise by Joseph Gikatilla, entitled Sefer Ha-

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66 To be sure, there is no evidence that Midrash ha-Ne’lam was familiar with Sefer ha-Bahir.
67 See, for instance, Bahya ben Asher’s comments on Exodus 38:
69 Ibid.
To what does a teacher-student relationship compare? To a candle. Just as the candle illuminates a man in the realm of the senses, so does the teacher illumine a man in the realm of the intellect. And just as a candle can light many candles without diminishing its flame, and actually increases when it lights another, so does the wise one learn a lot from his students, and he does not lack anything. Instead, his wisdom increases because he is involved in masah u-matan with them, with questions they ask him, and he must answer them, and he innovates through their questions a large amount of wisdom.

To what does an individual who studies wisdom resemble? To a single lit branch. Meaning, just as a fire does not ignite a sole branch except through hard work, and movement, and turning it from side-to-side, so is wisdom not held by an individual who engages with it by himself, except through hardship, and great movement, because wisdom is not understood except through masah u-matan between many friends, and through many types of question and answer, and specifications, and rebuttals and solutions that the students create with each other, which the individual is unable to do.

Contrary to those who may prefer the purity of personal cogitation when deciphering Jewish secrets, Gikatilla claims that it takes friendship and dialogue to understand esoteric wisdom (references to “wisdom” in this passage denote esoterica). Just as the multiplication of wicks increases the strength of a flame, scholastic companionship increases one’s comprehension of esoterica. The practices of rabbinic scholarship do not only help clarify the meaning of secrets, Gikatilla claims that it takes friendship and dialogue to understand esoteric wisdom.

Yehuda Liebes cites this excerpt as exemplary of the eros of communal learning performed by the hevraya in Guf ha-Zohar. But in light of our investigation into the social scholasticism of Midrash ha-Ne'lam, I would suggest that this passage points to the
representations of community in Midrash ha-Ne'lam, where it is more common to find masah u-matan, qushiot, pirukim, and she’elot. Furthermore, this passage appears in Sefer ha-Meshalim, a work that, as Hartley Lachter has highlighted, is an early Gikatilla treatise. Hence this text was likely composed closer in time to the composition of Midrash ha-Ne'lam than the composition of later sections of Zohar. Therefore, we may surmise that Midrash ha-Ne'lam adopts the rhetoric of the Babylonian Talmud to dramatize a communal engagement in esoteric masa u-matan, a communal discourse that looks a lot like Gikatilla’s imagined collectivity of teachers and students. After all, Gikatilla’s words—“wisdom not held by an individual who engages with it by himself, except through hardship, and great movement, because wisdom is not understood except through masa u-matan among many friends”—beautifully capture the ethos and literary commitments of Midrash ha-Ne'lam. Midrash ha-Ne'lam’s innovation, then, is more in using the rhetoric of masa u-matan to represent a dialectical and communal engagement with secrets than in applying such rhetoric to aggadic contexts. While the former is common in aggadic midrashim, the latter discursive forms are specific to the Babylonian Talmud. Additionally, Midrash ha-Ne'lam makes frequent use of specific talmudic formulae of connection, such as “דאמר כמאן ואתיא” and “במתניתא אוקימנא אוןן דהכי ט.”

While both contain homilies and narratives, the homilies in Midrash ha-Ne'lam are often structured around arguments and affinities, while homilies in other parts of Zohar tend not to foreground the ways its homiletical traditions relate to each other. To get a more precise sense of this stylistic disparity, it is helpful to quantify the difference. In my count, there are twenty-five scenes of masah u-matan, dialogical disagreements, in Midrash ha-Ne'lam to Genesis, compared to seven in Guf ha-Zohar (to the equivalent chapters of Genesis, 1-28). Given that the latter has close to double the amount of words, Midrash ha-Ne'lam carries an almost seven times higher density of argumentation than Guf ha-Zohar. The difference is not only a factor of the number of

76 On the rabbinic history of conceptual associations, see Leib Moscovitz, Talmudic Reasoning: From Casuistics to Conceptualization (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), pp. 274-292.
arguments in each text. Few arguments in *Guf ha-Zohar* rarely go past a single question and response, while over half the arguments in *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* contain multiple steps of *masah u’matan*. The statistics for “*d’amar*” are even starker. *Guf ha-Zohar* only uses formulae of “*d’amar rabbi x*” four times throughout its commentary on Genesis 1-28, while *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* uses such phrases thirty-six times, in a text sample half the size.

Given that the majority of *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*’s amoraic rhetoric appears in its non-narrative sections, it produces a sense of the social outside of narrative, a sense of community that is not bound to the conventions of plot. The sociality that emerges from these non-narrative contexts is sporadic, confrontational, collaborative, and in flux. Rabbis are cast more as nodes of dissensus and correlation—*masa u’matan* stresses the differences between tradents, while connective rhetoric stresses their affinities—than as members of a spiritual community. Unlike *Guf ha-Zohar*, where the emotional and mystical intensity of the *hevraya* can only be captured through narratological tools, *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* experiments with more scholastic forms of community. To represent that scholastic sociality, its medieval authors turned to the rhetorical devices of the amoraim and the stammaim, familiar to all students of the Babylonian Talmud, rather than to the emergent medieval models of Jewish confraternities.

The style through which *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* imagines rabbinic community—a scholastic sociality engaged in esoteric discourse—combines formal elements from talmudic scholasticism with ideological elements from medieval esoterism. Because only the latter elements were adopted by later strata of Zohar, its literary experiment was short-lived. Not only do later parts of the Zohar invent a radically different style of rabbinic community, but actual Jewish spiritual confraternities that arose in the early-modern and modern period were specifically modeled after the intimate sociality of *Guf ha-Zohar*. As Jonathan Garb writes about these subsequent spiritual communities, “in many cases the charismatic individual was the focal point of the group. This was clearly the case for the zoharic fellowship, and it was this fraternity, whether real or imagined, which the Safed kabbalists fervently emulated.”

This chapter has shown that a different style of sociality is introduced in *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*, a fellowship that is not centered around a charismatic sage but, rather, is bonded together through debate over the secrets of scripture. To fashion that sense of scholastic sociality, *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* adopts the rhetoric of the Babylonian Talmud, which discursively animates rabbinic debate and collaboration. *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*’s literary dependence on the Babylonian Talmud can therefore be theorized of as an instance of “formal intertextuality,” wherein “a work takes up and re-uses a device or structure which is a recognisable feature of another work, or of a

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particular type of literature or genre." But in this instance, those forms are not merely literary devices. Talmudic rhetoric enables *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* to imagine and represent a social world where rabbinic sages discover, share, and argue over the esoteric stratum of scripture.

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