

## Jacques Derrida and the Kabbalah

In one of his last meetings with Jacques Derrida, the French-Jewish philosopher, Emanuel Levinas (1906-1995), is said to have asked Derrida to confess that he was in fact a modern day representative of the Lurianic Kabbalah. I learned of this from the death-of-God theologian, Thomas J.J. Altizer, who related that he had heard it from the literary critic, Hillis Miller, when Miller introduced Altizer to Derrida himself. Whether apocryphal or true, the story seemed to confirm what I had suspected for quite some time, that an encounter with Derrida's thought is a potentially important gateway to a contemporary perspective on the Kabbalah.

### Derrida, Judaism and the Kabbalah

The question of the influence of Judaism, and specifically, the Kabbalah on Derrida's thought has surfaced now and again in recent literature on Jewish mysticism. Derrida himself frequently spoke of his life as a child and young man in Algeria as one in which he was alienated from three cultures; the French, the Arab and the Jewish. Born of Jewish parents, Derrida relates that his family was observant of Judaism only "banally" and that their observance was "external" and "not grounded by a true Jewish culture."<sup>1</sup> In an essay entitled "Monolingualism of the Other" Derrida tells us that the Jewish environment in which he was raised was so fanatically "Frenchifying" that "the inspiration of Jewish culture seemed to succumb to an *asphyxia*: a state of apparent death, a ceasing of respiration, a fainting fit, a cessation of the pulse,"<sup>2</sup> Derrida acknowledged that even as an adult he knew very little Hebrew and had a very limited knowledge of Jewish history, texts, and culture, a fact that prompted him, he says, to shift to the metaphorical,

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<sup>1</sup>J. Derrida, "There is No 'One' Narcissism (Autobiographies). An interview broadcast in the program prepared by Didier Cahen over France-Culture, "Le bon plaisir de Jacques Derrida," on March 22, 1986 and published with the title "Entretien avec Jacques Derrida" in "Digraphe" 42 (December 1987); <http://www.hydra.umn.edu/Derrida/narc.html> (downloaded February 19, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> J. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. Trans. Patrick Mensah. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 53.

rhetorical, allegorical dimension of Judaism.”<sup>3</sup> Derrida’s late writings on “circumcision”<sup>4</sup> and the “tallith”<sup>5</sup> fall under this heading, and he suggests that in them he bears “in a negative fashion...the heritage of that amnesia (for Judaism) which (he) never had the courage, the strength, the means to resist.”<sup>6</sup>

In her book, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*, Derrida’s friend and fellow Algerian Jew, Helene Cixous, describes him as a “marrano”, a secret Jew, “one of those Jews without even knowing it; and without knowledge...guardian of the book he doesn’t know how to read.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Derrida in “Circumfession” writes “I am a kind of Marrano of French Catholic culture...I am one of those Marranos who no longer say they are Jews even in the secret of their own hearts”<sup>8</sup> Yet, by pointing to Derrida’s own extended meditation on the *tallith* he inherited as a youth, Cixous shows how Derrida’s attachment to his prayer shawl is a metaphor for his attempt to *preserve* the Jewish tradition within himself. In support of her view she cites Derrida’s own proclamation: “Up to the end, never, whatever may happen in no case, whatever the verdict at the end of so formidable journey, never can one get rid of a *tallith*. One must never, ever, at any moment, throw it away or reject it.”<sup>9</sup> Though Derrida acknowledged that he had not worn his *tallith* “for almost half a century,” he speaks of the significance of inheriting it a “second time” after his father’s

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Gideon Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> J. Derrida, *Circumfession*, in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, Jacques Derrida, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> J. Derrida, “A Silkworm of One’s Own” (1996). In his *Acts of Religion*, Edited with an Introduction by Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 311-355, p. 343.

<sup>6</sup> J. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, op. cit. p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> H. Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*. Trans. Beverley Bie Brahic. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> *Circumfession*, p. 170 /*Circonfession* p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> J. Derrida, “A Silkworm of One’s Own”, op. cit., p. 343. Note that Derrida’s meditation on the *tallith* includes extensive quotations from Shlomo Ganzfried’s (Hungary 1804-1884) brief compendium of Jewish law, the *Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh*.

death, writing, “I simply place my fingers or lips on it, almost every evening...I touch it without knowing what I am doing or asking in so doing, especially not knowing into whose hands I am entrusting myself, to whom I’m rendering thanks.”<sup>10</sup>

There can thus be little doubt that Derrida came to acknowledge a profound impact of Judaism upon both his life and his work. However, with regard to the specific impact of Jewish mysticism on his thought, in 1986 Derrida explicitly rejected the charge leveled by Susan Handelman’s (and Jurgen Habermas’) charge that he is a “lost son of Judaism” who has much in common with the Jewish mystical tradition:<sup>11</sup>

[...] at any rate, unfortunately or fortunately, as you like it, I am not mystical and there is nothing mystical in my work. In fact my work is a deconstruction of values which found mysticism, i.e. of presence, view, of the absence of a marque, of the unspeakable. If I say I am no mystic, particularly not a Jewish one as Habermas claims at one point, then I say that not to protect myself, but simply to state a fact. Not just that personally I am not mystical, but that I doubt whether anything I write has the least trace of mysticism.<sup>12</sup>

Although Derrida wrote on explicitly Jewish themes, and later admitted to Gideon Ofrat that he regularly expressed “the concepts of Judaism in an oblique way,”<sup>13</sup> he never formally acknowledged a specific Kabbalistic influence on his thought. Nonetheless, as we will see, Derrida made a number of approving references to Jewish mystical symbols,<sup>14</sup> which suggest, that if he was not directly influenced by the Kabbalah, he was at least in accord with many of its key ideas.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 327-8.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982; cf. Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. Frederick Lawrence. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Translation downloaded from <http://www.lake.de/sonst/homepages/s2442/reb.html>. Translated by PK, 1995- the German transcript of this interview is found in Florian Rötzer's book, *Französische Philosophen im Gespräch*, Munich 1986, pp. 67-87, here: 74 (Klaus Boer Verlag, ISBN 3-924963-21-5)

<sup>13</sup> Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, op. cit. p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida writes “The Kabbalah is not only summoned up here under the rubric of arithmosophy or the science of literal permutations...it also cooperates with an Orphic

### Wolfson on Derrida and the Kabbalah

Recently, the question of the impact of the Kabbalah on Derrida and deconstruction has been addressed by two of the most influential contemporary scholars of Jewish mysticism, Elliot Wolfson<sup>15</sup> and Moshe Idel.<sup>16</sup> Whereas Idel argues for a direct influence of Kabbalah on Derrida's thought, Wolfson holds that the relationship between Derrida and Kabbalah should be understood as one of "convergence" rather than influence. As Wolfson's analysis is more systematic I will consider it first.

According to Wolfson, the convergence between Derrida and the Kabbalah is apparent in several places in Derrida's thought, including his analysis of the "gift" and "secrecy", as well as in his "belief that the materiality of being is textual."<sup>17</sup> Wolfson sees "convergence" rather than influence even in those places where Derrida makes specific use of Jewish symbols and ideas, for example in Derrida's use of the rite of circumcision as a metaphor linking "language, secrecy, and the gift," in a manner, which according to Wolfson, is consonant with the Kabbalah.<sup>18</sup>

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explanation of the earth." J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, Trans. By Barbara Johnson (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1981),, p. 342. Derrida further wrote of the three major elements of the Kabbalah as "negativity in God," "exile as writing," and the "life of the letter". J. Derrida, Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book, in *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 74. Originally published as "Edmond Jabes et la question du livre." *Critique*, no. 201. January, 1964.

<sup>15</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, Assaulting the Border: Kabbalistic Traces in the Margins of Derrida. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Sep 2002: 70, 3, pp. 475-514.

<sup>16</sup> Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, Assaulting the Border: Kabbalistic Traces in the Margins of Derrida, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, September 2003, Vol. 70, No. 3, pp. 474-514.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfson points out that Derrida's preoccupation with "circumcision" is based on an analogy with writing, inasmuch as in circumcision one's body is in effect engraved with one's proper name, one's individuality, one's *difference* as a Jew, and with the covenant between the Jewish people and God.

However, according to Wolfson, Derrida's references to Jewish mysticism are "occasional asides". Wolfson points out that Derrida has neither offered up a "sustained analysis of Jewish mysticism" nor suggested that an understanding of the Kabbalah is necessary for comprehending his own philosophy. Further, according to Wolfson, Derrida "does not position himself primarily as a thinker trying to determine his place within Judaism."<sup>19</sup> On Wolfson's view (a view that he shares with Cixous) "Derrida's relationship to Judaism is one particular instantiation of a larger sense of belonging-by-not-belonging that has informed his way of being in the world."<sup>20</sup> Derrida refers to himself as the "last of the Jews"<sup>21</sup> since, according to Wolfson, "he does not envision the possibility of meaningfully perpetuating the tradition."<sup>22</sup>

In his book, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*,<sup>23</sup> John Caputo suggests that deconstruction perpetuates and builds upon the *prophetic* tradition in Judaism, a tradition, however, which Caputo distinguishes quite radically from the negative theology of Jewish mysticism. Caputo holds that Derrida's work is in the tradition of the Jewish prophets and the "wandering" Jew who lives for a messianic, redemptive promise, the sole meaning of which is that it is always "yet to come".<sup>24</sup> According to Wolfson, for Derrida the messianic is not predicated upon revelation, is not a "historical" messianism, and paradoxically rests on the idea that the messiah *cannot* come. While such a view appears to contravene the traditional Jewish view of the messiah, Wolfson argues that "Derrida has grasped the paradoxical implication of the conventional Jewish messianic belief: The possibility of the messiah's coming is predicated on the impossibility of the

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<sup>19</sup> Wolfson, *Assaulting the Border*, op. cit. p. 478.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, op. cit., p. 479, n.9.

<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 145.

<sup>22</sup> Wolfson, *Assaulting the Border*, op. cit., p. 480.

<sup>23</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfson *Assaulting the Border*, op. cit. 492.

messiah's arrival."<sup>25</sup> Wolfson points to similar ideas not only in Franz Kafka, but also in Nahman of Bratslav. For example, he informs us that Rabbi Nahman told a tale of a "footless beggar" who does not come to the wedding, and which in Bratslav tradition is symbolic of the Messiah.<sup>26</sup>

According to Wolfson, a key to grasping the relationship between deconstruction and Judaism lies in the Jewish mystical view that "reality is a text" and that the world's most basic elements are the twenty-two letters of the holy tongue, which are in turn comprised of the four letters (YHVH) of the divine name.<sup>27</sup> While Idel has suggested that Derrida may well have been influenced by the Kabbalah in his formulation that "there is nothing outside the text" (see below) Wolfson holds that there is no "definitive proof" and only scanty secondary evidence for this assertion.<sup>28</sup> For example, Wolfson points out that Shira Wolosky argues for such influence on the basis of Derrida's 1967<sup>29</sup> comments that "Jabes<sup>30</sup> is conscious of the Cabalistic resonances of his book", which she infers applies equally to what she refers to Derrida's own version of "linguistic mysticism".<sup>31</sup> While Wolfson holds that it is uncertain that Derrida's comments on Jabes can be read as applying to Derrida's own work and opinions,<sup>32</sup> it is certainly a fair reading of Derrida's essay on *The Book of Questions* to hold with Ofrat that "many of the assumptions that Derrida attributes

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 481. Wolfson cites J Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*. Trans, by George Collins. (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 173-4.

<sup>26</sup> Wolfson, *Assaulting the Border*, op. cit. p. 481n.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 484.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 485.

<sup>29</sup> J. Derrida, *Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book*, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Edmond Jabès (1912-1991) was an Egyptian born Jewish writer and poet who, writing in French, became interested in pushing the boundaries of the "sayble", and who made numerous references to Kabbalistic ideas.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Wolfson *Assaulting the Border*, op. cit. p. 485.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 486.

to Jabes appear to be oblique declarations touching upon his (Derrida's) own identity as a Jew."<sup>33</sup>

Wolfson points out that Harold Bloom has argued that Kabbalistic hermeneutics were influences upon Derrida's notions of "difference" and the "trace", but Wolfson holds that here again there is more evidence for a "convergence" as opposed to influence between the Kabbalah and Derrida.

Wolfson cites Wolosky's and Susan Handelman's<sup>34</sup> view that Derrida's "visceral familiarity with Jewish ritual experience" may have informed Derrida's according of primacy to the written text over the spoken word, and ultimately to the formation of the textual view of reality that provided Derrida with an alternative to Hellenistic "ontotheology".<sup>35</sup> Wolfson further suggests that Judaism ultimately became a vehicle through which Derrida, in his study of the Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, expressed precisely this "textual" point of view.<sup>36</sup>

According to Wolfson, there is a strong affinity between Kabbalistic hermeneutics and Derrida's "grammatology," one that is expressed by the notion that interpretation never leads to an original truth, but always to a text in need of further interpretation. Wolfson quotes from the early Hasidic master, R. Zadoq ha-Kohen of Lublin: "Thus I have received that the world in its entirety is a book that God, blessed be He, made, and the Torah is the commentary that he composed on that book,"<sup>37</sup> which he compares with Derrida's assertions that "there is nothing outside the text,"<sup>38</sup> that "Being is grammar" and "that everything belongs to the book before being and in order to come into the world..."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, op. cit. p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> S. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Wolfson, *Assaulting the Border*, op. cit., pp. 489-90.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfson here cites J. Derrida "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas." Wolfson, *Assaulting the Border*, op. cit. p. 490.

<sup>37</sup> Wolfson *Assaulting the Border*, p. 497.

<sup>38</sup> J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1974). p. 158.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 1978, op. cit. pp. 76-77.

Wolfson believes that Derrida and the Kabbalah can be distinguished in terms of their respective attitudes toward *apophantics* or “negative theology.”<sup>40</sup> Whereas the Kabbalists and Derrida were each concerned with referring (and not-referring) to that which is before being, existence, and form, the Kabbalists held that the “unutterable divine name” ultimately points to a hyper-essential being that is the object of faith. For Derrida, on the other hand, it is a *condition of faith* that such references actually point to a true absence, an actual nothing. For Derrida “that there might be no addressee at the other end of my prayer is the condition of my prayer”, and he therefore goes so far as to suggest “that there should be a moment of atheism in the prayer.”<sup>41</sup> We should here note that this line of thought is hardly unknown to the Kabbalah. For example, Scholem has pointed out that according to the 13<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalist Azriel of Gerona, because *Ein-sof* “is the principle in which everything hidden and visible meet” it is “the common root of *both faith and unbelief*” (my italics).<sup>42</sup> The potential for “atheism” within the Kabbalah is not lost on Derrida, who writes:

Indeed, reduced to its textuality, to its numerous plurivocality, absolutely disseminated, the Kabbalah, for example, evinces a kind of atheism, which, read in a certain way—or just simply *read*—it has doubtless always carried within it.<sup>43</sup>

By introducing the notion of “atheism” into the very heart and meaning of prayer, Derrida, points to a “nondogmatic doublet of dogma...the possibility of religion without religion,”<sup>44</sup> a possibility that he says is shared by thinkers as varied as

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<sup>40</sup> Wolfson, *Assaulting the Border*, op. cit. p. 505.

<sup>41</sup> D. Shapiro, M. Govrin, and J Derrida, *Body of Prayer* (New York:Copper Union of the Advancement of Science and Art, 2001, p. 63. Quoted in Wolfson *Assaulting the Border*, op.cit. p. 506.

<sup>42</sup> G. Scholem. *Origins of the Kabbalah*. Trans. R.J. Zwi Werblowski. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). Originally published, 1962, pp. 441-2.

<sup>43</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, op. cit. p. 244.

<sup>44</sup> J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, Trans. By David Wells, (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 49). Cf. Wolfson *Assaulting the Border*, op. cit., p. 505.

Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Levinas, but which may well be coiled up in the heart of the Kabbalah as well.

### Idel's Views

Both Wolfson and Idel argue that deconstruction and the Kabbalah differ precisely on this point of the “hyper-essentiality” of the divine. Wolfson points out that in contrast to Derrida, the Kabbalists “do assume there is a reality beyond language.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Idel argues that whereas in the Kabbalah multiple, indeed infinite interpretations of scripture point to an infinite authorial source, in Derrida they are simply a manifestation of the indefinite play of readings independent of all authorial intent.<sup>46</sup> According to Idel, whereas modern hermeneuticists speak of the *indeterminacy* of the text, the Kabbalists preferred to view the Torah as having an indefinite, if not infinite, number of *determinate* interpretations.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, Idel holds that “Derrida [is] a thinker who has been influenced by Kabbalistic views of the nature of the text.”<sup>48</sup> As an example, Idel points out that Derrida’s and Mallarme’s interest in the *white page of the text*, and the idea that the white background for the black letters itself is a source of future, as yet unknown meaning “testifies to a certain contribution of Jewish Mysticism to a modern philosophy of the text.”<sup>49</sup> This is because these ideas, as expressed in the writings of the Hasidic Rabbi Isaac of Berditchev, and brought into contemporary intellectual discourse by Gershom Scholem, are, according to Idel, “hardly found outside Kabbalistic literature.” According to Idel, Derrida viewed the Kabbalah’s emphasis on the text and its interpretability as an indication of “a kind of atheism” within Jewish mysticism.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Idel goes so far as to say “if the Kabbalists or

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<sup>45</sup> Wolfson, *Assaulting the Border*, *ibid.* p. 507. In a similar vein, Wolfson points out that both Derrida and the Kabbalists utilize the figure of “the trace” but whereas for the Kabbalists “the trace is a demarcation of the negative presence of absence...for Derrida it is the sign of the wholly other that is neither a presence nor an absence.” *Ibid.*, p. 476.

<sup>46</sup> Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-9.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 83.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p. 83.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p. 76. See Derrida, Cf. J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, *op. cit.* p. 343.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p. 77.

the Hasidic masters may be thought to exhibit ‘a kind of atheism’, then it seems to me that deconstruction may indeed contain a certain residue of Kabbalistic thought in its cult of the book or textuality or, as Eco called this phenomenon, ‘atheistic mystics’.”<sup>51</sup>

More strikingly, Idel suggests that Derrida’s famous dictum “There is nothing outside the text”<sup>52</sup> may well bear the mark of Kabbalistic influence.<sup>53</sup> Idel points to the Italian Kabbalist R. Menahem Recanti, who in the early fourteenth century wrote “All the sciences altogether are hinted at in the Torah, because there is nothing that is outside of Her...Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, is nothing that is outside the Torah, and the Torah is nothing that is outside Him, and this is the reason why the sages of the Kabbalah said that the Holy One, blessed be He, is the Torah.”<sup>54</sup> Idel points out that this passage had never been translated and was unknown outside of Kabbalistic circles prior to its discussion by Gershom Scholem at the 1954 Eranos Conference in Ascona. At that time Scholem’s comments and the passage itself were printed in English and French translations in the journal, *Diogenes (Diogene)*. The French translation (1955-6), which was made by the distinguished Judaica scholar Georges Vajda, reads “there is nothing outside her (i.e. the Torah).” Idel writes “the fact that this statement about the identity between the Torah and God was available in French in 1957 may account for the emergence of one of the most postmodern statements in literary criticism: ‘There is nothing outside the text’.” Idel suggests that in the *Grammatologie*, which was first published in 1967, Derrida, who maintained a certain interest in the Kabbalah, “substituted the term and concept of Torah with that of text.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., referring to Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 156.

<sup>52</sup> In *Of Grammatology*, op. cit., p. 158, Derrida writes “*There is nothing outside of the text,*” or “there is no outside-text” (*il n’y a pas des hors-texte*).

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, op. cit. 1978, pp. 76-77.

<sup>54</sup> Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, op. cit. p. 122.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 123. Idel further points out that Recanti’s contemporary, the Provençal philosopher, Gersonides (R. Levi ben Gershom-also known as the Ralbag) wrote: “Behold, the book that God wrote is the existence in its entirety, that is caused from Him...Existence is compared to a book because just as a book points to the ideality from

However, Idel argues that in spite of a striking similarity between Recanti's and Derrida's phrases, the Kabbalistic equivalence between God, text and the world, gives voice to a metaphysical theory that Derrida completely disavows. Indeed, Derrida's claim that there is "nothing outside the text" suggests not an equivalence between the text and its author (i.e. God), but rather the obliteration of the author himself. Derrida adapts the Kabbalistic formula, but distances himself from its metaphysical implications. Idel holds that Derrida's attempt to distance himself from Kabbalistic (and all other) metaphysics is not completely successful, as "the book [has] remained the main metaphor for reality, and it survived even Derrida's attempt to get rid of God."<sup>56</sup> Further, Idel holds that in his "modest reading" Derrida "conceives of the text as so pregnant with infinite meanings that his system is, after all, another reading, slightly secularized, of the formula of the Kabbalist: 'the canonical text is God'." Only the "god" that Idel equates with Derrida's text is "not a transcendental entity emanating meaning into a lower text, but an immanent divinity that ensures the infinity of meanings within the human text."<sup>57</sup> Both the conservative Kabbalist Recanti and the radical postmodernist Derrida can agree on "the absolute centrality of the book." The former understands the book as a vehicle through which one can intuit the *infinite* God, whereas the latter understands it as a prism through which one encounters an *infinitude* of free-floating meanings. "From Recanti to Derrida the nature of the infinity changed, but not the absolute statement regarding the all-inclusiveness of the text."<sup>58</sup> Idel goes so far as to suggest a theological significance to Derrida's point of view, holding that Derrida's exploration of the infinite plenitude of meaning within the text, to be an exploration of an imminent divine.<sup>59</sup> God, so

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which it was, in the same manner the sensible world points to the law of the intelligible universe, which is the [idealty of] God, from which the sensible world is."

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 124.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Of course, Derrida is free to argue, and does argue, that equating textual significance with *God* involves a duplication of entities when one is all that is necessary. There are not two things that are equivalent here, text and God, but only one thing, text, which is infinitely interpretable. One is, of course, free to interpret Derrida's text in theological terms, but there is nothing in Derrida's ideas that entails such an interpretation. Further, the infinite plurality of meanings may be said to have *some* of the characteristics of God

conceived, is the source and totality of all significance whatsoever, a significance that is embodied in the infinite interpretability of any text.

In the end, Idel seeks to “demarginalize” the Kabbalah as a source for Derrida’s conception of the text, as part of a greater project, suggested by Derrida’s own work, to “allow a greater role to forms of knowledge, though formulated and transmitted in Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, that have been neglected or repressed by the historiography of European culture.” For Idel, postmodernism involves a return of certain intellectual concerns that actually preceded the modern era.

In the following sections I will re-examine some of Derrida’s explicit references to Judaism and the Kabbalah in an effort to articulate some of the more significant points of contact between deconstruction and Jewish mysticism.

### **The Last of the Jews**

In *Circumfession*, his 1991 meditation of the universal significance of circumcision as a symbol of “linguistic rupture” Derrida writes “the last of the Jews that I am is doing nothing here other than destroying the world on the pretext of making truth.”<sup>60</sup> Derrida later explained in an interview with Elisabeth Weber that his assertion that he is the last Jew can be simultaneously understood as “I am a bad Jew...but also ‘I am the end of Judaism,’ that is, the death of Judaism, but also its only chance of survival, I am the last who can say it, the other’s don’t even deserve to say it, they’ve forfeited the right, because to say ‘I am a Jew’ one should perhaps say how hard it is to say ‘I am a Jew’”.<sup>61</sup> In the

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as he is traditionally conceived, but, minus serious argument, it appears to be lacking many others: will, purpose, etc. Here, of course, one is free to argue that by being the source and embodiment of all significance whatsoever such a God most certainly embodies will, purpose, even love for his creatures, as each of these are significances subsumed by Him in purveying all significance whatsoever.

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession*, pp. 190-91. cf. p. 154. Ofrat translates the French “I am the end of Judaism” and “I am the last Jew; I merely demolish the world on the pretext of creating truth.” Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> Elisabeth Weber, *Questions au judaïsme* (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1996), p. 78. Quoted and translated in Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, op. cit. p. 9.

Weber interview, Derrida acknowledged that “in everything I may do or say, there is a ‘Of course, I’m a Jew!’ or ‘Of course, I’m not a Jew’...and a way of living simultaneously slightly *maladroit* and ironical, the condition of the Jew.”<sup>62</sup> For Derrida, a condition of division, alienation and exile from Judaism, is today the very nature of Judaism itself: “the more one says ‘My identity consists of not being identical with myself, of being alien, noncongruent with myself,’ etc., the more Jewish one is.” It is thus “possible to say...the less one is a Jew, the more one is a Jew.”<sup>63</sup> For this reason Derrida can hold that “those Jews who proclaim an actual circumcision, a Jewish name, Jewish descent, Jewish soil, Jewish sun, etc., are not by definition better placed than others to speak on behalf of Judaism...There is ‘Of course I am a Jew’ and ‘Of course, I am not a Jew’...both together, that is the condition of the Jew.”<sup>64</sup> Derrida, who confesses that his own sons were not circumcised<sup>65</sup>, nevertheless tells us “Circumcision, that’s all I’ve ever talked about”<sup>66</sup> and that all his discourse about writing, margins, the *pharmakon*, bodily inscription, etc. is a discourse related to this Jewish symbol. For Derrida, circumcision signals the primal lingual rupture<sup>67</sup>, humankind’s entry into writing and the alienation from presence which writing necessarily brings with it, and in this sense it is both universal and specifically Jewish. Yet such alienation from presence (writing denotes a “meaning” even long after its reference is gone) is, for Derrida, the very condition of truth.

Derrida’s views on the inherently alienated nature and experience of the contemporary Jew (as well as the inherently alienated nature of human experience in general) can be understood against the background of the Lurianic symbol of *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, the Breaking of the Vessels. This symbol suggests that all life and experience, indeed all “being” is in a state of psychological and metaphysical exile. According to Gershom Scholem, as a result of the Breaking of the Vessels

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<sup>62</sup> Weber, *Questions au judaisme*, p. 77, quoted in Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, p. 12.

<sup>63</sup> Weber, *Questions au judaisme*, pp. 76-7, quoted *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, *Circumfession*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>67</sup> Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

Nothing remains in its proper place. Everything is somewhere else. But a being that is not in its proper place is in exile. Thus since, that primordial act, all being has been in exile...<sup>68</sup>

In this light Derrida's "inverted" understanding of his Judaism and his role as a Jew who is also not a Jew (i.e. non-congruent with himself) takes on distinctly Kabbalistic overtones.

### Jabes' The Book of Questions

As early as 1964, several years before the publication of his seminal paper on *differance*, Derrida published an essay on "The Book of Questions" by the Jewish postmodernist writer and poet Edmund Jabes (1912-1991). There, Derrida not only noted Jabes' own Kabbalistic references, but made several such references himself. For example, Derrida writes:

The well-worn themes of the question within God, of negativity within God as the liberation of historicity and human speech, of man's writing as the desire and question of God (and the double genitive is ontological before being grammatical, or rather is the embedding of the ontological and the grammatical within the graphein), of history and discourse as the anger of God emerging himself, etc. etc.—these themes are not first proper to Bohme, to German romanticism, to Hegel,<sup>69</sup> to the final Scheler, etc., etc. Negativity in God, exile as writing, the life of the letter are already in the Cabala. Which means "Tradition" itself. And Jabes is conscious of the Cabalistic resonances of his book.<sup>70</sup>

Derrida own "Cabalistic resonances" are to be found in several of his comments on Jabes' work. Here Derrida writes, in an apparent allusion to the Kabbalistic symbol of *Tzimtzum*: "God separated himself from himself in order to let us speak, in order to astonish and interrogate us. He did so not by speaking but by keeping still, by letting silence interrupt his voice and signs, by letting the Tablets

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<sup>68</sup> G. Scholem, *On The Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, Trans. Ralph Manheim, (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 112.

<sup>69</sup> On the connection between these figures and the Kabbalah, see Drob, *Kabbalistic Metaphors* (Northvale, NJ: *Kabbalistic Metaphors: Jewish Mystical Themes in Ancient and Modern Thought* (both Jason Aronson, 2000), pp. 82-84, 185-240.

<sup>70</sup> Derrida, Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book, op. cit, p. 74.

be broken...This difference, this negativity in God is our freedom.”<sup>71</sup> These ideas resonate with the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, who held that the *Tzimtzim* (the divine contraction and concealment) along with the *Shevirat ha-Kelim* (the shattering of the world with a view to its being restored and revised by man), is the origin of human freedom.

In perfect step with the Kabbalistic and Hasidic notion that the *Tzimtzum* is manifest through the letters of divine writing and speech, Derrida avers: “Absence is the permission given to letters to spell themselves out and to signify, but it is also, in language’s twisting of itself, what letters say: they say freedom and a granted emptiness, that which is formed by being enclosed in letters.”<sup>72</sup> One also hears an echo of the Kabbalistic symbol of *Shevirat ha-Kelim* when Derrida writes: “Between the fragments of the broken Tables the poem grows and the right to speech takes root.”<sup>73</sup> Derrida informs us that “commentary, like poetic necessity, is the very form of exiled speech.”<sup>74</sup> For the Kabbalists, the broken Tablets symbolize a cosmic occurrence in which an ideal, pristine world is shattered and a world of exile, freedom and human creativity is inaugurated.

Like the Lurianists, Derrida holds that a withdrawal or concealment is the origin of revelation and truth. He writes in *Dissemination*: “The disappearance of the truth as presence, the withdrawal of the present origin of presence, is the condition of all (manifestation of) truth. Nontruth is truth. Nonpresence is presence. Differance, the disappearance of any originary presence, is *at once* the condition of possibility *and* the condition of impossibility of truth.”<sup>75</sup> Derrida’s thought not only reflects the Kabbalistic principle that concealment (*Tzimtzum*) is the condition for revelation, but also echoes the Lurianic idea that destruction (*Shevirah*) is the *sine qua non* of truth.

Indeed, it can be argued that the entire project of Derridean deconstruction is a reprise of the Lurianic notion of *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, the Breaking of the Vessels, understood in linguistic/conceptual rather than metaphysical terms. Commenting on Jabes declaration “Do not forget that you are the nucleus of a

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 72.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>75</sup> J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, op. cit. p. 168.

rupture” Derrida writes that “The breaking of the Tables articulates, first of all, a rupture within God as the origin of history.”<sup>76</sup> The Kabbalist’s held that the *Shevirah* (Breaking, rupture), is symbolized by the expulsion of Eden and the breaking of the Tablets, events which indeed mark historical beginnings. The *shevirah* further implies that all concepts, values, systems, and beliefs are inadequate containers for the phenomena they are meant to contain and circumscribe. As such, the Breaking of the Vessels provides a caution against being satisfied with any of the interpretations or constructions we place upon our experience, texts and world, a caution that goes to the very heart of the deconstructive project. In its recognition of the permeability of all concepts (e.g., good and evil, man and God, *etc.*), in its view that concepts imply and are in fact dependent upon their opposites, and through its insistence that there are an indefinite number of interpretations of any phenomenon or linguistic act, the Lurianic Kabbalah performs a “deconstruction” of traditional philosophical ideas, one that clearly anticipates contemporary deconstruction.

The idea that reality is a text and that hermeneutics is the most fundamental vehicle to knowledge (an idea that is quintessentially Jewish and, moreover, Kabbalistic), also makes an early appearance in Derrida’s essay on Jabes. In anticipation of his later pronouncement that there is “nothing outside the text”<sup>77</sup> Derrida writes: “In the beginning is hermeneutics,”<sup>78</sup> and tells us that in Jabes we find the views that “the world is in all its parts a cryptogram...that everything belongs to the book...that anything can be born only by *approaching* the book, can die only by failing *in sight* of the book.”<sup>79</sup> The Kabbalists held that God created the world by patterning it upon a linguistic original, the Torah, and the doctrine emerged in Kabbalistic (and later in Hasidic) sources that the Torah is the essence, foundation, and cause of the world, and that God Himself is identical with His Torah.. In this 1964 essay, Derrida’s own notion of the primacy of the text appears to be mediated by Jabes’ Kabbalistically inspired comments:

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<sup>76</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, op. cit. p. 67.

<sup>77</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

<sup>78</sup> Derrida, *Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book*, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

“The world exists because the book exists” and “If God is, it is because He is in the book.”<sup>80</sup>

While Derrida clearly identifies the Jew with “writing” he draws a distinction between hermeneutics as it is practiced by the rabbi and the poet, a distinction that is foundational for deconstruction and postmodern thought. This distinction, as Alan Bass (Derrida’s translator) suggests, is between one who seeks a return to an original or final truth (the rabbi) and one who “does not seek truth or origin, but affirms the play of interpretation” (the poet).<sup>81</sup> As will become clear in this and later chapters, the Kabbalah holds these two notions in interpretation in exquisite tension, suggesting that, in Derrida’s terms, a Kabbalist is a “rabbi-poet.” Indeed, the Kabbalists permitted themselves a hermeneutic latitude that enabled them to interpret not only each word and letter of the Torah, but also the white spaces dividing them, and to reinterpret and effectively rewrite the Torah text by rearranging the order of its words and letters.<sup>82</sup> The deconstructive notion of the “play of interpretation” is anticipated in the hermeneutics of such Kabbalists as Abulafia, Cordovero and Luria. Derrida, in spite of his lack of facility with the original Kabbalistic sources, could well have encountered this and other Kabbalistic ideas through a reading of the works of Gershom Scholem (see discussion of “Idel’s Views, below).

Also in the essay on Jabes’ *The Book of Questions* are remarks suggestive of the doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum* which played such an important role on the Kabbalist’s world-view. I do not mean to suggest here that Derrida derived his fascination with polarities and opposites, and his famous notion that all totalities are founded upon what they are meant to exclude,<sup>83</sup> from Kabbalistic sources (these ideas are present throughout the history of mysticism and in the philosophy of Hegel) only that the coincidence of opposites is quite visible in this early essay on Jabes’ highly Kabbalistic work. This is clear in such Hegelian comments as “freedom allies and exchanges itself with that which restrains it”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.* p. 76: as quoted by Derrida.

<sup>81</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, *op. cit.*, p. 311, note 3.

<sup>82</sup> These themes will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

<sup>83</sup> Bass, Intro. to J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, *op. cit.*, p. xvi..

<sup>84</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, *op. cit.* p. 66.

but even more pointedly in Derrida's comments on Jabes' views about language, e.g. "It is thus simultaneously true that things come into existence and lose existence by being named", and that "Being is Grammar." These comments, which collapse the signifier-signified distinction, and therefore suggest a coincidence of opposites between words and things, and other assumed polarities, resonate throughout Derrida's later work (where we read such things as "Nontruth is the truth. Nonpresence is presence"<sup>85</sup>) and are not, as Derrida suggests "unprecedented." They are, as the essay on Jabes makes clear, anticipated in the writings of the Kabbalists.

### Sollers and Scholem

In his 1971 essay, "Dissemination" Derrida considers Phillippe Sollers, 1968 novel, *Nombres* (Numbers). In the course of the discussion Derrida makes reference to "the ungraspable column of air in the Zohar", the number mysticism of the Kabbalah, and the tree of the ten *Sephiroth*. He notes that the Hebrew word "Safar means 'to count' and *Sephiroth* is sometimes translated as 'numerations'". Derrida states that "the tree of the *sephiroth*, an engraving of the whole, reaches down into the *En Sof*, 'the root of all roots'", and he tells us that this structure is entirely recognizable in Sollers' work. Derrida further makes reference to the "fires of the Torah, the black fire and the white fire", an image that he correctly attributes to 18<sup>th</sup> century Chasidic rebbe, Levi Isaac of Berditchev.<sup>86</sup> Derrida informs that "the white fire, a text written in letters that are still invisible, becomes readable in the black fire of the oral Torah, which comes along afterward to draw in the consonants and point the vowels..."<sup>87</sup> and that according to Rabbi Levi Isaac "the blanks, the white spaces in the Torah scroll also arise from the letters, but we cannot read them..."<sup>88</sup> However, "when the Messianic era comes,

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<sup>85</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, op. cit., p. 168.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 343, 345.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p. 345. Wolfson, following Idel, holds that in all likelihood Derrida's source for R. Levi Isaac's meditations on the "white letters" was Gershom Scholem's *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (pp. 81-82), which was first published in 1969 (Wolfson, *Assaulting the Border*, op. cit. p. 476).

God will unveil the white Torah in which the letters are now invisible to us, and this is what the term “new Torah” implies.”<sup>89</sup> For Derrida, the opening of the Torah to its “white spaces” is important philosophically, because as a result “it is always possible for a text to become new, since the white spaces open up its structure to an indefinitely disseminated transformation.”<sup>90</sup>

Derrida describes how Sollers provides an “Orphic explanation...an analogue of the pleroma, which is a sort of original space, or pneumatic layer (tehiru) in which the zimzum, the crisis within God, the ‘drama of God’ through which God goes out of himself and determines himself, takes place.”<sup>91</sup> He continues:

This contraction into a dot, this withdrawal and then this exit out of self located within the original ether, is of course linked to the mythology of ‘Louria,’ but it can also arise by way of ‘Hegel,’ ‘Boehme,’ etc.”<sup>92</sup>

In an article entitled “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano”<sup>93</sup> Derrida comments upon a letter of the great Kabbalistic scholar, Gershom Scholem to Walter Benjamin, date December 26, 1926, entitled “Confession on the Subject of Our language.” In his essay, Derrida writes:

There is a power of language, therefore, at once a dynamis, an enveloped virtuality, a potentiality that can be brought or not to actuality; it is hidden, buried, dormant. This potentiality is also a power (*Macht*), a particular efficacy that acts on its own, in a quasi-autonomous manner (*facon*) without the initiative and beyond the control of speaking subjects. Scholem will not cease to develop this theme in his works on the name of God, Jewish mysticism, and above all on the Kabbalah. This is indeed an explicit motif in certain trends of the Kabbalah. The magical

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<sup>89</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, op. cit., p. 345.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 344.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> J. Derrida, *The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano*. In J. Derrida, *Acts of Religion*. Ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 191-227.

power of the name produces effects said to be real and over which we are not in command. The name hidden in its potency possesses a power of manifestation and of occultation, of revelation and encrypting [crypte]. What does it hide? Precisely the abyss that is enclosed within it. To open a name is to find in it not something but rather something like an abyss, the abyss as the thing itself. Faced with this power, once we have awakened it, we must recognize our impotence. The name is transcendent and more powerful than we are...<sup>94</sup>

The impact of Jewish mystical modes of interpretation on Derrida's thought is further evident in his autobiographical essay, *Circumfession*, where Derrida makes reference to the medieval Kabbalistic acronym, which is used to refer to four levels of scriptural meaning, *peshat*, the literal meaning, *remez*, the allegorical meaning, *derash*, the homiletic meaning, and *sod*, the profound, mystical meaning.<sup>95</sup> He even suggests that this "quaternary model of a paradisiac discourse of Jewish 'rationality'" is "in [his] blood."<sup>96</sup>

### A Philosophical Accord

Within Derrida's comments on the Kabbalah one can discern more than a few of the more significant trends in Derrida's own thought. While I agree with Wolfson that one cannot unequivocally assert that Derrida's ideas on such topics as language, hermeneutics, God, exile, alienation, and the coincidence of opposites originated in Kabbalistic or neo-Kabbalistic sources, our review of his comments on Jabes, Sollers, Scholem, etc. reveals a remarkable accord between Derrida's own understanding of the Kabbalah and what were, or were to become, his own philosophical views. Specifically, on Derrida's own interpretation of the Kabbalah, as he understood it through his reading of Jabes, Sollers, Scholem and others, the Kabbalah (and particularly the Lurianic Kabbalah) suggested that

(1) reality is a text, and that God himself has his origin and being in the book;

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 226-7.

<sup>95</sup> Wolfson, *Assaulting the Border*, op. cit. p. 477.

<sup>96</sup> Derrida, *Circumfession*, op. cit., pp. 110-11.

- (2) being is “grammar” and the break-down of the distinction between words and things;
- (3) that interpretations rather than facts are primordial;
- (4) hidden within the apparently plain meaning of a linguistic event are innumerable other, as yet unknown, possibilities that can transform both the text and its meaning;
- (5) that there is an exquisite tension between hermeneutics as a vehicle for arriving at an original truth, and hermeneutics as a creative, “playful”, and indeterminate endeavour;
- (7) language has a power that pre-exists, goes beyond and conditions the speaking subject;
- (8) the “name” produces powerful effects over which the speaker has no command, but it refers to nothing, an “abyss”—there is no transcendental signified; there is no “presence” behind the “name”, only an abyss, a “creative absence”;
- (9) an “original space” provides the arena out of which all things, including God, language and being, are determined;
- (10) language is the vehicle of creation and revelation, while at the same time producing alienation and exile;
- (11) experience, in particular Jewish experience, is one of division, alienation, and exile;
- (12) that God’s eclipse, separation, contraction and concealment is necessary for human speech and creativity, and that this separation/concealment is accomplished through the letters of writing and speech;
- (14) that such concealment is the origin of revelation and truth;
- (15) that the broken tablets symbolize a logical or linguistic rupture that engenders alienation but also gives rise to freedom and creativity;
- (16) that a rupture in God or the Absolute is the origin of both *poesis* and history and that all concepts, values, systems, etc. are inadequate to contain or account for their supposed referents;
- (17) that polar oppositions do not exclude but rather contain and are in some sense dependent upon one another;
- (18) a concern with the hidden, the “secret” and the “gift”;
- (19) an openness to an indeterminate messianic future, characterized by an as yet unborn and unknown justice; and

(19) a convergence between atheism on the one hand and faith, prayer and mysticism on the other.

While one can certainly point to divergences between Kabbalah and deconstruction (e.g. the Kabbalah's general acceptance of an hyper-essential divine being that is the object of faith) it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that the propositions I have enumerated point to a very significant overlap between Kabbalistic and deconstructive hermeneutics and philosophy, and give warrant to Levinas' reported assertion that Derrida is a "modern day representative of the Lurianic Kabbalah."