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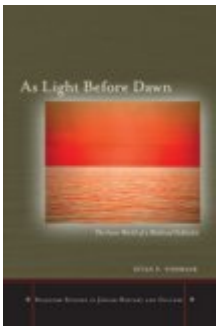

Eitan P. Fishbane. *As Light before Dawn: The Inner World of a Medieval Kabbalist.* Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. 336 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-5913-7.

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Eitan P. Fishbane's compelling study of Isaac of Akko shines a light on one of medieval kabbalah's most unique thinkers. Fishbane's book contributes mightily to a wide range of issues in kabbalah scholarship: sociology of knowledge, kabbalistic hermeneutics, mystical practice, mystical experience, and mystical union. Throughout, Fishbane treats the reader with his engaging and sophisticated style, a fecund reading of this kabbalist's oeuvre, and impressive erudition. Moreover, the author brings a wide variety of methodological approaches that deepen and enrich the scholarly conversation.

In chapter 1, the author lays out his aims and methodological approaches, saying that he is "concerned ... with the discernment and analysis of *types* of contemplative consciousness and mystical practice, on the one hand, and models of the reception and transmission of kabbalistic wisdom, on the other" (p. 18, emphasis in original). Through three distinct methodologies--"historical-contextual; ... phenomenological-typological; and ... the textual-hermeneutical," Fishbane aims to "construct a taxonomy of the contemplative imagination, a morphology of ritual engagement and the transmission of wisdom" (p. 19).

Chapter 2 provides a detailed summary of Isaac's historical contexts, first in Akko, then in Toledo, and finally in North Africa. Beyond a valuable account of his subject's peregrinations, situating the kabbalist geographically also lays the groundwork for comparisons of Isaac's early and later works. The influx of both Tosafistic groups and Sufi-inspired Maimonideans into thirteenth-century Akko, Fishbane offers, were probable influences on Isaac's approaches to pietism, asceticism, and contemplation. Isaac cites Rabbis Shlomo ibn Adret and Yom Tov ibn Ishvili frequently, indicating a stay in Barcelona. In Toledo, he came in contact with the Castilian kabbalah of Yaakov ha-Kohen, Todros Abulafia and the *Zohar*, from whom he learned the "Kabbalah of the Left Side." Regarding the authorship of the *Zohar*, Fishbane notes that there are six occasions in Isaac's later work, *Oẓar Ḥayyim*, in which Isaac refers to R. Shimon bar Yohai as the author of the *Zohar*, con-

cluding that whatever actually transpired in Isaac's well-known interactions with Moshe de Leon, his widow, and daughter, Isaac concluded that Moshe de Leon's attribution of the work to Rashbi was authentic.

In part 2, Fishbane captures the complexity of Isaac's approach to questions of reception of kabbalistic lore, its authenticity, and authority: Isaac is simultaneously an arch-traditionalist, for whom the reliability and authenticity of the transmission of a particular teaching is paramount; an eclectic, wandering figuratively and literally among different strands of theosophic and prophetic kabbalah; and a creative thinker and mystic, whose own understanding and experiences inform the ways in which he reads kabbalistic texts and interprets the nature of Divinity. Fishbane carefully distinguishes between the eclecticism and anthological quality of Isaac's early work, ***Me'irat Einayim***, and the self-confident creativity of the later ***Oẓar Ḥayyim***. The term "kabbalah" at that time refers to the reliability of transmission of highly esoteric doctrine: "In the view of the kabbalists themselves, what makes something 'Kabbalah' has everything to do with the reliability of and authority of the transmissional source. The term alludes to a ***specific method of transmission***--one that is entirely predicated on the authority of the real or purported transmitter" (p. 53, emphasis in original). The transmitter takes on the role of "proof-person," the authenticating marker in the same way that "proof-texts" operate in literary contexts (p. 55). Fishbane tracks a "rhetoric of reception": a trope indicating Isaac's own authenticity as transmitter of kabbalistic traditions and a system of validation for the teachings that he replicates. The claim that this is a "rhetoric of reception" is supported by Isaac's frequent self-referencing; stature and legitimacy are ongoing concerns and his methodology can be plausibly argued to be part of a broader rhetorical strategy.

In the face of the variety of kabbalistic traditions, many of which stand in direct contradiction to one another, Fishbane says that Isaac adopts a "pluralistic hermeneutic." The "non-determinate and unstable meaning structure" that this yields allows Isaac to prescribe the harmonizing of opposing positions, such as those of kabbalah and philosophy (p. 70). While Isaac adopts this apparently egalitarian approach to legitimated teachings, at other points he signals an overall preference for the teachings of Naḥmanides to prevent eclectic practice.

In chapter 4, Fishbane investigates the creative and authoritative roles that Isaac assigns to himself in determining the meaning of textual intent. By arrogating to himself this facility, Isaac mitigates the instability of the pluralism analyzed above. Isaac can thus reconcile the hermeneutical conundrum that opposes authorial intent to the meaning elicited by the reader. By adopting the position of authoritative interpreter of Nahmanidean intent and through the hyperesotericizing of Naḥmanides's works, Isaac creates a space for the expansion of the esoteric.

Chapter 5 charts Isaac's authorial approach in his testimonial work, ***Oẓar Ḥayyim***. One of the primary cognitive modalities for Isaac's mystical understanding rises from the blurred line between sleep and wakefulness, leading to exegetical insight. Fishbane demonstrates how the personal, theoretical, and prescriptive are interwoven into a cohesive whole, moving past the more diffident third-person style of much of contemporary Spanish kabbalah.

Part 3 addresses Isaac's contemplative practices and mystical experience, with chapter 6 covering the theurgic effects of normative Jewish ritual. Unifying sefirot is the bread and butter of kabbalistic ritual, and Fishbane indicates that the "purpose and consequence of devotional ritual is the ***reunification*** of the primal androgyne" (p. 131, emphasis in original). In this chapter he also shows how Isaac sees the act of prayer as a "sub-

stitute ritual" for the priestly sacrificial cult (p. 133). Fishbane offers a heuristic rereading of the meaning of kabbalistic intention identifying a revised self-knowledge as the key: "Articulation of theology and theurgy thus emerges as a prominent mode of ***self-understanding*** on the part of the human kabbalist; his conception of metaphysical dynamics is entirely oriented by his definition of human purpose and responsibility" (p. 155, emphasis in original).

In ***Oẓar Ḥayyim***, Isaac pays greater attention to the "drawing" of divine forces into this world, culminating in "the indwelling of divine presence in ... [the] human soul" (p. 167). In these instances the human self is transformed into a sanctuary for the Divine Presence. This spiritual phenomenon entails two distinct aspects: one in which theurgical activity results in "a state of illumination or heightened intimacy with the deity"; and second, in which this constitutes "a reconstruction of the divine Sanctuary ... within the human self" (pp. 168-169). The kabbalist has become not just the actor within the worship, but its very locale.

Chapter 7 lays out "a typology of contemplative practice ... structured by the following phenomena and devotional techniques: (1) the movement, journey, and pilgrimage of consciousness through the divine sefirot; (2) binary concentration of the nature of fixed intention; [and] (3) visualization of the sefirotic realm and contemplation of the divine name" (p. 181). Paying close attention to the different aspects of the mental and verbal techniques that Isaac prescribes, Fishbane notes the interactions of breath, ***kavvanah***, and visualization. He traces the presence of contemplative topographical journey and split intention toward different aspects of Divinity--e.g., holding kabbalistic intention toward both ***Ein Sof*** and the particular ***sefirah*** associated with a blessing--back to the earliest stages of theosophic thinking in Provence and among Ḥasidei Ashkenaz. Yet another practice entails the visualization of the divine name, with attention to particular vowel points, serving to reenact the priestly vocal utterance of the divine name, an act that is prohibited to non-priests and even to priests outside the precincts of the temple. The intricacies of this visual-for-vocal substitution highlighted by Fishbane is distinctive, and he notes Isaac's debt to Avraham Abulafia in many of these techniques.

Chapter 8 emphasizes the body-soul dualism in Isaac's thought that leads to both violent self-flagellation and the possibility of mystical union through separation of the intellective dimensions of the spirit from the realm of physical sensations. Fishbane suggests that Isaac "experienced a deep state of anxiety and discomfort with his own embodied life--articulating an ideal of physical self-transcendence and a highly negative view of the body and its desires," although recent scholarship has generally moved away from this kind of psychological projection (p. 248). In a striking reading of Isaac's representation of mystical union, Fishbane suggests that through the ***devequt*** of the priest, the nonelite can attain ***devequt*** as well. One of the texts that Fishbane cites--indicating a full mystical union--shows Isaac's intellectual lineage from Abulafia and his student Natan ben Sa'adya: "And if [the soul (***nefesh***)] merits to reach and to attach to the Active Intellect, it itself becomes in fact the Active Intellect. And if it merits to reach and to attach to the Divine Intellect ... how fortunate it is! For it returns to its foundation and its root, and it is actually ... called the Divine Intellect--and that person is called 'a divine man'" (p. 279).

Fishbane's work is a valuable, comprehensive study of Isaac of Akko, bringing the whole scope of Isaac's intellectual interests and spiritual aims to light; that he does so with stylistic gusto makes it the greater pleasure to read. Notwithstanding the high standard of insight and analysis of the work, it does bear some deficiencies. There are a number of categories and terms that are either insufficiently developed or used improperly, extend-

ing beyond the semantic and into the substantive realm. Fishbane refers to a "rhetoric of prescription" whereas Isaac is merely being prescriptive, a common feature of contemporaneous kabbalistic literature (p. 179). The author repeatedly draws attention to "performativity," a term that scholarship in ritual studies uses to designate phenomena in which the presence of an audience and public social context transforms the nature of the ritual's performance. The internal and private nature of most of Isaac's contemplative practices preclude "performativity" in this sense (see, for example, pp. 195, 227). The book is handsomely produced with Hebrew script liberally embedded into the text, allowing the specialist to read the original along with Fishbane's translation and interpretation. This ability to use Hebrew serves as a double-edged sword, however, as there are times when the author uses Hebrew terms ***only*** in their Hebrew form, blocking access to the non-Hebrew reader, whom Fishbane also hopes to reach.

Isaac emerges as a fascinating individual, a kabbalist who was able to collect a wide range of kabbalistic teachings from disparate sources, to remain open to them in their disparateness, and to forge a series of readings and practices that sought the heights in mystical consciousness and experience. Fishbane's attention to the rhetorical styles is a distinctive contribution to the growing attention to the literary aspects of kabbalistic literature. Moreover, he has brought Isaac of Akko, a man who stood at geographical, intellectual, and spiritual crossroads to light for the broader scholarly audience. For all of this, we are considerably indebted to Fishbane's ***As Light before Dawn***.

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