

Renaissance and Rebirth

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Renaissance and Rebirth

Reincarnation in Early Modern Italian Kabbalah

by

Brian Ogren



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To Mom and Dad,
with immense gratitude and love

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Books, like people, often undergo developmental processes of growth in a veritable form of *gilgulim*, that is, transformations and change. Like the soul in various ideas of *gilgul*, the core remains the same, yet improves itself through the various stages of development. The soul of the present book originated in my doctoral dissertation, written at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under the guidance of Professor Moshe Idel. I thank Professor Idel for helping me to formulate the original idea of the book and for helping me to realize the importance of the subject at hand, both for Jewish thought and for wider Renaissance intellectual history. Even at points where I have come to disagree with his findings, Professor Idel's methodological spirit permeates this study and stands as a constant model for my own research; his outstanding scholarship will always remain my ideal.

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Several of the texts analyzed in this study are extant only in manuscript, and I had the opportunity to view them at the Institute for Microfilmed Manuscripts at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. I would like to thank the following libraries for permission to cite from manuscripts in their possession: the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York, the Bodleian Library of Oxford University, the French National Library in Paris, and the Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana in Vatican City. Part of chapter three and most of chapter eight already appeared in an article published in *Accademia*, volume vi (2004). I thank the Société Marsile Ficini for the permission to reprint those portions within this book. Here they have been reshaped and enhanced, and their new context has given them a different nuance.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my parents, Carol and Ken Ogren. No amount of thanks does justice to the gratitude that I have for their unyielding love and support. Without them, this work indeed would not have been possible. They have most certainly been my anchor throughout my own various transformations and *gilgulim*, and it is to them that this entire book is dedicated.

INTRODUCTION

All of the kabbalists reckon that the world was created and that it will cease in motion, but that from the beginning the souls were created together, and they continuously change bodies until the end of motion.¹

Ideas of change and motion played a significant role in fifteenth century perceptions of the soul in both Christian and Jewish forms of discourse, which often times overlapped and increasingly found a shared borrowing of ideas. This is the case not only with Jewish thinkers borrowing from the dominant Christian culture, but with Christians borrowing from and being shaped by Jewish forms of thought as well. Indeed, with the above quoted passage, the highly influential Italian Renaissance Christian Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino remarkably alludes to a specifically Jewish understanding of soul migrations.² As one of the most important fifteenth century Christian philosophers who dealt extensively with matters of the soul, Ficino's invocation of "the kabbalists" concerning the origin of souls and their relation to cosmic processes is certainly noteworthy. Ficino goes on in the same passage to state that "the world has already lasted for 5240 years."³ This rather unique matter of Hebrew dating by a Christian humanist who otherwise does not much rely upon the Hebrew kabbalists undoubtedly places Ficino's ruminations concerning the subject within an uncharacteristically Jewish context. It also allows us to note that according to the secular reckoning, Ficino was already having these thoughts, within their kabbalistic framework, in late 1479 or in early 1480. This early date is quite significant, considering the fact that Ficino's younger contemporary Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who is rightly considered to be one of the original innovators of Christian kabbalah, only seems to have begun learning Hebrew in 1486,⁴ and mentions kabbalah for the very first time in his works of that same year.

¹ Marsilio Ficino, ms. Paris Greek 1816, fol. 46a: "Omnes Kabaliste mundum creatum ponunt et motum cessaturum, sed animas ab initio simul creatas et mutare corpora usque ad finem motus..."

² The remark is in the handwriting of Luca Fabiani, the personal secretary of Ficino, but the remark can be considered to have been dictated by Ficino himself. I thank Dr. Guido Bartolucci for bringing this to my attention.

³ "...duravisse enim iam annos quinquies mille atque ducentos quadraginta."

⁴ Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, p. 5.

Ficino's early mention of the idea of metempsychosis within a Jewish kabbalistic context provides an indication of the concept's heightened importance in regard to matters of the human soul and its relation to the cosmos. Moreover, the overlap of kabbalah and Renaissance humanism, which in the above example involves direct reference to kabbalists by a preeminent humanist, denotes an important point of departure for research into Renaissance Jewish and Christian trends of thought. Namely, it indicates that shared concepts between kabbalists and humanists, such as metempsychosis, can act as ideal devices for the gauging and the analysis of intellectual interaction and reaction, of possible mutual influence, and of particular, contextualized developments in thought. Such is the purpose of this present study. The concept of metempsychosis, mainly within its Jewish contexts, will act as an axis around which to study and to analyze developments in Renaissance intellectual history.

Indeed, metempsychosis stood as a salient element in the Renaissance conceptualization of the human being, the universe, and the former's place in regard to the latter. Under the rubric of this doctrine, which is known in variant forms with diverse subtleties of meaning by the English terms palingenesis, the transmigration of souls, rebirth, and reincarnation, and which is associated with the Hebrew locutions *gilgul neshamot*, *ha'atakah*, *'ibbur*, *din b'nei halof*, and *sod ha-shelach*, stand concepts and theories as diverse as its names. These include ideas such as human to human reincarnation, human to vegetal, animal, or angelic entities and vice versa, the cohabitation of more than one soul in one body, and the transmigration of souls between various spheres of existence, including between the divine and the human realms. Some versions of this doctrine maintain that individuals who have not completed their tasks here on earth but who have the potential to do so can be 'reborn' after death in order to be given the chance to fulfill that unrealized potential, while other versions maintain that individuals undergo bodily change as a form of punishment or reward. Some models posit a three or four-time limit for the return of the soul to life, while others allow up to a thousand times, or even an open-ended number.

Common to all of these theories of metempsychosis is the idea that a separate entity or entities within the individual, called the "soul" in western parlance, has some type of existence distinct from the body and that upon physical death, the souls of certain individuals live on and pass into new physical or spiritual bodies or realms of existence. From there, the idea is that they then can possibly pass on to other spheres

or bodies, or even return in a circular pattern to their 'original' sphere. As Moshe Idel proposes, "More than assuming that survival of the soul involves the occasion for a final account, transmigration involves a much more open type of worldview."⁵ Indeed, in opposition to absolute notions of finality as related to classical notions of final judgment, paradise, and hell, in all of their alternative forms of conception, and even of purgatory as a set, intermediate stage to finality, metempsychosis presupposes change and dynamism, both in relation to the individual and in relation to the workings of the cosmos.

This present study will focus upon eight significant fifteenth century thinkers who discussed the idea of metempsychosis from within Jewish and humanist contexts. The first two scholars to be treated, Rabbi Michael ha-Cohen Balbo and Rabbi Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, were Jewish communal leaders at the ends of two opposing philosophical camps in the community of Candia on the Venetian controlled island of Crete. In 1466, Balbo and Ashkenazi engaged in an unprecedented, detailed debate concerning the veracity of metempsychosis. Balbo argued in favor of the truth of the doctrine on kabbalistic and philosophical grounds, while Ashkenazi argued against the doctrine by criticizing kabbalah, by appealing to philosophy, and by invoking worldwide halachic opinion. The lengthy proceedings of the debate will be analyzed in the first chapter of this book, with an eye toward the unique interplay of philosophy and kabbalah in a struggle for intellectual hegemony and in the shaping of Renaissance modes of consciousness. The second chapter will discuss literature by the two interlocutors that is not in the notebooks of the debate itself but that further deals with philosophical, kabbalistic, and legalistic questions related to the belief in metempsychosis. This includes an epistolary exchange concerning metempsychosis between Balbo and one of his students, and a series of halachic responsa concerning the laws of levirate marriage and their relation to metempsychosis between Ashkenazi and the rabbinic authorities of Mestre and Jerusalem. Issues of national character and personal identity are raised within this extra-debatal literature, and the second chapter of this present book will seek to flesh these out and to examine the kabbalistic, philosophical, and halachic implications of identity formation through ideas such as metempsychosis, both on the personal and on the national levels.

⁵ Moshe Idel, "The Secret of Impregnation as Metempsychosis in kabbalah," p. 4.

Two next two thinkers to be treated in this study, Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel and Rabbi Judah Hayyat, were prominent Spanish Jewish thinkers who both made their way to Italy after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Though they both brought with them elements from their original Iberian environs, both Abarbanel and Hayyat wrote their respective treatises in which they deal with metempsychosis while upon Italian soil; Abarbanel wrote his philosophico-mystical masterwork *Mif'a lot Elohim* around 1500 while in Apulia and his commentary on the book of Leviticus while in Venice a few years later, and Hayyat wrote his kabbalistic opus *Minhat Yehuda* upon his arrival in Mantova after 1493. Abarbanel did not consider himself to be a kabbalist, but he positively viewed the philosophical possibility of the doctrine of metempsychosis and he categorically supported its truth value from a more mystical point of view. Chapter three will examine this dual character of philosophy and mysticism in Abarbanel's writings concerning metempsychosis. It will analyze his unique usage of Italian Renaissance Neoplatonic elements for Jewish exegetical purposes and his simultaneous preservation of and deference to Iberian kabbalistic ideas as shaped by his Spanish predecessor Nahmanides. In contrast to Abarbanel, Hayyat was a self-avowed kabbalist who blatantly rejected philosophical interpretations of kabbalistic lore and who held himself to be in line with the more mythical Spanish school of the *Zohar*. Hayyat saw himself as a preserver of this endangered form of wisdom and as a fighter against its more philosophical expressions. Nevertheless, an analysis of his ideas on metempsychosis reveals elements of the more philosophical kabbalah of Italy that made their way into his writings. Chapter four examines this dialectic within Hayyat's thought and its rhetorical implications for the flow of knowledge and for the development of distinct forms of kabbalah.

The next two thinkers who will be examined, Rabbi Elia Hayyim ben Binyamin of Genazzano and Rabbi Yohanan Alemanno, were both born in Italy and were active in Tuscany. In contrast to Balbo and Ashkenazi who were active on Venetian controlled Crete, and as opposed to Abarbanel and Hayyat who were Iberian imports to Italy, both Genazzano and Alemanno were native Italian kabbalists who were deeply immersed in and involved with Italian humanist trends of thought. Both thinkers extensively incorporated philosophy into their writings, both set up hierarchies of wisdom, and both saw the need to assert the supremacy of the Jewish kabbalah as the most reliable and efficacious form of ancient wisdom. Genazzano may have been

influenced by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola regarding metempsychosis, and seems to have possibly read Eusebius' *Preparatio Evangelica*, which was translated into Latin in 1448 by the humanist George of Trebizond. Notwithstanding these humanist influences, Genazzano ties the idea back to Moses and Abraham through the *Midrash Ruth* of the *Zohar Hadash* and through his Italian kabbalistic predecessor, Rabbi Menahem Recanati. Chapter five of this book traces these variant lines of development as perceived within the thought of Genazzano, who saw the idea of metempsychosis as originating with Abraham and developing in two separate trajectories, namely, that of the unperturbed path of Torah and that of the true, albeit less reliable path of the pagan philosophers. Similar to Genazzano, Alemanno based himself on different paths and trajectories in relation to the idea of metempsychosis, yet in a manner almost opposite to that of Genazzano, Alemanno sought to create a convergence and a unity of variant streams of thought regarding the idea. Indeed, Alemanno synthesized older Jewish traditions regarding metempsychosis in a manner that may have been affected by and may have affected wider Renaissance thoughts of *coincidentia oppositorum*. Chapter six fleshes out this unique synthesis of Jewish sources and the philosophical neutralization of mythical elements within these sources by Alemanno, who was one of the most preeminent Italian kabbalists of his day and who was one of the direct teachers of Pico della Mirandola.

The final two thinkers to be analyzed in this book were prominent Christian philosophers of the Italian Renaissance who fell under the influence of kabbalistic lore. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino were two of the most influential and important Italian humanist philosophers of the fifteenth century, and an analysis of their thought concerning metempsychosis will help us to moor the idea in the wider cultural and philosophical context of the Italian Renaissance. Indeed, both Pico and Ficino discussed the idea at some length within their writings, and both seem to have lent it a degree of support. Nevertheless, the idea was in opposition to the standard sentiments of the Church, and both thinkers veiled their support of the doctrine of metempsychosis in allegory. Interestingly, Pico, who is widely known for his familiarity with kabbalistic lore, completely omits kabbalistic reference to metempsychosis and relies most heavily upon Plotinus in the formulation of his own theories. In contradistinction, Ficino, who is not known for his reliance upon kabbalah, invokes the kabbalistic tradition in regard to metempsychosis, oftentimes at points that go beyond mere allegory and venture into questions of veridicality. Chapter seven examines

Pico's non-kabbalistic, Plotinian understanding of metempsychosis as participated transmigration for the human soul. It attempts to make sense of discrepancies within Pico's writings concerning metempsychosis, including the lack of mention of kabbalah and a final reticence to show outright support for the idea. In contrast to Pico, Ficino seems to show definitive, albeit veiled support for the doctrine as applied to human-to-human transmigration specifically. In this regard, he not only invokes Plato and Plotinus, as does Pico, he also remarkably appeals to the Jewish kabbalistic tradition. Chapter eight analyzes Ficino's innovations in regard to metempsychosis, including his allegorical understanding of the doctrine in regard to human-to-animal transmigration and his more literal understanding of it in its human-to-human form within his later writings. Ficino's noteworthy references to Jewish mysticism and kabbalah, alongside Plato and Plotinus, bring full-circle the analysis of the meeting-point and development of Jewish thought and Renaissance humanism through the concept of metempsychosis.

As a complex doctrine involving change and dynamism, metempsychosis offers a unique and pertinent window through which to examine the complex and dynamic contours of Jewish thought in late fifteenth century Italy, and from which to evaluate that thought in relation to general Italian humanist currents. During this period in Italy, the 'rebirth' of classical knowledge led to a renewed interest in thinkers such as Pythagoras, Plato and Plotinus, who propounded strong doctrines of 'rebirth' itself within their respective psychological theories that supported positive assessments of the idea of transmigration. This renewed interest by Renaissance scholars in recovering various forms of a more 'pristine' ancient theology, known as *prisca theologia*, involved a vigorous campaign of the renovated translation of and commentary upon classical sources on the one hand,⁶ and an interest in the Jewish kabbalah, perceived to be the 'ancient theology' of the Jewish tradition, on the other.⁷ Many of the thinkers either correctly or erroneously thought to be 'ancient', such as Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, Hermes Trismegistus, and several kabbalistic sources, earnestly espoused separate doctrines

⁶ The literature on this topic abounds. For the deftest analyses, see primarily: Charles B. Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy"; Christopher Celenza, "Pythagoras in the Renaissance"; idem, "The Search for Ancient Wisdom in Early Modern Europe"; and James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*.

⁷ On this, see primarily Idel, "Particularism and Universalism in kabbalah." See also idem, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of kabbalah in the Renaissance."

of metempsychosis as integral parts of their respective psychological systems. As such, the new method of using ancient sources in order to understand contemporary philosophical and theological problems brought notions of transmigration to occupy a position of central importance in Renaissance reflections on the soul, both from the philosophical and from the mystical points of view. From the Jewish side, this led to a pronounced particularistic assertion of ascendancy on the one hand, as based on the view of kabbalistic lore as the most ancient, divinely revealed base of all pristine knowledge,⁸ and on the other hand it led to a straightforward confrontation between Jewish and non-Jewish sources, which sometimes led to reconciliation and oftentimes led to an integration by Jewish thinkers of non-Jewish philosophical elements related to kabbalistic ideas. In a complex twist, thinkers such as Plato and Hermes could be utilized as figures of authority, but this is only because, in the eyes of Jewish savants, they based themselves on the supreme authority of the kabbalah.

Previous scholarship has extensively probed developments in philosophical psychology as related to the dominant cultural trends of the Renaissance,⁹ oftentimes concluding that a shift to a more individually conceived, anthropocentric philosophical psychology is detectable in the Italian Renaissance. This is based in large part on the theories of the famed Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, who is seen as the main inventor of the category of Western history known as “the Renaissance,” and who, in 1860, devoted the entire second part of his seminal *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* to “The Development of the Individual.” Within this section, Burckhardt claims that Renaissance Italy saw an all-around heightened impulse to self perfection. “When this impulse to the highest individual development was combined with a powerful and varied nature, which had mastered all the elements of the culture of the age,” he writes, “then arose the ‘all-sided man’—‘l’uomo universale’—who belonged to Italy alone.”¹⁰ This idea of heightened “individual development” culminating in “l’uomo universale” has

⁸ For more on this phenomenon, which Moshe Idel terms the “unilinear” theory of *prisca theologia*, and which takes strong expression in Jewish thought of the fifteenth century, see: Idel, “Prisca Theologia in Marsilio Ficino and in Some Jewish Treatments.”

⁹ Most notably, see the following: *Renaissance Philosophy of Man*; Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos*; Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, especially pp. 461–551; and Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*.

¹⁰ Burckhardt, p. 84.

had a profound affect upon all areas of Renaissance studies, including analyses of the philosophical psychology of the era. This is an area that will be treated in this book through the concept of metempsychosis, with an eye toward the re-examination of influential Burckhardtian assumptions as they take form in subsequent scholarly assessments of Renaissance psychology.

Indeed, *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* devotes to the topic of philosophical psychology an entire section, which is composed of three chapters, one on the concept of psychology and its importance to Renaissance thought, one on the organic soul, i.e., the principle responsible for those life functions inextricably tied to the bodies of living beings and dependent on their organs, and finally, one on the intellective soul, the cognitive faculty within the individual.¹¹ Within this section, as within several of its antecedent works on Renaissance psychology, the authors claim that questions regarding the continuity of the individual soul held great importance in the transformation from Medieval to Renaissance notions of man. Formerly, according to their theory, individual continuity had not played a major role within systematic philosophy. Paul Oskar Kristeller, the great historian of Renaissance philosophy, promoted a similar view and pointed out that Thomas Aquinas defended the incorruptibility and future beatitude of the rational soul, but did not attach any individual importance to the subject. In fact, according to Kristeller, Aquinas avoided the term “immortality” altogether in regard to the individual human being.¹² Accordingly, Duns Scotus explicitly declared the traditional arguments for any form of postmortem continuity of the individual soul to be feeble and inconclusive, and added the postulate that belief in resurrection and eternal life should be based on faith alone.¹³ Only Averroes and his followers elevated a concept of eternality to a position of supreme philosophical importance, yet theirs was a formulation that accounted for the immortality of the universal intellect and thereby removed all bases for any type of individual continuity. As Ernst Cassirer, another eminent scholar who was influenced by the Burckhardtian model, notes, within the Averroist formulation, “the true subject of thought is not the individual, the ‘self.’ Rather, it is a non-personal, substantial

¹¹ Katharine Park and Eckhard Kessler, “Psychology,” in: *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, pp. 455–534.

¹² Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, p. 186.

¹³ *Ibid.*

being common to all thinking beings; one whose connection with the individual Ego is external and accidental.”¹⁴ By forcing the soul into the sphere of impersonal metaphysical forces, Averroism not only compromises individuality, a marked problem for religious thinkers of the Renaissance according to Cassirer, it also forsakes subjectivity for a principle of pure objectivity.

Classical scholarship on Renaissance psychology maintains that it was precisely this impersonal, undifferentiated philosophy of salvation of Averroes, as well as the indifference of Aquinas and the extreme fideism of Scotus, to which the philosophers of the Italian Renaissance, such as Pietro Pomponazzi and Marsilio Ficino, were reacting and responding with their divergent yet symmetrically more subjective and individualized views. Indeed, in 1516, Pomponazzi published his highly controversial *De immortalitate animae* (On the Immortality of the Soul), in which he argues at length from a naturalist position that absolute immortality cannot be proven conclusively. Pomponazzi maintains that man partakes of immortality relatively, insofar as he comprehends and participates in the infinite bliss and wonder of the divinity within his personal, mortal life. Under this formulation, human immortality does not depend on an infinite extension of time, but is fully realized in the experience of the single, present moment. For Pomponazzi, who is considered by many to be one of the preeminent heralds of the Renaissance, man is “the most perfect of animals,” because he is a mean between the material and the immaterial and thus participates in both during his finite life without truly being either.¹⁵ In 1474, Marsilio Ficino completed his magnum opus entitled *Theologia Platonica de immortalitate animorum* (Platonic Theology on The Immortality of Souls), which extended to eighteen books and has been described as a *summa* on immortality. In the preface to the work, addressed to Lorenzo da Medici, Ficino states that his double purpose in writing the work is to reinforce the worship of God and to bring about a new understanding of the nature of man. Deeply rooted in Neoplatonic philosophy, the work attacks the Averroen notion of the unity of the intellect,¹⁶ and shows the ultimate purpose of the life of man to be

¹⁴ *The Individual and the Cosmos*, p. 127.

¹⁵ For more on Pomponazzi's psychology and a view of it as a paradigm of Renaissance sensibilities, see Andrew H. Douglas, *Philosophy and Psychology of Pietro Pomponazzi*, ed. C. Douglas and R.P. Hardie, Lubrecht and Cramer Ltd., 1974.

¹⁶ This is especially so in book fifteen.

the ascent through contemplation toward the direct vision of God, an activity through which immortality is attained. As with Pomponazzi, Ficino's ideas are thought to reflect an individualistic shift in relation to matters of the human soul, and his philosophy is still considered to be an exemplar of Renaissance sensibilities.¹⁷ Pomponazzi and Ficino on immortality, and the elevation of both as paradigms of Renaissance thought, provide but two examples of the perceived individual tenor in Renaissance psychology. The idea was that in the Renaissance, man became more centrally perceived, and with that anthropocentric shift, philosophers and theologians began to understand the importance of the individual human soul in a different light. This present study will examine the subject of philosophical psychology in the Renaissance from a different angle, namely, through the doctrine of metempsychosis. Through metempsychosis, this study will analyze questions of individuality, community and continuity, and it will consider the continually convincing assertions of Burckhardt, as well as his followers in the field of philosophical psychology.

Parallel to the advances made in understanding the philosophical psychology of the Renaissance and the allegedly more "subjective," "individualized" nature that sets it apart, scholars have made vigorous attempts to treat the complex historical phenomenon of the doctrine of metempsychosis as developed within Judaism and from Jewish sources.¹⁸ This study will be moored within that complex history and will take into account the textual and historical traditions that the eight fifteenth century thinkers to be examined had at hand. Simultaneously, it will open up a new chapter in intellectual history by exploring hitherto unexamined Renaissance developments concerning the idea of metempsychosis. Indeed, in his writings on the subject of metempsychosis,

¹⁷ For more on Ficino, see most recently: *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*. See also the recent academic translation of Michael J.B. Allen of Ficino's *Platonic Theology*.

¹⁸ Of paramount significance, see Gershom Scholem's extensive essay, "Gilgul: the Transmigration of Souls," pp. 197–250 in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*. See also idem, "On the Research of the Doctrine of Gilgul in the kabbalah of the Thirteenth Century"; Rachel Elijor, "The Doctrine of Transmigration in *Galya Raza*"; Moshe Hallamish, "The Doctrine of Transmigration"; and Michal Oron, "Terms of the Doctrine of the Soul and of Gilgul in the kabbalah of the Thirteenth Century and the Writings of Rabbi Todros Halevi Abulafia." More recently, see: Dina Ripsman Eylon, *Reincarnation in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosticism*; Mark Verman, "Reincarnation and Theodicy: Traversing Philosophy, Psychology, and Mysticism"; and Moshe Idel, "The Secret of Impregnation as Metempsychosis in kabbalah."

Gershom Scholem, the great historian of Jewish mysticism, jumps from the Spanish kabbalah of the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries to the late sixteenth century kabbalah of Safed; in doing so, he omits the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Italian developments. It has become the routine in Jewish historiography since Scholem to place an outburst of popular interest in metempsychosis within mid to late sixteenth century Jewish culture, linking it to the Spanish expulsion as an expression of exile and restoration.¹⁹ This thinking holds that perception of the soul migrating from one body to another in an attempt to correct itself and to raise itself to a higher plane reflects the migrations of the nation of Israel in its exile and migration from land to land. This outlook, though not completely without foundation, views the popular development of metempsychosis as an internal process that developed from the particular national tribulation of Jewish life. It ignores the unique encounter of ideas between thinkers, the porous nature of intellectual development, and the flow of ideas between groups, sub-groups and individuals, which most often characterizes the formation of ideas. This book seeks to fill in these gaps by focusing upon intellectual processes within the Italian Renaissance.

In order to understand such developments, it is important to outline a preliminary, brief history of the idea of metempsychosis as it took shape in Jewish thought. The origins of the doctrine of metempsychosis within Jewish literature are somewhat veiled in mystery, as there is no explicit reference to the idea in pre-medieval strata of the Hebrew textual tradition. Nevertheless, an important Jewish Byzantine point of departure for the idea should be mentioned, which finds itself on the island of Crete, which from 395 was an integral part of the Byzantine Empire. According to the fifth century Byzantine historian Socrates, in the year 440, a pseudo-messiah in Crete convinced a portion of the Jews of that community that he was the reincarnation of the biblical Moses and that he could lead them dry-shod through the sea, back to the shores of the land of Israel. His followers jumped from the cliffs, and those who did not drown were rescued by their Christian neighbors; subsequently, most of the disenchanting survivors converted

¹⁹ For Scholem's tone, see: "Gilgul: the Transmigration of Souls." See also R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic*, Philadelphia, 1977, pp. 234–256 and Elior, "The Doctrine of Transmigration." More recently, see: Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 305.

to Christianity.²⁰ Whether or not this episode had an effect upon the subsequent theories and debates concerning metempsychosis is nearly impossible to determine; indeed none of the later thinkers who treat the subject make mention of this episode and none seem to be aware of its occurrence. Nevertheless, its transpiration and its rarity as an extremely early mention of reincarnation in relation to Judaism stand as important precedents that deserve mention. This is especially the case due to the fact that one thousand and twenty six years later, the Jewish community of the selfsame island would act as the seat of the unprecedented intellectual debate concerning metempsychosis that will be discussed in the first few chapters of this book.

The first Jewish textual reference to the idea of metempsychosis seems to have come about three hundred years after the incident in Crete, within the framework of Karaite Judaism. It has been duly noted by researchers that the prominent tenth-century Karaite authority Jacob al-Kirkisani wrote in his *Sefer ha-Orot* that Anan ben David, the eighth-century thinker considered by many to be the father of Karaism, not only believed in metempsychosis, but wrote an entire book concerning the subject and garnered the support of many followers who eventually broke off from Karaism.²¹ Though Anan ben David's treatise on metempsychosis is no longer extant, it seems to be the first known explicit mention of the doctrine within a specifically Jewish text. For his part, Kirkisani wrote against the doctrine, and his negative assertion seems to be against Anan's positive assessment of the concept, as well as that of Anan's subsequent group of followers.²² Moreover, Kirkisani's rabbinic contemporary, the tenth century Rabbi Saadia Gaon, opposed the doctrine in his famed philosophical treatise, *Emunot v'Deot*. There he writes:

And now I say that people from those who are called "Jews" found themselves believing in transmigration, and they call it "relocation," and the idea, in their opinion, is that the spirit of Reuven will live in Simon, and afterwards in Levi, and afterwards in Judah. And some of them, or most of them, maintain that it is the case that the spirit of man will live

²⁰ Joshua Starr, "Jewish Life in Crete Under the Rule of Venice," p. 233.

²¹ See: Leon Nemoy, "Al-Qirqisani's Account of the Jewish Sects and Christianity," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 7 (1930), p. 386; Scholem, "Gilgul," p. 199; and Verman, "Reincarnation and Theodicy," p. 404.

²² Kirkisani devotes two chapters of his *Sefer ha-Orot* to the refutation of the idea.

in a beast and the spirit of a beast will live in a man, and many other illusionary and confused things like these.²³

According to Benzion Uzziel, Saadia Gaon's mention in the above passage of "Jews" who believe in transmigration is a reference to Anan and his ilk, "who are called Jews and who hold this Greek opinion."²⁴ Uzziel's assertion as to Saadia Gaon's contention against Anan seems to be correct, since much of Saadia's *Emunot v'Deot* is a philosophical affirmation of rabbinic Judaism as opposed to competing Karaite trends. This assertion would also make sense due to the fact that there were no known Jewish references to metempsychosis at this time, other than those of Kirkisani and, if we take him at his word, of Anan ben David. Whatever the case may be, Saadia Gaon's influential book undoubtedly holds the first known explicit mention of metempsychosis, albeit in a negative light, within a text of the normative rabbinic Jewish tradition. This critique would prove to have an impact upon later Jewish thinkers who debated the idea, including some of those of the Renaissance, to be studied here.

The rabbinic world-view as expressed in the Talmud and Midrash does not develop the concept of metempsychosis at all, and despite Dina Ripsman Eylon's recent citation of Yitzhak Baer that "our ancient sages knew Orphic and Platonic theories, among those the theory of reincarnation,"²⁵ there seems to be no indication that the Talmudic authorities recognized the idea. Based on Herbert Loewe's *A Rabbinic Anthology*, both Ripsman Eylon and Mark Verman argue for a rabbinic sensibility to metempsychosis. Specifically, two passages pertain:

Once in seven years God changes his world: the chameleon becomes a great serpent, the head-louse after seven years becomes a scorpion, the horse worm becomes a human worm, the ox worm is changed into another species of vermin, the male hyena becomes female, the field-mouse becomes a wild boar, the fish vertebra turns into a centipede and

²³ *Emunot v'Deot*, vi, 8: "והנני אומר כי אנשים ממי שנקראים יהודים מצאתים מאמינים: בגלגול וקורים אותו ההיעתקות, וענינו לדעתם רוח ראובן תהיה בשמעון, ואחר כך בלוי, ואחר כך ביהודה. ומהם או רובם סוברים שיש שתהיה רוח האדם בבהמה ורוח בהמה באדם, ודברים רבים מן ההזיות הללו והבלבולים."

²⁴ Rabbi Benzion Meir Hai ben Joseph Raphael, *Sefer Hedyonei Uzziel* [Hebrew], part 1, p. 371: "דבריו אלה מכוונים נגד ענן וחבריו שנקראים יהודים ומחזיקים בדעה: 'יונית זו'."

²⁵ Baer, "A Clarification of the Doctrine of the End of Days in the Second Temple Period" [Hebrew], *Zion* 23 (1958–59), p. 9, quoted in Ripsman Eylon, p. 68.

the human vertebra turns into a serpent, that is if the owner has failed to bow at *modim*. (Jerusalem Talmud Shabbat 1:3; 2:3).²⁶

And:

A Male Hyena changes into a bat in seven years; the bat changes into arpad (ring-dove?) in seven years; the *kimos* becomes a thorn in seven years; and the snake becomes a ghost in seven years. The human vertebra changes into a snake in seven years—that is to say if the owner of the vertebra has failed to bow at *modim*. (Babylonian Talmud Bava Kama 16a).²⁷

Despite the highly metamorphic character of these two rather enigmatic passages, there is absolutely no indication of a reference to metempsychosis. First of all, as Ripsman Eylon herself notes, the word “soul” is not at all mentioned in the above description of the process of transformation. Were these passages related to metempsychosis, which depends specifically upon the concept of the soul, then some indication would probably have been made to that effect. Moreover, mention is made of fish and human ‘vertebra,’ in seemingly structural relation to centipedes and serpents respectively, and not to fish and humans in and of themselves, indicating a purely physical type of transformation. Finally, absolutely no mention is made of life and death or birth and rebirth, but only to a strict structural system of seven year cycles, far below the life expectancy of the human who would be the purported ‘owner’ of the transformed vertebra and much below the age of one who would be required or expected to bow at *modim*. Hence, these two rather strange and mysterious passages do not seem to be pointing in the direction of rabbinic knowledge of and support for metempsychosis, and such a reading of them is purely interpretive. Indeed, a clear and positive view of metempsychosis did not make its way into rabbinic Judaism with the Rabbis of the Talmud, but only much later, with the twelfth century Provencal pseudepigraphic Midrash attributed to the first century tanna Nehunia ben ha-Kanah, *Sefer ha-Bahir*.

Considered by many to be the first work of explicitly kabbalistic thought due to its unique theosophical character, *Sefer ha-Bahir* is the first known rabbinic style text to have espoused a doctrine of metempsychosis. Since the appearance of *Sefer ha-Bahir* upon the scene of Jewish thought around 1180, metempsychosis became a central,

²⁶ *A Rabbinic Anthology*, edited by Claude Goldsmid Montefiore and Herbert Loewe, New York: Schocken Books, 1974, p. 662, quoted in Ripsman Eylon, p. 67.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

integral component of kabbalistic thought. Interestingly, *Sefer ha-Bahir* treats metempsychosis, which it never refers to with an explicit term, as an understood and given doctrine within Judaism, and enigmatically discusses the idea through parables and biblical exegesis.²⁸ Although no explicit reference is made to the doctrine within biblical literature, the *Bahir*, first basing itself upon Psalm 146:10, “From generation to generation,” and Ecclesiastes 1:4, “A generation goes and a generation comes,” has no problem interpreting the bible in a transmigratory manner.²⁹ According to the *Bahir*, “generation” here refers to the same generation that passes through time; one generation passes to another in a never-ending cycle of death and rebirth. The idea of metempsychosis in relation to this idea is especially emphasized in the latter biblical proof-text here from Ecclesiastes 1:4, in which the verb “goes” precedes the verb “comes.” That is, a generation that leaves this world subsequently comes back into this world from the realms beyond this world, in a transmigratory fashion.

After the *Bahir* normalized the concept of transmigration within Judaism and gave it credence by reading it into canonical texts, later generations of Jewish thinkers followed suit. In a standard interpretive process of arcanization,³⁰ these thinkers read the enigmatic doctrine of metempsychosis back into the classical canon of Judaism, including the bible itself. Through this process, thinkers would interpret biblical and other canonical texts as though they contained within themselves the secret doctrine of transmigration, seeking legitimacy for the doctrine from these very texts themselves. For example, thinkers from the school of thought of the famed thirteenth century thinker Nahmanides understood the secret of levirate marriage³¹ to be contained within what they

²⁸ See Scholem, “The Book Bahir,” in *Origins*, pp. 49–198.

²⁹ For the *Bahir*’s exegesis on these biblical verses, coupled with a parable relating to metempsychosis, see: Daniel Abrams, *The Book Bahir: an Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts*, ¶186, pp. 171–173.

³⁰ For more on the nature of arcanization and dearcanaization, the process of reading secrets into canonical, usually exoteric texts and then proceeding to decode the secrets, thereby creating a fully transformed text, paradoxically fully moored within the dialectical circle of exotericism/esotericism, see: Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, especially the introduction.

³¹ Idel points out a discrepancy, overlooked by earlier scholarship, between the school of Nahmanides and the Geronese school of the followers of Isaac the Blind. For Nahmanides and his followers, the complex *sod ha-‘ibbur* involves metempsychosis and polypsychism, while for the followers of Isaac the Blind, *sod ha-‘ibbur* involves the vertical channeling of the divine efflux into the mundane world. See: Idel, “The Secret of Impregnation,” and idem, *Rabbi Menahem Recanati*, vol. 2, chapter 19.

termed ‘*sod ha-‘ibbur*,’ the secret of impregnation, which itself related to a very secretive and undisclosed type of metempsychosis. According to the book of Deuteronomy, when two brothers dwell together and one dies without having brought children into the world, it is incumbent upon the living brother to lie with the wife of the deceased brother and to have children with her, in the name of the deceased brother.³² Starting with Nahmanides, this rather peculiar deuteronomic commandment came to be associated with metempsychosis; the newborn baby was thought to be a reincarnation of the soul of the deceased brother. In the original kabbalistic thought of Nahmanides, this idea was highly veiled, and in the words of Nahmanides himself, “The matter is a great secret from the secrets of the Torah concerning the generation of man, and it is seen by the eyes of those to whom God gave eyes to see.”³³ In other words, it is a secret tradition that explains the human generations throughout the ages, and it cannot readily be revealed, but is left up to the understanding of those who are capable of understanding on their own accord. Nahmanides also perceived the doctrine to be the key to the entire book of Job as implied, according to him, in Elihu’s utterances to Job.³⁴ Nevertheless, in this case too, according to Nahmanides, the matter is highly secretive, should not be expounded, and can only be understood by the select few.

After the generation of Nahmanides, perhaps due to a desire to unravel the mystery of the secret that enticed by means of its very secrecy, the topic of metempsychosis became more open for discussion amongst kabbalistic thinkers. Among these thinkers, the thirteenth century Isaac of Acco, who sought to synthesize several mystical strands and elements including Sufism, ecstatic kabbalah and theosophical thought, discussed the idea of metempsychosis in his influential work *Sefer Me’irat Einayim*. Most of the sections of *Me’irat Einayim* dealing with transmigration are based upon, and attempt to decode the mysteries of Nahmanides. Indeed, in the very first place in which Isaac of Acco discusses the idea, in relation to the death of Abel in the book of Genesis, he directly quotes Nahmanides: “The received secret concerning the matter of Abel is very great.” He proceeds, “Alas, I am

³² See: Deuteronomy 25:5.

³³ Nahmanides, commentary on Genesis 38:8, p. 779 in *Mikraot Gedolot*, p. 779: “הענין סוד גדול מסודות התורה בתולדת האדם, ונכר הוא לעיני רואים אשר נתן להם השם עינים לראות.”

³⁴ See Job 33:4–31.

properly writing a clear clarification for you, with the help of He who is good and who makes good; know that the secret of Abel is the secret of transmigration.”³⁵ In a motif that is later to become prominent with kabbalistic thought, Abel’s is the first soul to be transmigrated, and eventually finds its way into the figure of Moses. Isaac of Acco expands upon the idea of metempsychosis in various other ways, and with this declaration and others, and this blatantly stated transmigrational reading of Nahmanides’ secret, he opens up the way for further exploration and inquiry into the matter.

Around 1275, the same period in which Isaac of Acco was active, the *Zohar* made its appearance onto the scene of Jewish thought in Castile, Spain. Later to become the central text of kabbalah, the *Zohar* is in actuality not a single book, but an entire body of literature. Within the specific portion of this corpus of literature known as ‘the body’ of the *Zohar*, which is fundamentally a running mystical midrashic commentary on the weekly portions of the Torah, the discussion concerning metempsychosis takes its fullest form in the commentary on the Torah portion *Mishpatim*, known as *Sava d’Mishpatim*. This section of the *Zohar* contains the discourse of Rav Yeiva Sava, an unassuming old man who appears to be a lowly donkey driver, but who in reality is a remarkable mystic. Rav Yeiva Sava gives a rather elaborate homily concerning the soul, in which the theory of metempsychosis is the most developed of the *Zohar*; nevertheless, the discussion is limited to deliberations concerning levirate marriage.³⁶ The theme of metempsychosis as connected to levirate marriage also appears in the *Midrash ha-Ne’elam l’Ruth*, a separate work from the main body of the *Zohar* that is printed in a section called *Zohar Hadash*. This section, which expresses the particularity of metempsychosis for Israel in relation to levirate marriage, was to have a great impact upon subsequent Jewish thinkers. In addition to the *Midrash ha-Ne’elam* and to the *Sava d’Mishpatim*, the *Ra’aya Mehemna* and *Tikkunei Zohar* portions of Zoharic literature expound upon a theory of metempsychosis as a general law for those who have not fulfilled the commandments within their lifetime. These

³⁵ Isaac of Acco, *Sefer Me’irat Einayim*, p. 43: “והסוד המקובל בעניין הבל הוא מאד: גדול, הנני כותב לך מבואר באר היטב, בעזרת הטוב והמטיב, דע כי סוד הבל הוא סוד הגלגול.”

³⁶ For more on the theory of metempsychosis in *Sava d’Mishpatim*, see: Oded Israeli, *Pshat, Sod v’Yitzriah b’Sabba de-Mishpatim*, pp. 127–146. See also: Pinchas Giller, “Sabba de-Mishpatim: Love and Reincarnation.”

sections of Zoharic literature, which may have been written by the same authors and which were probably written after the composition of the main body, expand the idea of metempsychosis beyond the peculiar injunction of levirate marriage.

The fourteenth century Italian kabbalist Menahem Recanati based himself heavily upon Zoharic literature and profusely expounded upon the idea of metempsychosis on his own accord.³⁷ Though the idea is scattered throughout his works, Recanati's main expositions concerning metempsychosis exist primarily in his *Sefer Ta'amei Mitzvot* in relation to the commandment of levirate marriage, and in his commentary on Genesis 38, which contains the complex levirate story of Judah and Tamar. Hence, for Recanati, as for the body of the *Zohar* and the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam l'Ruth*, the commandment of levirate marriage acts as a point of departure for an exposition of the idea of the transmigration of souls. Within the two places in which Recanati exposit, he offers a type of a summary of the idea as it appears within prior kabbalistic sources, basing himself mainly upon the *Bahir* and upon the *Zohar*; in regard to the latter, he bases himself especially, though not exclusively, upon the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam l'Ruth*. Recanati proved to have had a profound effect upon the subsequent course of Italian kabbalah, which relied heavily upon his theories and his citations of the *Zohar*. Indeed, his works were a main source of Zoharic literature for those within the Italian milieu. Recanati also influenced the likes of David ibn Avi Zimra³⁸ concerning transmigration, a figure who was the purported teacher of Isaac Luria. Without a doubt, Recanati's reach was wide-ranging, both as a transmitter of previous texts and ideas and as an interpreter in his own right.

Another fourteenth century thinker who had a profound effect upon the subsequent course of understanding of the doctrine of metempsychosis within Jewish thought was Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, also known as Joseph the Long. Active in Spain though of Ashkenazi heritage, Joseph ben Shalom authored an important commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*. This commentary ironically gained widespread reputation and

³⁷ For a detailed analysis of Recanati on metempsychosis, see: Moshe Idel, *Rabbi Menahem Recanati the Kabbalist*, vol. 2, chapter 19.

³⁸ Melila Helner, "The Doctrine of Transmigration in the Kabbalistic Books of Rabbi David ibn Zimra," p. 27. For more on Recanati's general subsequent influence, see: Idel, *Rabbi Menahem Recanati*, vol. 2, chapter 24; "The Influence of Recanati on the Jewish kabbalah in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" [Hebrew].

dissemination by mistakenly being attributed to, and published under the name of Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquières, the famed twelfth century Provencal halachic authority. Joseph ben Shalom also authored a kabbalistic commentary on Midrash *Bereshit Rabbah*, which importantly contains his innovative ideas connected to transmigration and change. Nevertheless, this commentary did not receive as wide of a readership or have as large of a sphere of influence as Joseph's commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*. Presently, the commentary on *Bereshit Rabbah* exists in only three known manuscripts, and was published for the first time, from these manuscripts, by Professor Moshe Hallamish in 1985.³⁹ Notwithstanding the *Bereshit Rabbah* commentary's lack of popularity and propagation in comparison to the *Sefer Yetzirah* commentary, it does contain some of the same novel ideas that, through the *Sefer Yetzirah* commentary, were later to have an effect upon succeeding generations of Jewish thinkers, including those within Italy. Paramount among these is an idea of cosmic transmigration, called by Joseph ben Shalom by the terms *sod ha-shelach* and *din b'nei halof*. According to this theory, transmigration is not connected to levirate marriage, or to any specific commandment or transgression. Moreover, it is not limited to the souls of humans. Rather, it is a more universal, cosmic process that involves constant movement and change, both of all existing separate forms and of the entire universe as one.

Joseph ben Shalom's cosmic transmigratory ideas concerning universal and individual movement and change involved a concept of cosmic cycles and circular time. This theory, which was also held in common by Nahmanides and which was linked by both thinkers to notions of soul transigrations, was derived from the Levitical injunction of *shmittot* and *yovelot*. According to Leviticus 25, the land shall be worked for a six year period, with the seventh year as a sabbatical year for the land. Seven of these sabbatical periods should be counted for a total of 49 years, with the fiftieth year as a jubilee, in which all debts shall be forgiven, slaves shall be freed, and all shall begin anew.⁴⁰ Based upon chapter *Helek* of the talmudic tractate *Sanhedrin*,⁴¹ Joseph

³⁹ Moshe Hallamish, *A Kabbalistic Commentary to Bereshit Rabbah by Rabbi Joseph ben Shalom (the Long) Ashkenazi* [Hebrew], Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985. To this day, Ashkenazi's commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah* is published under the name of Rabbi Abraham ben David.

⁴⁰ See Leviticus, 25:1–20.

⁴¹ BT. *Sanhedrin* 72a.

ben Shalom, in line with Nahmanides, universalized this idea as it appears in Leviticus and gave it a theosophical character. According to this theory, the universe goes through a process of constant creation and destruction in relation to seven thousand and forty-nine thousand year cycles, respectively, and in relation to the seven lower *sefirot* in a seven-fold cyclical pattern. Tied to this is a theory of souls, which are constantly collected back to their source in God at the end of these cycles, and which are re-emanated at the ends of the periods of rest in order to revivify the cosmos. This creates a form of transmigration that is cosmic in nature.

Both *din b'nei halof* and Joseph ben Shalom's cosmic idea of *shmittot* and *yovelot*, along with his Byzantine contemporary *Sefer ha-Temunah*, which posits a concept of metempsychosis in strong relation to the theory of *shmittot*, had a profound effect upon the fifteenth century Byzantine kabbalistic texts, *Sefer ha-Kanah* and *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*. These books, presumably written by the same author, indeed conflate the Italian kabbalah of Recanati, the ecstatic kabbalah of the thirteenth century Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, Spanish forms of kabbalah, Ashkenazi forms of kabbalah including that of Joseph ben Shalom, and native Byzantine elements, including those from *Sefer ha-Temunah*.⁴² Like Joseph ben Shalom, the author of these Byzantine texts holds to a cosmic type of transmigration related to a cyclical movement of ascent and descent from form to form. He takes this idea a step further and, like the *Sefer ha-Temunah*, he asserts that we are presently in the *shmittah* cycle related to the *sefirah* of *Gevurah*, stern judgment. In his opinion, due to the harsh character of the present *shmittah*, new souls do not come into the world, but only old souls transmigrate. He connects this entire cosmic process to the sins and actions of the people of Israel: "When the people of Israel are good and upright, then I will bring new seed from the East," he writes in *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, "and if, God forbid, the people of Israel are evil and sin, I will bring them seed that has already come into the world and it will be transmigrated and made dirty."⁴³ These Byzantine texts signaled a new synthetic and cosmic direction for a Jewish understanding of metempsychosis, and were to have an

⁴² For more on the nature of these important Byzantine books, see: Moshe Idel, *La Cabbalà in Italia*, pp. 353–358.

⁴³ *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, 47:4, quoted in Michal Kushnir Oron, *Ha-Peli'ah and Ha-Kanah*, p. 302: "כשישראל טובים וישרים אז ממזרח אביא זרע חדש ואם ח"ו ישראל רעים" "והטאים אביא להם רע שכבר בא לעולם ונתגלגל ונתלכלך."

important influence upon subsequent developments, including those within the Italian Renaissance milieu.

Such, in brief, were some of the major Jewish textual traditions concerning the idea of metempsychosis, as developed before the Italian Renaissance and as leading up to our present study of the idea. From Saadia Gaon to the Byzantine kabbalistic writings mentioned, these historical developments and texts acted as important precedents and proof-texts for the fifteenth century thinkers to be examined here. As will be shown throughout this study, these texts and ideas, considered by many to be authoritative, would be combined, reworked and reinterpreted in various ways throughout the period under examination here, in order to create new agendas of thought concerning metempsychosis.

An analysis of Italian Renaissance conceptions of the Jewish idea of metempsychosis should consider not only the historical background of the idea itself, but also some of the circumstances that determined Italian Jewish life during the era. David Ruderman has identified at least three factors that are of primary importance in this regard.⁴⁴ The first is the fact that Italian Jewish communities during the Renaissance were relatively small and new, and consisted of few families that lacked political influence. The second is the fact that these relatively new Jewish communities were composed primarily of immigrants with diverse cultural backgrounds, from French, German or Spanish lands, or even from other regions in Italy. As will be seen throughout the present study, this diversity in the face of an already weak sense of political influence led to internal conflict, and often bitter struggles for religious and political authority. The third factor pointed out by Ruderman involves the concentration of economic wealth within these fledgling communities, in the hands of a small number of affluent banking families. These families exerted considerable influence over the cultural life of their communities, and major thinkers of the era were aligned to these groups. Thus, for example, we find a connection between Elia ben Hayyim da Genazzano and the banker David ben Binyamin da Montalcino, and between Isaac Abarbanel and Yohanan Alemanno and the wealthy da Pisa family.

The above factors account, in part, for the multifaceted nature of the era. Any serious consideration of Jewish thought during the period of the Renaissance should indeed allow for multivalent voices and for

⁴⁴ See his: "The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought," p. 383.

wider complexities as they take form from such factors. Such is the aim of this present study, which goes beyond the three social factors mentioned above and takes into account several facets of Italian Renaissance thought concerning Jewish and humanist conceptions of metempsychosis. These include the Byzantine connection to Italy through the unparalleled Cretan debate between Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi and Michael ha-Cohen Balbo, the Spanish-Italian connection through Isaac Abarbanel and Judah Hayyat, native Italian developments in Elia Hayyim ben Benjamin of Genazzano and Yohanan Alemanno, and the Jewish-Christian connection through the theories of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino. This study will attempt to give as full a picture as possible by allowing for diversity of opinion and background. What will unify these diverse and varied facets of Italian Renaissance thought within the following pages is not only the common era of the thinkers and, loosely speaking, the common geographical location; it is also the common theme of metempsychosis. By focusing upon this singular topic, the complexity of the multiplicity that is characteristic of the age will be able to speak for itself, while at the same time uniting around this common axis. Nevertheless, in order to understand this unity of complexity in that which we call the "Italian Renaissance," it is important to recognize some of the historical processes concerning the four areas briefly outlined, namely, the connection of Crete, the world of the Spanish exiles in Italy, native Italian kabbalistic developments, and the connection between Christian humanists and the Jewish world.

The Jewish cultural connection between Byzantine civilization and Italian Renaissance society leads through the island of Crete, which was under Byzantine control until 823, and again from 961 until 1204. In the wake of the Fourth Crusade of 1204, the island was sold to the Republic of Venice, under whose control it remained until 1669.⁴⁵ Although most of the Jews continued to speak the Greek vernacular, which even entered into the synagogue services, with some exceptions, the Jews of Crete became full Venetian subjects with the status of citizens of the Republic.⁴⁶ This facilitated a greater mobility for the Jews of Crete between their native island and the Italian peninsula,

⁴⁵ Simon Marcus, "Crete," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, second edition, volume 5, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2007, p. 289.

⁴⁶ Ibid. This naturally came with the restrictions placed on Jews as a group, however, such as the admittance into wholesale commerce.

and it also allowed greater access to the island itself from mainland Italy by the likes of the traveler and chronicler Menahem of Volterra, who reports of activities in Crete around the year 1481.⁴⁷ In this latter context of arrival to Crete, it is highly important to mention that Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, one of the main figures who took part in the debate in Crete concerning metempsychosis, to be discussed below, first arrived in Venice with his father, where he developed a relationship with the Rabbi Yuda Obernik of Mestre,⁴⁸ and from there proceeded by himself to the island of Crete. Beyond this, not much is known about the figure of Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, except for that fact that he was possibly the father of Saul ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, an inquirer who would later write a series of philosophical questions to Isaac Abarbanel.

The earliest known Jewish intellectual to arrive to Italy from Crete and to play a significant role was the fourteenth century Shemaryah ben Elijah Ikriti, a philosophically oriented thinker who was active at the court of Robert, king of Naples.⁴⁹ Shemaryah's father, Elijah ben Jacob, had been a rabbi in Rome before arriving in Crete in order to fulfill the position of community leader, and Shemaryah had maintained close contact with the Jewish community of Rome throughout his life. Another Cretan to arrive in Italy and to have a major impact there was the fifteenth century Averroist, Elijah Delmedigo. Delmedigo traveled to the Italian peninsula, presumably for medical training, and spent about a decade of his life between Padova and Venice. While there, he taught his Averroistic postulates to several figures, including both Domenico Grimani, known as an ecclesiastical pluralist who later became a Cardinal, and Grimani's humanist friend Pico della Mirandola, with whom Delmedigo set up a patronage and thereby brought his teachings to the Italian Renaissance intellectual fore. A little over a decade after Delmedigo returned to his native Crete, the famed Elijah Capsali followed in his older contemporary's footsteps, and in 1508 made his way to Padova. There, he studied in the yeshiva of the great Talmudist, Judah Minz, and in 1510 returned to Crete where he would eventually become the rabbi of Candia. In 1517 he

⁴⁷ Starr, "Jewish Life in Crete," p. 90.

⁴⁸ Efraim Kupfer, "On the Cultural Image of Ashkenazi Jewry," p. 125. Ashkenazi's relation to Obernik in connection to metempsychosis will be discussed in chapter 2, below.

⁴⁹ Idel, *La Cabbalà in Italia*, pp. 351–352.

wrote a chronicle of Venice, entitled *Divrei Yemei Venezia*, in which he gave an account of the history of the Republic.⁵⁰

Through these famed figures and their connections to Italy, it becomes readily apparent that the island of Crete played no small role for the Jewish community in Italian Renaissance developments and sensibilities. The converse is also the case, that Italian Renaissance developments had an impact upon Cretan Jewish sensibilities. This is exemplified by the extensive correspondence between the Cretan scholar Saul ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, the purported son of Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, and between Isaac Abarbanel, who at the time of the correspondence was residing in Venice.⁵¹ Indeed, neither the Jewish communities of Italy nor that of Crete remained wholly insular. While the Jewish community of Crete maintained much of its Byzantine character as a community, it also took part in Renaissance developments typically characteristic of the Italian milieu and engaged in important intellectual exchanges, as exemplified above. In fact, this may have paved the way for the introduction of Byzantine sources into Italian kabbalah in the works of thinkers such as Yohanan Alemanno. Moreover, the syncretistic tendencies of Byzantine sources, not only in works such as *Sefer ha-Kanah* and *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, but also in the writings of Michael Balbo, to be discussed below, may have been a veritable precursor to Italian Renaissance developments of the same nature. This is also the situation for more philosophical, rational understandings of kabbalistic lore, which have characteristically been attributed by scholarship to the Italian environs.⁵² Indeed, as Dov Schwartz has recently noted, Byzantine kabbalists expressed an explicit and overwhelming appreciation for the writings of Abraham Abulafia, and Elnathan ben Moses Kalkish, who wrote his extensive *Even Sappir* in 1367 in either Trebizond or Constantinople, conveyed a patently rationalistic bent in relation to kabbalistic ideas.⁵³ Already prior to the advent of

⁵⁰ For more on this and on Capsali in general, see: Ann Brener, "Portrait of the Rabbi as a Young Humanist: A Reading of Elijah Capsali's 'Chronicle of Venice'," *Italia*, volume xi (1994), pp. 37–60.

⁵¹ See: Saul ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, *Questions*.

⁵² An analysis of the nature of Byzantine kabbalah in general, including but also beyond *Sefer ha-Temunah*, *Sefer ha-Kanah* and *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, and a more extensive analysis of the relation between Byzantine kabbalah and its Italian counterpart are desiderata. For the time-being, see the works of Moshe Idel on the Byzantine developments, and especially the sections of his *La Cabbalà in Italia* that touch upon these subjects.

⁵³ Dov Schwartz, "Conceptions of Astral Magic," p. 166 and p. 168.

the Italian Renaissance, many Byzantine-Jewish thinkers “offered a combination of philosophy and kabbalah,” in the words of Schwartz, “or at least expressed their high regard for mystical lore.”⁵⁴ Whatever the case may be for trajectories of influence, due to the political and cultural connections and the phenomenological parallels in textual sourcing and reasoning, intellectual activities and developments in Early Modern Crete should not and cannot accurately be perceived as something wholly separate from their Italian counterparts, of which they are actually very much a part. It is with this understanding that the unprecedented debate concerning metempsychosis between Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi and Michael ha-Cohen Balbo will be examined in the first few chapters to follow.

The second broad area of Italian Renaissance complexity which should be understood for the present study involves Spanish exiles who made their way to Italy. Indeed, the cataclysmic event of the expulsion from Spain in 1492 would prove to have a significant effect within the wider fabric of Italian Renaissance intellectual developments. This is not due to the fact of a complete transformation of kabbalistic thought into a fully redemptive system, as Gershom Scholem has claimed,⁵⁵ but rather, is due to the relocation of Spanish Jewish intellectuals to new centers of thought, and the mutual flow of knowledge that would come from these encounters. Indeed, not only were these thinkers affected by their new acquaintances with Italian Renaissance developments in thought; they also brought with them traditions and ideas from the Iberian Peninsula, which would be reflected in their thought and which they would sometimes more actively express and defend than when they were in Spain, in an attempt to preserve these ideas and to assert their superiority.

Many important Spanish thinkers made their way to Italy after the expulsion, including Joseph Ya'avetz, Isaac Aramah, and Judah and Isaac Abarbanel. Though none of these were professed kabbalists per se, those such as Joseph Ya'avetz and the Abarbanels were connected to the world of Spanish kabbalah and influenced by it. Indeed, they would often eschew philosophical thought, despite their strong philosophical training, for the assertion of a more faith-based,

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 173.

⁵⁵ See especially: *Major Trends*, pp. 244–251. For a well-founded critique of Scholem's historiography of exile and redemption, see: Idel, *kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 264–267.

prophetic type of knowledge as connected to the world of kabbalah. Many historians connect such an anti-philosophic attitude by Spanish Jewish intellectuals to the catastrophic events of 1391. Spurred by the venomous anti-Jewish propaganda conducted by the Archdeacon of Seville Ferran Martinez, the massacres of 1391 destroyed several Spanish Jewish communities and claimed several thousands of Jewish lives.⁵⁶ This destruction, which was accompanied by a series of mass conversions to Christianity, led many Spanish Jewish intellectuals to reflect upon their philosophical cultural heritage and to reject it as one of the impetuses of the breakdown in Jewish society. In its place was upheld a stronger sense of fideism, which further embraced and advanced kabbalistic lore as received tradition. Isaac Abarbanel followed suit in this type of “anti-rational” philosophy as laid down by his predecessors, and was perhaps the most influential of the Spanish exiles in Italy. Despite this particularly fourteenth and fifteenth century Spanish trend in his thought, he displays a peculiar connection to the world of Renaissance philosophy as well, which could be attributed to his activity in Italy. This unique mix within this one illustrious thinker will occupy us in chapter three.

In addition to such “anti-rational” Spanish philosophers in Italy as Ya'avetz and Abarbanel, Moshe Idel has noted that at least six Spanish kabbalists stayed in Italy from around 1490 to 1500. These include Isaac Mor Hayyim, Joseph ibn Shraga, Joseph Alcastiel, Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi, Isaac ben Hayyim ha-Cohen, and Judah Hayyat.⁵⁷ These thinkers brought with them a very mythical type of kabbalah that was even more devoid of philosophical speculation than their “anti-rational” speculative contemporaries, and that saw itself as pure received tradition in contradistinction to impure foreign bodies of thought. Idel has referred to the last mentioned above, Judah Hayyat, as “the main representative of his generation of Spanish kabbalists,”⁵⁸ and he will be the focus of chapter four of this study.

It is important to note that immediately prior to the expulsion, kabbalistic creativity in Spain was scant. Idel notes that the important fifteenth century Spanish kabbalist Shem Tov ben Shem Tov even

⁵⁶ For more on the historic events and their effects, see: Assis, “Spanish Jewry—From Persecutions to Expulsion.”

⁵⁷ Idel, “Encounters,” p. 198, and idem, *La Cabbalà in Italia*, p. 258.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

complained that he could not even find a proper kabbalistic teacher.⁵⁹ Indeed, in his seminal *Sefer ha-Emunot*, Shem Tov writes, “I sought a teacher for myself and I did not find one, until I searched in some of the books of the wise men of the kabbalah, and I occupied myself with them for a long time.”⁶⁰ Notwithstanding this situation, kabbalah remained important to the intellectual elite as the anti-rational, revealed core of Jewish thought. Indeed, apart from kabbalists themselves, several fifteenth century Spanish philosophers, such as Abraham Bibago, integrated kabbalistic lore into their writings.⁶¹ In most such instances, however, similar to the account of Shem Tov, such lore would continue to be drawn from books and from the textual tradition.

Despite this shift in means of transmission and the greater appropriation of kabbalah by philosophers in the fifteenth century, Spanish kabbalah’s tenor would nevertheless remain esoteric and veiled in myth. Central to this esotericism were the continually important writings of the early thirteenth century Geronese thinker Nahmanides and his followers, as well as the later, more mythical Castilian elements of the *Zohar*, which would achieve quasi-canonical status. Indeed, the appropriation by non-kabbalists of Spanish kabbalistic elements would continue well after the expulsion, as is evinced in the figure of Isaac Abarbanel. Though he professes to be a non-kabbalist, within his writings, Abarbanel freely quotes from sources such as the *Bahir* and the *Zohar*. Throughout, he displays a great esteem for kabbalistic discourse in its more esoteric, Spanish form. As will be shown in chapter three, in regard to metempsychosis, Abarbanel integrates aspects of Renaissance Neoplatonism, yet often falls back upon Nahmanidean esotericism. Such seems to be the influence of his prior Iberian sensibilities as they meet the world of Italian Renaissance philosophy.

Apart from philosophical appropriation, Spanish kabbalah as its own specific entity ironically saw a greater flowering of creativity outside of Spain, after the expulsion. This is exemplified in works such as Yehuda Hayyat’s *Minhat Yehuda*, which purports to be a specifically Spanish interpretation of the classical Spanish kabbalistic text that gained its

⁵⁹ Idel, “Spanish kabbalah after the Expulsion,” p. 166.

⁶⁰ *Sefer ha-Emunot*, 26b, op. cit., Gottlieb, *Studies*, p. 351. “בקשתי לי מלמד ולא מצאתי עד שחפשתי במקצת ספרי חכמי הקבלה והתעסקתי בהם זמן רב.”

⁶¹ In his *Derekh ‘Emunah*, Bibago cites *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the *Zohar*, and *Ma’arekhet ha-Elohut*, as well as *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Shiur Komah* and the *Hekhalot* literature. See Allan Lazaroff, p. 3 and the references there.

greatest popularity in Italy, *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*. Indeed, Hayyat's work is heavily based on Zoharic writings and explicitly elevates the *Zohar* to an exalted position. The reason for such a flowering of Spanish kabbalistic literature and the assertion of Zoharic supremacy after the expulsion requires a more detailed analysis,⁶² but it could very well be related to the uprooting of Spanish Jewry and the subsequent feeling of a need for preservation. In the case of Hayyat, this process seems to be related to his encounter with variant, Italian forms of kabbalah and a desire to assert the preeminence of the more esoteric, mythical kabbalah of Spain. As will be shown in chapter four, this is paradoxically coupled with a dialectical integration of elements from the "other" form of kabbalah that he seeks to refute in his assertion of Spanish kabbalistic dominance.

The third broad area of Italian Renaissance complexity to be treated here involves that to which Hayyat was responding, namely, native fifteenth century Italian developments in kabbalah. Moshe Idel has noted three central pillars of Italian kabbalah as it took form from its early stage in the thirteenth century until the beginning of the sixteenth century.⁶³ These are Abraham Abulafia who, though Spanish, composed most of his works in Italy, Menahem Recanati, who was the first native son of Italy to significantly infuse Zoharic thought into the culture, and the highly influential book *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*. These three figures all share one common characteristic, namely, a predominantly speculative bent with an attenuation of myth. As Idel writes, "the mythical conception of the Divinity which characterized the *Zohar* and the later works of Gikatilla was either unknown to them or incompatible with their way of thought."⁶⁴ Indeed, the three pillars mentioned are more systematically speculative in nature than the forms of kabbalistic thought that would take hold in Spain, and they seem to share a greater affinity with philosophy.

Examples of this affinity between the pillars of Italian kabbalah and philosophy abound. Abulafia, who wrote no less than three commentaries on the philosophical *summum* of Judaism, *The Guide of the Perplexed* of Maimonides, emphasizes an intellectualist kabbalah throughout his writings, which sees *unio mystica* as the highest goal. Recanati, though

⁶² For the time being, see: Idel, "Spanish kabbalah after the Expulsion."

⁶³ Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations," p. 109.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

steeped in the *Zohar*, stresses an instrumentalist view of the *sefirot* and usually neutralizes the mythical elements of Zoharic thought. Finally, *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* systematizes its thought in an unprecedented manner for a kabbalistic work, writes in Neoplatonic terminology, such as that of unity and multiplicity, and seems to take a nominalist approach to the workings of the godhead. Through such writings, kabbalah comes to lose its more theosophical-theurgical value and takes on a more markedly philosophical tenor. Such was the general state of kabbalah as it took form upon the Italian Peninsula. This is in part due to the force of influence of the kabbalistic thinkers mentioned, and in part due to the fact that works such as the *Zohar* were relatively unknown in Italy until the last decade of the fifteenth century. During this period, copies of it were brought to Italy by refugees from the Iberian Peninsula.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, by that time, the philosophic approach to kabbalah had already had over two-hundred years to take root and had already developed in its own unique manner.⁶⁶ Thinkers coming from Spain and other areas had no choice but to contend with the likes of Elia Genazzano and Yohanan Alemanno, two thinkers who were both raised on, and representatives of native trends.

It is important to note that this philosophical approach to kabbalah meshed with the Renaissance ideal of comprehensive learning. According to this principle, the *studia humanitatis*, which consists of the five academic disciplines of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy, aims to create a *homo universalis*, a universal man who is well-rounded in all of the important areas of human scholarship.⁶⁷ Jewish scholars of the period borrowed this idea and framed the *homo universalis* by the Hebrew phrase *hakham kolel*, which denoted a scholar who excelled in several areas of both Jewish and secular learning and who sought the attainment of comprehensive intellectual perfection.⁶⁸ Under this type of rubric, kabbalah was utilized in an eclectic fashion and was commingled with material drawn from other systems of thought. This was possible due to its philosophical nature as it had taken root in Italy. Viewed as a type of speculative lore like Aristotelianism or

⁶⁵ Tirosch-Samuelson, "Philosophy and kabbalah: 1200–1600," p. 242.

⁶⁶ For a detailed analysis of these historical processes, see: Idel, *La Cabbalà in Italia (1280–1510)*.

⁶⁷ For a definitive history of this idea, see: Kristeller, "Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance," especially pp. 571–574.

⁶⁸ For more on this, see: Tirosch-Rothschild, *Between Worlds*, especially pp. 66–73 and pp. 105–138.

Platonism, kabbalah was most often studied autodidactically by Italian Renaissance thinkers from books such as those of Abulafia, Recanati and *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*. In this manner, it was given over to a degree of hermeneutical freedom and was ultimately seen as an ancient theoretical science, interpreted through variant means. Chapter five will discuss this perception of kabbalah as an ancient science alongside other forms of speculative thought in the writings of Genazzano. Genazzano's wide range of humanist learning will become apparent, as will his unique understanding of the interplay between kabbalah and philosophy in relation to the idea of metempsychosis, which views the former as a more solidly grounded strand of ancient speculative lore than the latter. Chapter six will display Alemanno as an outstanding representative of the Italian philosophical syncretic tendency. Somewhat of a *hakham kollel* himself, Alemanno utilized an unprecedented number of variant kabbalistic sources in the shaping of his own ideas on metempsychosis; chapter six will analyze this unique usage, along with Alemanno's own neutralization of the mythical elements within these sources in a successful attempt to form a more philosophical reading of the kabbalistic idea of metempsychosis.

The final strand that makes up the complex fabric of Italian Renaissance thought, to be examined in this study in relation to conceptions of metempsychosis, involves the world of Christian humanists and their relation to the Jewish world. Indeed, Jewish thought developed in an unprecedented manner in Italy of the Renaissance period due to the fact that many of the most creative Jewish thinkers, including Alemanno, were in direct communication with leading figures of Christian Renaissance thought. Ruderman and Idel have both noted that for the first time in the history of Western thought, postbiblical Judaism was openly seen by important Christians as representing a valuable dimension of the human experience, resulting in a number of Christian intellectuals taking instruction from Jews.⁶⁹ This situation has to do with the same mode of thought within the Italian Jewish camp that holds that kabbalah is but one of several pertinent systems of speculative lore that should be studied alongside others in an attempt at achieving a comprehensive program of learning. This idea, which relates back to the *prisca theologia* tradition that was staunchly supported

⁶⁹ Ruderman, "The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought," p. 395; Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations," p. 107.

and upheld by both Pico and Ficino, allowed for mutual exchange and a blurring of otherwise rigid boundaries.

It should be kept in mind that this blurring of boundaries does not indicate a sense of sudden tolerance, affability, and an eradication of animosities between Jews and Christians during the Renaissance. Indeed, the two final subjects of study here, Pico and Ficino, attest to the opposite tendency. In the case of Pico, there are clear indications that through Hebrew learning, he was in fact seeking missionary tools with which to convert the Jews. In his *Heptaplus* of 1489 he clarifies his purpose. There he states concerning his learning of the Hebrew tradition, "Whatever we detect foreign to the truth of the Gospels we shall refute to the extent of our power, while whatever we find holy and true we shall bear off from the synagogue, as from a wrongful possessor, to ourselves, the legitimate Israelites."⁷⁰ In the case of Ficino, there is an indication of the opposite tendency, namely, that through the proper use of Platonic philosophy, the Jews can be refuted. In a letter to Domenico Benivieni describing disputations between two Jews against the Christian convert Flavius Mithridates at Pico's house, he writes concerning the Jewish intellectuals: "[It does not] seem that they will be easy to refute unless the divine Plato enters the debate, the invincible defender of the holy religion."⁷¹ In both cases, the blurring of boundaries serves a polemical purpose. In the case of Pico, the purpose is to erase sharp distinctions, to appropriate (or to re-appropriate, as he sees it) that which he views to be positive, and in the process, to win over converts. In the case of Ficino, the purpose seems to be to assert the primacy of Christianity through Plato, who perhaps by no coincidence, was used during the period by autodidacts such as Alemanno in order to interpret kabbalistic thought. In an interesting reverse, which will be shown in chapters seven and eight respectively, in the case of metempsychosis, Pico does not relate to kabbalistic thought at all but rather relies upon the Neoplatonic interpretations of Plotinus, while Ficino does appropriate some ideas from kabbalah.

Scholarship has indeed considered this blurring of boundaries from the angle of Jews who borrowed from humanist culture, from the angle of Jews who taught their own specific lore to humanists, and

⁷⁰ *Heptaplus*, p. 107: "Denique quicquid alienum ab evangelica veritate deprehendemus confutabimus pro virili, quicquid sanctum et verum, a synagoga, u tab iniusto possessore ad nos, legitimos Israelitas transferemus" (Latin text, pp. 246–247).

⁷¹ Quoted in Ruderman, "Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought," p. 406.

from the angle of humanists such as Pico, who appropriated such ideas into their own systems of thought. The baptism of Jewish ideas from the side of Christians and the giving of a *brit* to humanist ideas from the side of Jews, as well as polemics from both sides, have also been considered. More recently, scholars have attempted to provide an even wider picture by allowing for even more blurred boundaries; this is through the realization of an oftentimes greater continuum of thought than has been previously been realized, between the Jewish and the Christian worlds of the Renaissance.⁷² This type of scholarship does not attempt to whitewash the tensions or differences, which indeed exist, but it does attempt to allow for greater complexity to show through in understanding the multi-streamed, dynamic flow of ideas and concepts. Such is the aim of the analyses of Pico and Ficino in the present study. Sometimes, as will be shown in the case with Pico on metempsychosis, a blatantly “Jewish” influence is peculiarly absent. This is despite the fact of his being steeped in kabbalistic learning. Other times, as will be shown with Ficino, kabbalistic thought comes to bear in seemingly peculiar Plotinian contexts concerning metempsychosis. This is despite his usual greater reliance upon Plato, and his scant display of kabbalistic knowledge in other places in his writings. In each of the two chapters on Pico and Ficino, the concept of metempsychosis will be sketched out in its wider philosophical context. This is not always in relation to particular Jewish or kabbalistic precedents, and is in order to allow for a fuller picture of the idea as it filters between Jewish and humanist thought of the Italian Renaissance. Together with the Cretan, Spanish-Italian, and native Italian kabbalistic threads, this last, humanistic thread will contribute to a fuller fabric of our understanding of Italian Renaissance kabbalah and Jewish philosophy as it relates to the idea of metempsychosis.

According to Aviezer Ravitzky, Jewish philosophy “is a philosophy which deals with a certain *problem* (or more precisely, with a certain type of problem), namely the confrontation or encounter of the non-philosophic Jewish sources and the non-Jewish philosophic sources.”⁷³

⁷² See, for example, Toussaint, “Ficino’s Orphic Magic, or, Jewish Astrology and Oriental Philosophy?: A note on ‘Spiritus’, the ‘Three Books of Life’, Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Zarza,” *Accademia* 2 (2000), pp. 19–31; Bartolucci, “Per una fonte cabalistica del ‘De christiana religione’: Marsilio Ficino e il nome de Dio,” *Accademia* 6 (2004), pp. 35–46; Bacchelli, *Giovanni Pico e Pier Leone da Spoleto*.

⁷³ Ravitzky, *History and Faith*, p. 4. Italics are in the original.

Under this definition, much of the speculation of Jewish thinkers in fifteenth century Italy, including by those traditionally thought to be more “traditional” kabbalists such as the Spanish thinker Judah Hayyat and the particularistic scholar Elia Hayyim ben Binyamin of Genazzano, can be considered to be Jewish philosophy. Even if filtered through prior Jewish sources, the usage of theories such as Neoplatonic emanationism and Aristotelian intellection in order to advance ideas of biblical, prophetic and kabbalistic supremacy indeed involves the “problem” of encounter about which Ravitzky writes. Interestingly, the thought of non-Jewish philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino, who evoke the Jewish kabbalah in support of their philosophic doctrines, can be seen to be working by the same type of movement, though from the reverse angle. Within this schema, a process of blurring begins to take place, in which inside and outside begin to become indistinguishable in the philosophical project.

In a recent study on the subject, Giuseppe Veltri notes the *contradictio in adiecto* inherent in the term “Jewish philosophy,” and states: “The more a Jewish approach to philosophy is emphasized, or denied, and thus becomes a prominent object of academic debate, the more radically it forces the question as to the essence, identity, and continuity of Jewish culture as compared to culture in general.”⁷⁴ The present study takes this perspicacious argument for *contradictio in adiecto* into account, and indeed seeks to plumb the depths of identity, continuity, and Jewish cultural formation as compared to “culture in general” during the Renaissance, not by forcing the question, but by allowing for its varied expressions through the thinkers examined. Indeed, much of the discussion of many of the thinkers discussed here centers around specifically kabbalistic questions such as the nature of the *sefirot*, and many, including professedly non-kabbalists such as Isaac Abarbanel, invoke sources such as the *Zohar* and the *Bahir*. This, together with the primacy accorded to the received tradition, indicates a strong kabbalistic element in their thought, and a strong *vie* for a particularly Jewish sense of ascendancy. Taken together with the intellectual exchanges between Jewish and Christian elites, such as those between Yohanan Alemanno and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, with the appropriation and transformation of kabbalistic ideas by the likes of Ficino, and with the exchanges between Jewish elites from variegated cultural

⁷⁴ *Renaissance Philosophy in Jewish Garb*, p. 14.

backgrounds, such as those between Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi and Michael Balbo, this gives rise to a complex, polychromatic picture of Jewish thought in fifteenth century Italy. This goes beyond “Jewish” philosophy, and also beyond “kabbalah.”

In the words of Elliot Wolfson, “it is misleading to view kabbalah... as singular and monolithic; it is rather a polymorphous entity informed by distinct patterns and structures conveyed in symbolic and mythical images.”⁷⁵ To this should be added the assertion that it is misleading to view general Jewish thought in fifteenth century Italy in monolithic terms, and that the kabbalah of the era was a polymorphous entity conveyed not only in symbolic and mythical images, but by philosophical speculation and parlance as well. Instead of a resort to reductive terms of taxonomical typologies, which, according to Moshe Idel “risks producing conceptual and historical misunderstandings,”⁷⁶ it is more accurate to allow for voices of diversity and complexity regarding general fifteenth century Italian Jewish thought, and regarding ruminations on metempsychosis specifically. In this context, it is important to heed the warning of Idel that “without being able to discern differences among the different schools and models, and without attempting to understand the manner in which they were harmonized in a totalizing system, how they encountered one another, how they were ordered, hierarchically or otherwise, and without accounting for tensions and frictions that characterized their coexistence in the same writings, the study of Jewish mysticism will remain a relatively sterile history of ideas or themes.”⁷⁷ Due to the inherent complexities of fifteenth century Italian Jewish thought, an analysis of the dynamic idea of metempsychosis during the period allows for a move beyond sterility and into the dynamic picture of the multifaceted nature of Jewish thought itself.

Contributing to the complexities of the dynamic idea of transmigration that go beyond mere typologies is the very sociological fact of migration itself. Italy during the period under examination, including Candia, which was then under Venetian rule, acted as a nexus point for the Levantine, Sephardic, Ashkenazic and native Italian Jewish communities due to its location as a major hub of migration patterns.⁷⁸ Such a position led to an influx and a more fluid exchange of various

⁷⁵ Wolfson, “The Tree that is All,” p. 69.

⁷⁶ Idel, *kabbalah and Eros*, p. 14.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ See: Robert Bonfil, “Aliens Within,” p. 264.

ideas as developed in disparate cultural landscapes. That which Moshe Idel terms “the mobility factor”⁷⁹ in the constant reshaping of Jewish thought, that is, the movement of intellectuals between distinct centers of ideation, led to new confrontations, novel assertions of older ideas, and fresh syntheses between variant ideas. As has been mentioned, two of the thinkers to be treated in this book, Isaac Abarbanel and Judah Hayyat, were prominent Spanish scholars who arrived upon Italian soil, prompting such assertions and interpretations that may very well have gone undeveloped in written form had they not come into contact with alternative modes of thought. Whatever the case may have been had they been able to remain in their Iberian environs, there is no disputing what indeed was. Though Abarbanel passed most of his life in Iberia and arrived in Italy at the age of fifty-five, most of his works were written in Italian lands, including all of those that discuss the mystical doctrine of metempsychosis: his messianic trilogy, the completion of his seminal commentary on the book of Deuteronomy, and his most important philosophico-mystical work, *Mif’alot Elohim*.⁸⁰ In the case of Judah Hayyat, he explicitly affirms that his arrival in Mantova and the bequest of “notable wise men” from that community were the stimuli behind the writing of his famous commentary on *Ma’arekhet ha-Elohut*, entitled *Minhat Yehudah*.⁸¹ As such, the evidence seems to support the “mobility factor”, as opposed to any specific typology, in the development of the writings of these two thinkers.

Prior to the expulsion from Spain, Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, a man of “Ashkenazic stock who had joined the exile of Jerusalem in Spain”⁸² made his way to the island of Crete, upon which he waged an intellectual battle concerning metempsychosis against a community leader of the old guard, Michael Balbo. In this case too, the “mobility factor” and the clash of cultural and intellectual ideals seem to have played a major part in the development and production of literary

⁷⁹ Idel, “On Mobility, Individuals and Groups,” p. 147. Corresponding to the mobility factor in Judaism, Charles Schmitt points to a strong professorial mobility in late fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian universities in his plea against the claim of regional traditions and in his assertion that there are “no good reasons to support the traditional distinction between ‘Paduan Aristotelianism [or Averroism]’ and ‘Florentine Platonism’” (Schmitt, “Philosophy and Science in Sixteenth-Century Italian Universities,” p. 302).

⁸⁰ For more on the composition of Abarbanel’s works, see: Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel’s Stance Toward Tradition*, pp. 27–57.

⁸¹ Judah Hayyat, *Minhat Yehudah*, introduction.

⁸² *Questions of Saul ha-Cohen*, quoted in Ravitzky, p. 117.

activity, both from the side of the “mobile” Ashkenazi and from the side of the resident Balbo. Apart from the strict mobility of thinkers as in the above cases, the influx of texts from variegated centers of thought also shaped the thought processes of scholars. This is the case not only for the above mentioned thinkers, but for theorists such as Elia Hayyim da Genazzano and Yohanan Alemanno, who were also influenced by the flow of information to and from Christian elites, who themselves in turn were also affected by these exchanges. This influx and complex flow of ideas makes Italy an important nexus of examination in the multifaceted development of Jewish thought, with metempsychosis as a good point of departure from which to gauge the multifarious ideas, opinions and ideational changes.

Notwithstanding the need for extreme reticence in terms of grand narratives and rigid typological classifications and the need to allow for variant voices, it is important to note that patterns of distinction in thought, though not hard and fast, do exist between centers, between schools of thought, and between individual thinkers. Without recognizing this, scholarship runs the risk of becoming amorphous. Hence, there is a need for a delicate balance. Sometimes cultural divergences are due to the texts available to a given community or to a specific thinker, sometimes they are due to divergences in halachic standards as will be seen in the case of the debate in Candia, and sometimes they are due to political and cultural situations, such as Yohanan Alemanno’s expanded praise of the virtues of Florence and of Lorenzo de Medici,⁸³ under whose watchful eye he operated. Yet other times, differences in thought may be attributed to personal proclivities and alliances. In the case of late fifteenth century Italy, it is important to note that Zoharic literature was not accorded as central of a status as it elicited in Spain or would later appreciate in much of the Ottoman empire, parts of North Africa⁸⁴ and Safed. It is also important to mention the fact that in most Italian Renaissance cases, the *Zohar*’s usage and invocation were filtered through the writings of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century Italian kabbalist Menahem Recanati, who often mitigated the mythic elements and inclined to a more philosophical understanding.

⁸³ See: Arthur Michael Lesley, Jr., *The Song of Solomon’s Ascents by Yohanan Alemanno*, pp. 76–78. For a separate study devoted to Alemanno’s praise, see: Abraham Melamed, “The Hebrew ‘Laudatio’ of Yohanan Alemanno.”

⁸⁴ Jonathan Garb notes, for example, the stark blatancy of the *Zohar*’s lack from the circle of David ha-Levi in Dar’aa. See Garb, *Manifestations of Power*, p. 226.

This has to do, in part, with a paucity of Zoharic texts;⁸⁵ according to Robert Bonfil, the evidence of extant fifteenth century Italian booklists clearly shows that “the entire Zoharic corpus—the *Ẓohar*, *Tikkunei ha-Ẓohar*, *Midrash ha-Ne’elam*, *Midrash Ruth*, etc.—is found only in one isolated case.”⁸⁶ It also has to do with a vie for intellectual hegemony, according to which the prophetic, philosophical kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia struck roots on Italian soil already in the latter part of the thirteenth century.⁸⁷ Under such conditions, kabbalah came to be viewed in many Italian circles as a speculative type of lore that was studied auto-didactically from extant texts, and that was interpreted more freely than its strictly Zoharic counterpart, on the basis of philosophic and other forms of knowledge.⁸⁸ It is from this background that more eclectic interpretations of ideas such as metempsychosis, as based on wider sources and theories, were able to burst forth and to test the boundaries of Jewish knowledge in their confrontation with diverse modes of thought, not only within the world of Jewish discourse, but with non-Jewish ideas as well.

Ancillary effects of the more “universalistically” perceived confrontation of concepts and the testing of ideational boundaries, which had strong implications for Italian Renaissance ruminations on metempsychosis, were particularistic contentions of superiority and the assertion of national boundaries.⁸⁹ From the side of internal Jewish dispute, this involved claims to greater authenticity, usually from those coming from outside of the “native” milieu, as will be shown with Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi in Crete and with Judah Hayyat in Mantova. From the side of interactions with the non-Jewish world, it entailed subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle polemics favoring the viability of Jewish particularity in the face of the blurring of separatist boundaries and the opening up of kabbalah and Jewish thought to the non-Jewish world. As David Ruderman has written, “In this context of a new universal

⁸⁵ See: Isaiah Tishby, “The Controversy Concerning *Sefer ha-Ẓohar* in Sixteenth Century Italy” [Hebrew], *Hikrei kabbalah U’Sheluhoteha*, Jerusalem, 1982, pp. 91–92.

⁸⁶ Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy*, pp. 279–280.

⁸⁷ See: Idel, “Abraham Abulafia and Menahem ben Benjamin in Rome,” and idem, “The Ecstatic kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia in Sicily and its Transmission during the Renaissance.”

⁸⁸ See: Idel, “Particularism and Universalism in kabbalah,” p. 331; and Hava Tirosch-Samuelson, “Philosophy and kabbalah: 1200–1600,” p. 242.

⁸⁹ For more on this, see: Bonfil, “Expressions of the Singularity of the Jewish People.” For more on the idea of alterity and Jewish superiority in kabbalistic thought in general, see: Elliot Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, especially chapters 1 and 2.

image of human experience, Jews were pressed to respond creatively to a dramatically new intellectual and spiritual challenge. Clearly, one major way to justify themselves and their own distinctiveness was to evoke a renewed image of the superiority of Jewish culture.”⁹⁰ One way of affecting this was to deem the kabbalistic doctrine utilized by the likes of Pico della Mirandola and his Jewish and convert cohorts to be inauthentic to the Jewish spirit, as was done by the prominent Jewish Averroist Elia Delmedigo in his seminal *Behinat ha-Dat*.⁹¹ Another way was to endeavor to limit kabbalistic speculation to its more particularistic, esoteric lore, as was attempted by Judah Hayyat and later by Moshe Cordovero of Safed in his criticisms of Italian kabbalah.⁹² Or, as Ruderman suggests, “one could remain solidly within Jewish culture by expanding the character of Judaism to include magic, Neoplatonism, and the *prisca theologia*, as Yohanan Alemanno had done.”⁹³ At the heart of these variant approaches stood a perceived need for national expression, a need that would make its way into reflections on the doctrine of metempsychosis.

It is important in this context to note that “nation” in the view of these thinkers does not constitute the modernist definition of theorist Benedict Anderson as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”⁹⁴ This is not only due to the fact that these thinkers operated in a world and context prior to the establishment of the modern nation-state, but also because of the fact

⁹⁰ David B. Ruderman, “The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought,” p. 415.

⁹¹ Delmedigo, *Sefer Behinat ha-Dat*, edited by Jacob Ross, Tel Aviv: University of Tel Aviv Press, 1984, p. 92. For a different interpretation of Delmedigo’s thought, which argues for a rejection of Neoplatonism and a positive Averroistic understanding of kabbalah by Delmedigo, including the consideration of metempsychosis, see: Kalman Bland, “Elijah del Medigo’s Averroist Response to the Kabbalas of fifteenth-century Jewry and Pico della Mirandola.” While Bland offers an interesting interpretation, I accept Moshe Idel’s criticism that “would del Medigo indeed believe in a valid content of the allegedly pure, and undistorted, namely non-Platonic, kabbalah, as claimed by Bland, he would make an effort to offer such an interpretation.” As Idel notes, Delmedigo “disparaged the Kabbalists and the kabbalah both openly, but also in a subtle way also hiddenly, by pointing out the resemblances of this mystical lore to Neoplatonism, a disparaging comparison for an Aristotelian thinker, without making any effort to offer another, Aristotelian, alternative explanation.” See Idel, “Jewish Mystical Thought in the Florence of Lorenzo il Magnifico,” pp. 31–32.

⁹² For more on Cordovero’s criticisms of Italian kabbalah, see: Bracha Sack, *In the Gates of the kabbalah of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero* [Hebrew], Be’er Sheva: Ben Gurion University, 1995, p. 37, Idel, “Jewish Thinkers versus Christian kabbalah,” pp. 55–56, and idem, “On European Cultural Renaissances,” pp. 69–71.

⁹³ “The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought,” p. 416.

⁹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 6.

that for these thinkers, earthly political sovereignty held a position of secondary importance, at best, in their own understandings of national constitution. Nevertheless, Anderson's definition offers a valuable and interesting periscope from which to view such pre-modern ideas, in that the imagining of origins and of a sense of community does play a major role. Indeed, according to Anderson, the religious community, based on a commonality of language, acts as a fundamental precedent to modern and contemporary notions of nationality.⁹⁵ In the Jewish case, this not only constitutes the Hebrew language, but halachic standards and the common symbolic narratives of the sacred canon as well. It is around such issues that Italian Renaissance debates concerning metempsychosis were waged and it is through such means that particular ideas concerning metempsychosis were formed. As such, an exploration into these debates and ideas not only hinges upon national sensibilities, it sheds light upon the pre-modern "imagined community" of the Jewish people, both in the face of non-Jewish society and in the face of disparate Jewish communities.

Fifteenth century Italy witnessed notable developments in notions of metempsychosis, partly due to a turn in philosophical psychology to more homocentric notions, partly due to an influx of texts, ideas and scholars and the meeting-points of various cultures, and partly due to a struggle for the assertion of national and cultural identity. Many other factors were involved as well, such as the exotericization of previously esoteric modes of thought, and indeed, no single factor stands at the crux of the process of these developments. Rather, the picture remains as complex as the doctrine of metempsychosis itself. What is certain is that in late fifteenth century Italy, the fluid doctrine of metempsychosis advanced to a position of theoretical prominence. Aided by the greater acceptance of both prior kabbalistic concepts and Neoplatonic thought, which were both esteemed elements of *prisca theologia* in Italian Renaissance Jewish and Christian camps alike, the doctrine of metempsychosis began to be taken seriously, even by those outside of the strictly mystical camps. As such, by turning to this increasingly popular doctrine of individual continuity in all of its complexities, greater light can be shed upon the dynamics, complications and consequences of Italian Renaissance thought, both Jewish and Christian analogously, concerning the creation of man in the divine image and the resulting uniqueness of his distinctive soul.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 12–19.

CHAPTER ONE

METEMPSYCHOSIS, PHILOSOPHY AND KABBALAH: THE DEBATE IN CANDIA

I came out against the kabbalist...to fight him and to set judgment against him and the things that were according to belief...And I clarified for him that the belief in *gilgul* is a belief of those who are mistaken.¹

In the year 1466 in the Jewish community of Candia on the island of Crete, a heated debate of unprecedented nature erupted concerning the doctrine of metempsychosis, the question of this doctrine's veracity, and the question of its place within Jewish thought.² At the two ends of this debate stood two prominent figures, Rabbi Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi and Rabbi Michael Balbo, who acted as the spokesmen for two respective ideological factions.³ The former, a man of Ashkenazic lineage who had lived for a time in Venice and was relatively new to the community of Candia,⁴ initiated the debate with an attack on the local authorization of levirate marriage by questioning its purported theological connection to the doctrine of metempsychosis. This in turn led him to wage a philosophical war against the concept of metempsychosis itself. The latter, a scholarly seasoned, senior spiritual guide of

¹ Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi in his letter to Mestre and Jerusalem of 1467, Vatican ms. 254, fol. 84b. "ויצאתי לקראת הקבלן...להלחם בו ולערוך נגדו דין ודברים ויהי ידי אמונה...וביארתי לו שאמונת הגלגול היא אמונת הטועים."

² The bulk of the debate exists in four tracts contained both within Vatican ms. 105 (the ledger of Rabbi Michael Balbo) and in Vatican ms. 254 (the record of Rabbi Moshe Ashkenazi, which also contains a satire written by him against the kabbalists). Other prior exchanges, hinted at by the immediately confutative language of Ashkenazi's first tract, are either no longer extant or have not been brought to light.

³ The fact that two groups, rather than two isolated individuals were involved in this argument is attested to within the letter sent by Ashkenazi to the Rabbis of Mestre seeking a halachic ruling, and also by Balbo's attestation that he would have remained silent on the matter had it only involved Ashkenazi's opinion, and had he not observed Ashkenazi "sweetening the secret of these things among some of our people, your comrades and associates." See Vatican ms. 254, fol. 84a and ms. 105, fol. 216b.

⁴ See Rabbi Yehuda Obernik of Mestre's responsa to Ashkenazi's halachic question concerning levirate marriage (written in 1468), printed in Efraim Kupfer, "On the Cultural Image," pp. 128–130.

the community from a long family line of Candian leaders,⁵ came to the defense of both the doctrine of metempsychosis and its association with the institution of levirate marriage. Scrupulously responding to the philosophical war waged against him and his circle, Balbo's espousal of this very mystically charged doctrine took on a predominantly philosophical character.

Efraim Gottlieb and Aviezer Ravitzky have both gingerly analyzed the philosophical constitution of the debate, importantly emphasizing a common ground between the disputants of philosophical learnedness and argumentation.⁶ Both scholars have correctly surmised that Balbo, the kabbalist, excelled in and even surpassed his rival Ashkenazi, the philosopher, in the very area of philosophical erudition.⁷ Combined with the need to defend his position against the philosophical claims of Ashkenazi, Balbo's philosophical expertise not only provided a common foundation on which possible dispute and dialogue could occur, it naturally led the discussion in a philosophical direction. In the words of Gottlieb, "The attempt of Ashkenazi to reject the possibility of the existence of metempsychosis by means of philosophical proemia compelled Balbo to also use philosophical theses to prove that it is not in the hands of philosophy to necessarily cancel out the possibility of metempsychosis."⁸ The debate as it exists, then, is heavily immersed in philosophical language, even at the points where the efficacy of philosophy itself is being questioned.

The philosophical saturation of the debate led both Gottlieb and Ravitzky to conclude:

It is doubtful whether Balbo's defense of the belief in metempsychosis stemmed from a spiritual affinity to this belief. The impulse derived from motives of conservatism. One should not say that his outlook was anchored in the world of the kabbalah. The problems in which he was interested were philosophical in their essence.⁹

According to this view, philosophical expression in the account of Balbo connotes a particular philosophical affinity. His high esteem for the likes of Maimonides and Gersonides throughout his works, as well

⁵ For more on the activities of the Balbo family in Candia, see Zvi Malachi, "From the Writings of the Balbo Family of Candia."

⁶ Ravitzky, *History and Faith*, pp. 115–153; Gottlieb, *Studies*, pp. 370–396.

⁷ Gottlieb, p. 372; Ravitzky, p. 120.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

as his entry into speculation on matters such as the nature of the soul, the separate intellects, and the problem of multiplicity with respect to immaterial entities, ultimately cast Balbo as a philosopher. His use of kabbalistic notions, according to this claim, mainly acted to further his philosophical agenda. Such a claim is fundamentally mistaken, for two main reasons. First, it overlooks a schematization of the kabbalah, explicitly expressed by Balbo himself, which includes a strong philosophical element. Second, it does not take into account a separate kabbalistic treatise written by Balbo that expresses a strong appreciation for the mystical doctrine of metempsychosis.

According to Balbo's own formulation, there are three types of kabbalah.

The first type is kabbalah whose proofs are known from the Writings [i.e., the Tanach], which bear witness to it and are its evidence; it needs no validation other than the many biblical verses that teach about it. Indeed, among these verses there are those that are easy to understand and those that are hints, some close and some remote. The second type of kabbalah is that whose proofs are not known from biblical verses at all, but from the words of the sages of the Talmud alone. And the third type of kabbalah is *that whose proofs are reasoned*.¹⁰

Based on this account, Balbo's proclivity to philosophize within the main sections of the debate has little, if nothing to do with a clear-cut predilection for philosophy over kabbalah. Rather, a more nuanced picture ensues in which, along with the other two, Balbo resorts to the third type of kabbalah as based upon "reasoned proofs." Indeed, kabbalistic ideas of metempsychosis and an extreme appreciation for the kabbalistic tradition stood as the essential core of Balbo's claims;¹¹ philosophical erudition stood as a mere, limited means of bringing this core to light, along with the other two more superior means of biblical and talmudic exegesis. Viewed within the wider picture, philosophical

¹⁰ Vatican ms. 105, fol. 201b (emphasis mine). See also Paris ms. 800 45a–45b.

¹¹ Despite Ravitzky's initial support of Gottlieb's claim, he does go on to state that within the debate, "Balbo's chief concern was to establish the theoretical supremacy of the kabbalah while simultaneously disparaging philosophy" (p. 125). He proceeds to state concerning Balbo: "He sought to prove that rational analysis permitted belief in transmigration, and that Jewish prophetic and kabbalistic tradition actually compelled it" (p. 127). Here Ravitzky hits the nail on the head, although holding Balbo to narrowly be "a scholar of philosophic inclinations" (p. 153), he misses the mark within the wider picture and fails to come to a resolution between Balbo's seemingly contradictory tendencies.

form in the debate did not preclude kabbalistic ideation. Rather, it allowed the doctrine of metempsychosis to break forth from the shroud of secrecy onto the scene of thought so that it could be conceptually debated with Balbo's philosophical antagonist.

The second proof against Gottlieb's and Ravitzky's claim involves an epistle dealing with questions of metempsychosis, identified by Moshe Idel as a tract written by Balbo.¹² Within his epistle, Balbo draws up the same three-tiered schema of kabbalah as the one he presents within the debate, that of the Writings, that of the sages, and that of reasoned proofs. Here, however, he explains the first and second types of kabbalah in detail by bringing concrete kabbalistic interpretations of the section in Genesis dealing with the tree of knowledge, as based upon rabbinic sources. He explicitly states a desire to regard the first two types of kabbalah within the epistle and to "leave the third [i.e., that based on reasoned proofs] to its masters."¹³ This does not prevent him from employing philosophical language within the epistle, although true to his intent, most of his arguments surrounding metempsychosis there relate to the first two types of kabbalah as outlined by him. Such a tenor indicates a greater mooring in the world of kabbalah and a greater affinity to the doctrine of metempsychosis than allowed for by Gottlieb and Ravitzky.¹⁴ Only upon the assault of a philosophical

¹² Paris ms. 800, fols. 44–46, Oxford Bodleian 2292, fols. 39–51. For Idel's identification of this epistle, see his *Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine*, vol. 1, pp. 75–76. There, Idel claims that the epistle was a preliminary stage of the debate, written by Balbo to Ashkenazi. While the evidence indeed supports Idel's claim of Balbo's authorship, it points to the probability that the epistle was not directly part of the debate with Ashkenazi; rather, it was sent by Balbo to one of his faithful disciples. This assertion stems from the fact that beside Balbo's epistle as it exists in Paris ms. 800 and in Oxford Bodleian 2292 is another epistle, which poses the questions to which Balbo is directly answering (Paris fol. 44a and Oxford fols. 39b–40b. This second epistle was recently published in Gershon Scholem, *Shedim, Ruhot Ve'Neshamot: Researches in Demonology*, edited by Esther Liebes, Jerusalem: Ben Tzvi Institute, 2004, pp. 210–213). The author of this inquiring epistle does not attack the belief in metempsychosis, as does Ashkenazi in the debate, but rather supports the veracity of the doctrine and, through his questions, attempts to better understand its implications. As such, these manuscripts contain a didactic exchange and not a heated debate. Moreover, in his epistolary reply, Balbo refers to his interlocutor by terms such as "my son," and writes, "Out of my love for you, I judged you favorably in all regards" (Paris fol. 45a). Judging from the debate itself, Balbo had absolutely no sentiments such as these for Ashkenazi. It stands to reason, then, that Balbo's epistle was written to a faithful disciple, and not to a menacing adversary.

¹³ Paris ms. 800, fol. 45b.

¹⁴ In all likelihood, Gottlieb was unaware of this epistle and its connection to the debate, as Idel's identification was made six years after the publication of Gottlieb's article. In regard to Ravitzky, though he mentions Idel's assertion (p. 118, cf. 9), he

adversary did Balbo feel the need to garb his kabbalistic ideas within the philosophical language with which he was well acquainted and to enter into the third type of kabbalah as based upon reasoned proofs.

Notwithstanding Balbo's reservations within the epistle concerning the third type of kabbalah, a complex, nuanced mode of thought as based on his three-tiered model presents itself there regarding his relationship to both kabbalah and philosophy. This mode of thought not only serves to better locate Balbo on the map of Jewish Thought, it sheds new light on a question posed by Gottlieb as to why Balbo refrains from making extensive use of Zoharic literature in support of his arguments for metempsychosis. As recent scholarship has shown, certain circles of Byzantine kabbalah, of which Crete was traditionally a part, played a crucial role in the editing into an actual "book" and the transmission of Zoharic literature prior to its first concrete printing in Mantua in 1558.¹⁵ Balbo's father, Shabbetai,¹⁶ held a central position within this process. He was the copyist of the most complete and substantial extant *Zohar* manuscript, containing 306 pages and consisting of the Zoharic commentaries on *Hayyei Sarah*—*Ve'Etchanan*, the *Sifra de'Tsinuta* and the *Idra Raba*, the *Zohar Heichalot* of *Bereshit*, and a large section of *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*.¹⁷ Given the son's, Michael Balbo's position of prominence within the community, his extensive erudition, his support for kabbalistic notions and finally, his familial connections, it stands quite reasonable to assume that he was thoroughly familiar with Zoharic literature. Why, then, the restraint in employing this literature within his argument for the case of metempsychosis? Gottlieb posits that Balbo's restraint from utilizing the *Zohar* probably stemmed from a desire to refrain from complicating his argument, especially concerning the multiplicity of

does not relate to the letter at all within his article, and has admitted to me in private conversation unfamiliarity with the epistle. Had these two scholars been acquainted with the epistle, perhaps their respective accounts of Balbo's connection to kabbalah would have looked different.

¹⁵ Avraham Elqayam, "The Holy Zohar of Sabbetai Zvi" pp. 348–350.

¹⁶ For more on this figure, see: Shalom Rosenberg, "A Philosophical Meeting in Jerusalem at the End of the Fourteenth Century," pp. 419–423.

¹⁷ Toronto ms. Friedberg 5–015. See the findings of Malachi Bet-Arie concerning this manuscript in his letter to Israel Ta-Shma, printed in Ta-Shma, "Rabbi Joseph Karo Between Ashkenaz and Sefarad—On Research Concerning the Dissemination of the Zohar" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz*, 59 (1945), pp. 169–170, op. cit., Elqayam, p. 348. As Elqayam has interestingly shown in his above mentioned article, this manuscript of Balbo's father, Shabbetai, was indeed more important than the printed editions of the *Zohar*, even long after their publication; this manuscript was the one to eventually make its way into the hands of Shabbetai Zvi and to act as his main Zoharic text.

souls, by employing non-Aristotelian elements.¹⁸ A perusal of Balbo's epistle to his student, however, makes it clear that Balbo's abstinence from the *Zohar* was not a mere artifice for the sake of argument alone, as Gottlieb suggests. Rather, Balbo's abstinence from Zoharic thought goes much deeper and, as is evinced by his epistle, is quite consonant with his overall mode of thought.

Within the epistle, Balbo introduces a concept, originally developed by Maimonides,¹⁹ of the relationship between 'truth' (אמת) and 'belief' (אמונה). According to this idea, belief encounters truth in the mind's representation of the physical, or in Maimonides' words, "belief is not the notion that is uttered, but the notion that is represented in the soul when it has been averred of it that it is in fact just as it has been represented."²⁰ He continues,

There is no belief except after a representation; belief is the affirmation that what has been represented is outside the mind just as it has been represented in the mind. If, together with this belief, one realizes that a belief different from it is in no way possible and that no starting point can be found in the mind for a rejection of this belief or for the supposition that a different belief is possible, there is certainty.²¹

Basing himself upon this passage, Balbo states that in order to arrive at the "certainty" of beliefs which are kabbalah and to avoid beliefs which are doubtful, one needs to understand the kabbalah in three ways:²² intellectually, according to an understanding of biblical verses, and according to the words of the sages, who themselves already intellectually examined and scrutinized such beliefs. Balbo proceeds,

The imaginary kabbalah,²³ however, is represented by some of the kabbalists of the *sefirot* who call the divine thought *keter elyon*, or *avir kadmon* and the like. And they are perplexed as to the essence of their own thought.

¹⁸ Gottlieb, p. 374.

¹⁹ *The Guide*, part I, ch. 50, pp. 111–112. Balbo also brings this Maimonidean idea of 'belief' within the debate itself. See: Vatican ms. 254, fol. 39a.

²⁰ *Guide*, p. 111.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Paris ms. 800, fol. 46a. Herein lies the fusion of the idea of 'belief' with his three-tiered schema of kabbalah.

²³ הקבלה הדמיונית. This could be understood, as in English, as a derogatory term, meaning "unreal kabbalah," as opposed to the "real" kabbalah as outlined by Balbo in the preceding section. It could also be understood to mean "the kabbalah of images," in which the *sefirot* act as images, or symbols, that stand above all else in their level of importance. Such, indeed, would be perceived to be problematic for one like Balbo, who holds to a more Maimonidean theology, in which representation of the godhead comes to be inconceivable.

I do not fancy their kabbalah, and I do not consider them to be exalted above the masses, but rather very much less than the masses in one respect; this is that because of what they have received and imagined to be the Truth [concerning thought and intellection], they neglect their studies and do not care for submitting to reality any true belief.²⁴

Picturing intellection in the mythical archon of *keter elyon* causes the sefirotic kabbalists to neglect any type of substantiation of belief with external reality as proposed by Maimonides, causing slovenliness in learning and ultimately, a lack in the intellect. This endangers the possibility of true knowledge through belief, ultimately endangering the possibility of conjunction with God and the attainment of the world-to-come.

Balbo's formulation, while on the surface very philosophical and in some respects anti-kabbalistic, conforms quite perfectly to the intellectualist element of the ecstatic kabbalah of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia. In the words of Moshe Idel, "Abulafia advocates a theology similar to that of Maimonides in lieu of the kabbalistic theosophy; he stresses primarily the understanding of God as Intellect/Intelligible/Act of Intellection, a definition allowing for the union of the actualized human intellect and the divine Intellect."²⁵ Apart from that system which modern scholarship deems the "theosophical-theurgical school," which concerns itself primarily with the *sefirotic* workings of the godhead as pristinely represented by the complex of the *Zohar*, this type of kabbalah concerns itself with the intellectual qualities of God and correspondingly, with the rationale of those commandments that can be understood and with the development of the human intellect as much as is possible in order to affect personal salvation. Within this schema, no room exists for a purely hypostatic understanding of the *sefirot*, as this complicates the pure and simple intellectually self-cognizing intellect, which is God.²⁶ This is quite consonant with Balbo's passage cited above, showing that he adopted and adapted these specific elements of Abulafia's thought. Seen in this light, Balbo's propensity for Maimonidean theory, which has been mistakenly attributed to a tendency to philosophy over kabbalah,

²⁴ Paris ms. 800, fol. 46a.

²⁵ Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, English version, p. 8.

²⁶ For the problem of multiplicity within the *sefirotic* kabbalah, see: Abraham Abulafia, "V'Zot L'Yehuda" in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, p. 30. There, he compares the hypostatic structure of ten *sefirot* to the trinity of Christianity, only with even greater multiplicity introduced.

as well as his reticence in regard to hypostatic-sefirotic thought, such as that presented in the *Zohar*, become clearer. Balbo was neither primarily a philosopher who championed the kabbalistic belief in metempsychosis for purposes of conservatism, nor was he a theosophical kabbalist who purposefully avoided Zoharic lore in order to keep from complicating his arguments. Rather, like Abulafia before him, Balbo fit into a more complex, syncretistic mode of philosophical kabbalah.

Despite the taciturnity in the debate concerning most portions of the *Zohar* and other theosophical texts, both Balbo and Ashkenazi invoked precedent kabbalistic as well as philosophical literature concerning metempsychosis in order to make their respective cases.²⁷ This brought the tradition of censure and defense concerning the doctrine to its unprecedented peak in an open, dynamic disputation. Never before in the recorded history of Jewish literature had two contemporary scholars at the forefront of two antithetical societal camps candidly gone head-to-head over this doctrine, which was previously considered to be arcane by its very nature. Concerning its secrecy, Nahmanides, the phoenix of his own school of Geronese kabbalah had previously written, "It is one of the hidden mysteries of the Torah, except for those who have received it by a tradition. It is forbidden to expound it in writing, and useless to talk about it in allusions."²⁸ Similarly, the great Castilian kabbalist, Rabbi Todros ha-Levi Abulafia, though unveiling more than Nahmanides by actually interpreting the doctrine, wrote about it that it is "deep, deep, and who can [possibly] find it?"²⁹ In one form or another, an air of secrecy enshrouded and accompanied this doctrine.

²⁷ On the kabbalistic side, Gottlieb mentions the use and citations of Todros Abulafia's *Otzar ha-Kavod*, the anonymous *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, Menahem Recanati, and Isaac of Acco's *Me'irat Einayim* (Gottlieb, p. 373). Moshe ben Nahman, Isaac ibn Latif as well as the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* to Ruth (although probably taken from Recanati) should also be mentioned. Ravitzky adds the *Bahir*, *Shiur Komah*, and Joseph Gikatilla to the list, while on the philosophical side pointing out the use of Maimonides, Falaquera, Joseph ibn Kaspi, Narbonni, the Ralbag, Hasdai Crescas, Samuel ibn Tibbon, Hillel of Verona, Hanoch ben Solomon al-Constantini, Jedaiah ha-Penini, Aristotle, al-Farabi, Avicenna, al-Ghazali, and Averroes (Ravitzky, p. 120). To this list should be added Abulafia, ibn Ezra, Albalag, al-Batalyawsi (mistaken for Ptolemy), Galen, Plato and Pythagoras. In addition, use was made of the neither kabbalistic nor philosophic commentator David Kimchi and of the traveler Benjamin Metudela.

²⁸ "Sha'ar Ha-Gemul," *The Writings of Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman*, vol. II, p. 279. See also Scholem, "Gilgul: the Transmigration of Souls," pp. 207–212.

²⁹ "עמוק, עמוק, עמוק ומי ימצאנו?" See: *Otzar ha-Kavod*, tractate Berachot, 9a.

Although both Ashkenazi and Balbo both expounded upon it in writing and talked about it in allusions, neither one outrightly ignored or took lightly the intent of such an injunction as that of Nahmanides. Indeed, within the debate itself, both Ashkenazi and Balbo attest to the supreme secrecy of the matters being discussed and the preference for silence concerning these selfsame matters. Both also claim to have been forced out of silence by the other who, in each one's respective opinion, has wrongfully expounded upon these matters, both in terms of the erroneous exposition itself and in terms of the uncovering of intentionally shrouded topics.³⁰

Whether or not either of the disputants was telling the truth regarding his motives for breaching the silence concerning the secretive subjects pertaining to metempsychosis,³¹ it is of utmost importance to note each one's recognition of the inherent problems of exotericism and esotericism as inevitably present in an open, dynamic debate. Each disputant desired to portray himself, as opposed to his adversary, as the holder of true arcana which should (or could) not be explicated, while simultaneously holding the opposite tendency to openly elucidate such materials in the face of an ominously perceived rivalry.³² The first of these above mentioned tendencies involved not only a claim to doctrinal sublimity, but on the philosophical side also the need to be adept before tackling such issues so as not to dangerously get caught up in seeming contradictions,³³ and on the kabbalistic side the intrinsic ineffability of the doctrine itself and therefore the desire to stay away from the paradoxical pitfalls of human limitation.³⁴ Ultimately, however, public

³⁰ See Ashkenazi on this at the beginning of his first tract, Vatican ms. 105, fol. 195a and Balbo in his second tract, Vatican ms. 105, fol. 216b.

³¹ From the epistle in Paris ms. 800 and in Oxford Bodleian 2292, it would seem that there is truth to Ashkenazi's claim.

³² This is related to the process of "arcanization" discussed by Moshe Idel, as referenced in footnote 30 of the introduction above. Particularly relevant for the discussion here is that which Idel terms "crisical arcanizations," defined as "arcanizations that result from the pressure of external events, historical or cultural, that demand a reorganization of the order of the text as rotating around an esoteric core that answers the repercussions of that crisis" (*Absorbing Perfections*, p. 6). Here, that "crisis" (or more accurately, "external event"), would be the debate itself and the struggle for societal hegemony.

³³ Ashkenazi opens the debate quoting tractate Hagigah 2:1: "אין דורשין בעריות בשלושה ולא במעשה בראשית בשנים ולא במעשה מרכבה ביחיד אלא א"כ היה חכם" indicating the need to be wise and adept before discussing the secrets of Torah.

³⁴ Balbo writes toward the beginning of his first tract, "ראיתי שיבואו דברי מזוגים, וההסתר עם שהתאר הגובר בהם יהיה ההסתר," indicating his limitations when it comes to "revealed" matters.

contention between two separate coexistent groups as connected with the practical matter of levirate marriage brought about the dialectical turn of disclosure; in order for each side to defend his position and his communal power, and to keep from being swallowed up by his rival, each of necessity had to reveal.

The theoretical divulgence of differing ideas concerning the nature of the human soul as understood to be furtively expositied within Jewish texts brought about an exotericization of esoterica concerning the soul. For Ashkenazi, this involved an attempt to iron out inconsistencies with the use of philosophical psychology, thereby putting an end to the secret; within philosophical esotericism, once contradiction is disentangled, the philosophical secret as such has been abrogated.³⁵ By its very nature, philosophical allegory contains metaphysical truths which are apparent to the learned initiate, but is clothed in metaphorical language in order to keep out the ignorant masses. Maimonides best sums up this allegorical idea of the philosophical secret through the medium of allegory itself:

Consider the explicit affirmation of [the Sages], may their memory be blessed, that the internal meaning of the words of the Torah is a pearl whereas the external meaning of all parables is worth nothing, and their comparison of the concealment of a subject by its parable's external meaning to a man who let drop a pearl in his house, which was dark and full of furniture. Now this pearl is there, but he does not see it and does not know where it is. It is as though it were no longer in his possession, as it is impossible for him to derive any benefit from it until, as has been mentioned, he lights a lamp—an act to which an understanding of the meaning of the parable corresponds.³⁶

He continues his idea of the parable by shifting to a different parable:

Its external meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning, as happens in the case of an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes. When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold.³⁷

³⁵ For more on secrets and contradictions within philosophical thought, see: Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, pp. 60–78. See also: Moshe Halbertal, *Hidden and Revealed*.

³⁶ *Guide*, p. 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Parable contains metaphysical truth that can be grasped by the discerning, but purposefully conceals just enough of this metaphysical truth to keep out the ignorant. Only the learned can benefit from the inner pearl. Through the act of explicit philosophical deciphering, however, the secret transforms itself into the revealed; this presents the danger of opening up the strictly defined circle of fastidiousness to the unrefined multitude, thereby opening up the way for antinomianism.³⁸ Exposure runs the risk of anarchy and confusion. Divulgence in this case, for which Ashkenazi had apprehensions, entails an epistemological change in perception as based upon a complete removal of the silver filigree to expose the gold core. It does not involve any type of ontological problem of the nature of the gold core itself.

Within his epistle, Balbo sets up a four-fold model of the secret and its disclosure. There are those which are written in close or remote hints, those which are written in riddles and parables, those which are not written at all but are transmitted orally from teacher to worthy student, and those which are not transmitted at all.³⁹ Balbo's schema represents a complex picture in which the philosophical, epistemological secret and its revelation stand in constant dialectic with the more cryptic, ontological secret. For Balbo the philosophical kabbalist, this dialectic involved the need to communicate the ontologically incommunicable. Elliot Wolfson deftly explains this paradoxical phenomenon:

The concealment of the secret is dialectically related to its disclosure. Simply put, the utterance of the mystery is possible because of the inherent impossibility of its being uttered. Even for the adept, who demonstrates unequivocally that he deserves to be a recipient of the esoteric tradition, there is something of the secret that remains in the very act

³⁸ The question of antinomian tendencies in regard to philosophical allegory reached its peak in the Maimonidean Controversy in the first decades of the thirteenth century. In a polemical letter sent by Rabbi Shlomo ibn Aderet (Rashba) from Barcelona, the leading opponent of Maimonideanism, to a Provencal rabbi by the name of Aba Mari, Rashba writes, "Their [the allegorists] true intention is clear. They want to say that the commandments have no literal meaning, because what does God care if an animal is [correctly] slaughtered or not? (*Answers of the Rashba* [Hebrew], edited by Dimitrovski, Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1990, p. 412, cited in Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 111–112.) For more on this episode, see Halbertal, *Ibid.* For more on the question of philosophical antinomianism, see also: Dov Schwartz, "The Decline of Religious Spiritualism," pp. 102–107.

³⁹ Paris ms. 800, fol. 46a.

of transmission. The secret has an ontological referent that is separate from the phenomenal realm, and thus transcends the limits of human understanding and modes of conventional discourse.⁴⁰

In order to reveal, Balbo largely resorts to the conventional discourse of philosophical exegesis. Nevertheless, throughout his discourse, he makes sure to remind his interlocutor that “the knowledge of this, that is, the essence of the soul and its felicity, is clearly and without a doubt impossible [to grasp] by way of the human intellect.”⁴¹ Questions of the soul, though subject to philosophical exegesis, paradoxically ultimately fall under the fourth category of unrevealable secrets. For Balbo, then, the disclosure of secrets has an innate limit within the gray zone that divides between the ontological realm of the secret and the phenomenal sphere of finite human understanding. Though philosophy can be used, as it is by Balbo, to confirm certain truths or to limit untruths, it is simply a medium used in an attempt to express the inexpressible. As much as it reveals and allows for dialogue, it necessarily conceals due to its finitude as moored within human discernment. Though he argues in a language with which he is most certainly adroit, the True kernel of Reality concerning the human soul remains inevitably veiled behind speculative thought, and in fact takes on that veil through its very theoretical, exoteric disclosure.

Notwithstanding Balbo’s recourse to philosophically tinged kabbalah for the purpose of dispute with his scholastically outspoken foe, Balbo does often resort to what he considers to be the higher form of truth, namely, prophecy and its successor, received oral tradition.⁴² Toward the beginning of the debate, he explicitly states,

⁴⁰ Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 15.

⁴¹ Ms. 105, fol. 222a and fol. 227a. **”ידעת דבר זה והוא מהות הנפש והצלחתה בבירור בלי ספק נמנע על שכל האדם.”**

⁴² Kabbalah of the philosophical type is also received tradition by the very nature of its being “kabbalah,” though it is based in reasoned proofs. It is not entirely clear whether he intends by this that immutable metaphysical propositions that can, and indeed should be reasoned are passed down, or whether he means that the assertion being made was arrived at through reasoning and it is that assertion which is being transmitted (in which case it can be re-reasoned and even overturned by more sufficient reasoning, opening up the way for scientific impetus). The second possibility is not much different than straight philosophy, and it is probably from this premise that Gottlieb and Ravitzky draw their conclusions. Had this been Balbo’s true intent, however, there would be no need for him to specifically classify it as a type of “kabbalah.” As such, I would argue for the first possibility, emphasizing his wrapping of mystical doctrines such as the one being discussed, metempsychosis, in philosophical language. In either

The wise Ptolemy in his *Book of Circles*⁴³ wrote that the prophetic soul is higher than the philosophical soul. Also, the Masters of Truth say that their feet stand upon the place of the heads of the Masters of Inquiry.⁴⁴ This is not said by way of exaggeration and overstatement, nor by way of superciliousness and haughtiness, but with paramount precision.⁴⁵

According to this passage, Balbo most definitively fits into a model of understanding the relationship between kabbalah and Philosophy, termed by Boaz Huss as the “hierarchical view.” “According to this model,” writes Huss, “Philosophy is, in comparison to kabbalah, an inferior, yet valid body of knowledge.”⁴⁶ Philosophical speculation, while not entirely useless, can only reach to certain heights; prophetic truth, on the other hand, reaches above, into the realm of the ontologically Absolute. Whereas the former begins, and therefore ends, in finite human understanding, the latter originates in, and therefore naturally

case, here with prophecy and its subsequent transmission, he connotes an ontologically superior type of tradition that originates purely in God and that is beyond the grasp of all finite human reason.

⁴³ Here, he is clearly referring to *Sefer ha-'Agulot ha-Ra'ayoniot* by al-Batalyawsi (1052–1127), which he mistakenly attributes to Ptolemy. For more on this book, see: David Kaufmann, *Jahresbericht*. There, Kaufmann shows the extensive impact that this book had upon medieval Jewish thought, from Hai Gaon in the 11th century to Judah Moscato in the 16th century. As adroitly shown by Alexander Altmann in his “The Ladder of Ascension,” al-Batalyawsi’s book influenced Jewish notions of the connection between the supernal world and the lower world as formed by the Universal Soul, known in this context by the Hebrew term *sulam ha-'aliyah*. Altmann elucidates the deep and wide-ranging influence that this book exercised upon Jewish thought, from Aristotelian philosophers such as Moshe Narboni and Joseph ibn Kaspi to Karaite writers such as Aaron ben Joseph ha-Rofe and Aaron ben Elijah to Kabbalists the likes of Moshe de Leon, Jacob ben Sheshet and Azriel of Gerona. Most recently, Moshe Idel has shown another angle of importance exerted by this book, namely, the notion of man as the “contingent,” as significantly expressed in the works of Yohanan Alemanno and Pico della Mirandola. See his: “Man as the ‘Possible’ Entity in Some Jewish and Renaissance Sources,” especially pp. 33–48. The notion of man as the median between the upper and lower worlds with the possibility to achieve to the higher or to fall to the lower seems to have influenced Balbo and his entire conception of metempsychosis as well.

⁴⁴ The phrase originally stating, **הפילוסופים שאתם משבחים חכמתם דעו באמת כי מקום מעמד ראשם מעמד רגלינו** “has been attributed by Gershom Scholem to Rabbi Moses of Burgos. See: *Major Trends*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ Vatican ms. 105, fols. 197a–197b.

⁴⁶ Boaz Huss, “Mysticism Versus Philosophy in Kabbalistic Literature,” pp. 125–126. The other two models of understanding the relationship between Philosophy and kabbalah as outlined by Huss are 1) that of representing them as essentially the same body of knowledge, and 2) a dualistic view in which philosophy is perceived as false. Incidentally, Huss does not take into account the view of philosophical superiority in an either hierarchical or dualistic manner, as represented, for example, by Ashkenazi within the presently discussed debate, or subsequently by Elijah Delmedigo.

proceeds to God. This ontological difference makes philosophy into the handmaiden of prophecy.

Balbo demonstrates the limits of philosophy in the face of prophecy from the side of Torah, by way of its numinous, seemingly irrational dictates. He brings the example of *tzara'at* (leprosy or, more accurately, blighting affection)⁴⁷ appertaining to clothes and houses, as delineated in detail in Leviticus 13:47–14:57. There the Torah commands several priestly, purifying rituals for clothes, or houses in the land of Canaan, that are afflicted with streaks of yellow or red. Throughout the long biblical narrative, no natural reason is given for *tzara'at* itself or for the priestly rituals that apply, and indeed, no natural reason seems to accord.⁴⁸ Moreover, it only applies to houses and, by parallel assumption according to Balbo who follows Nahmanides, to clothes in the land of Canaan; therefore, it is not a universal, ordered phenomenon. As such, asks Balbo, “if these categories do not have any reality at all in nature, and it is not a [known] existing phenomenon,⁴⁹ then what purpose did the Torah have to write about them in detail? . . . Since they are not in nature from the side of proofs that are by nature syllogistic, are they then not useless and void?”⁵⁰ This cannot be, unless one is willing to negate the Torah for the sake of philosophy. Balbo answers that the phenomenon occurs only in the land of Israel, thereby defying natural, universal categories, in order to show that everything subsists by way of divine providence and not by way of examinable nature. Moreover, concerning clothing, *tzara'at* only appears on white cloth⁵¹ in order that the philosopher cannot try to reason his way out of its mystery by claiming that the streaks are due to a run in the fabric’s

⁴⁷ Gersonides suggests that here, the Torah is discussing some type of mildew or fungus, consonant with the more general “eruptive affection.” This seems to be more reasonable than actual leprosy, which is a human disease, caused by a certain bacteria.

⁴⁸ Nahmanides maintains that *tzara'at* on clothing and houses is most certainly not a natural phenomenon, but is rather a divine happening that occurs to those few who are detached and corrupt during times when Israel as a whole is fully devotional. It acts as a supernatural sign of God’s fury, and occurs only in the Promised Land. (see his commentary to Leviticus, 13:47). Prior to Nahmanides, Judah Halevi had made similar claims (see: *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, part II, clauses 61–62).

⁴⁹ Here Balbo is taking straight from Nahmanides, who writes, “this [i.e., the phenomenon of *tzara'at*] is not in nature at all, and is not an existing phenomenon in the world” (commentary to Leviticus 13:47).

⁵⁰ Vatican ms. 105, fol. 227b.

⁵¹ Here again, he is following the commentary of Nahmanides.

colors. Ultimately, through the example of *tzara'at*, Balbo attempts to show that prophecy exceeds reason, and not the other way around.

Balbo analyzes the confines of philosophy from yet another angle, the side of philosophy itself. He endeavors to show philosophy's insufficiencies by turning to a topic fundamentally related to metempsychosis, namely, the nature of the human soul. Aristotle and his followers hold the sum and substance of the human soul to be one, located in the heart,⁵² whereas other ancient philosophers divide the soul into three parts located in three areas, the heart, the liver, and the brain.⁵³ Philosophers on both sides of the fence, according to Balbo, provide strong proofs for their claims, which makes final resolution in the matter nearly impossible. Moreover, he states, Aristotle himself evoked questions concerning the nature of the intellectual soul: is it active or passive? If it is active, is its active power inherent to itself? If it is passive, is it activated upon, and if so, by what?⁵⁴ Balbo goes on to assert that

Aristotle himself said that he would examine this [i.e., the intellectual soul, or more specifically, the material intellect], but it is nowhere found that he actually examined it... The reason why he refrained from examining this topic is because clearly, without a doubt, it is impossible for human reason to know it. For this reason, Galen said that he did not know about the immortality of the soul except through the Creator, may He be blessed.⁵⁵

By resorting to philosophical divergence and doubt, Balbo attempts to show that questions concerning the human soul are ultimately beyond human understanding. Even a philosopher the stature of Aristotle could

⁵² See: Aristotle, "On Youth, Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration," chapter 4, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, pp. 747–748. While Aristotle divides the soul into separate faculties, he does so by way of definition, leaving the soul itself intact as the "form, or actuality of the first kind of a natural organized body" (see: *De Anima*, book II, ch. 1).

⁵³ This idea, first developed by Galen, holds that the liver is the seat of the vegetative soul, the heart of the animal soul, and the brain of the rational soul. Galen based this idea on Plato's tripartite division of the soul and from it, developed a tripartite physiology of the human body. See: David Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, 600 B.C. to A.D. 1450*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 126–127.

⁵⁴ See *De Anima*, book III, chapters 4 and 5 (*Complete Works*, pp. 682–684). It is from these ambiguities that his most important early commentators, Themistius and Alexander of Aphrodisias (and subsequently others) based their variance as to whether the material intellect is a separate substance or a disposition, respectively. See: *Two Greek Aristotelian Commentators*.

⁵⁵ Vatican ms. 105, fol. 222a.

not plumb the depths of such questions, and anyone who enters into such speculation is simply entering onto futile ground. Only prophecy, which is far and above beyond the intellectual soul, can accurately affirm anything about that very intellectual soul, as attested to even by the outstanding rationalist Galen.

The fundamental questions of prophecy and philosophy in regard to truth claims do not escape the discourse of Ashkenazi, and he by no means sits idly by while his interlocutor establishes his theoretical groundwork. On the contrary, he attacks Balbo's claims by setting up his own, philosophical groundwork. Toward the beginning of his second tract, he relates a brief exchange with Balbo: "I asked him, 'are you not free and at liberty? How could you [possibly] believe in metempsychosis?' And he answered me saying that it is simply because he received it...I will not be seduced by things received that are not reasoned. My quill, pounding along with the fervor of an overturned sword, treads on in a war for the Torah, to save the human soul from chaos."⁵⁶ Ashkenazi sets out to fight a philosophical war for the Torah against the believers in metempsychosis, as based on rational arguments. Anything less, according to his portrayal, amounts to chaos and confusion.

One way in which he seeks to eradicate confusion concerns not the nature of prophecy in relation to philosophy, but more to the point, whether metempsychosis itself can be considered as prophecy. According to Balbo, metempsychosis is received tradition that has its moorings in the Torah itself. Moses and the ancient prophets attest to its verity and as such, it is a "received Torah proof," the greatest of all types of proof, which must be received on faith and cannot be questioned. Ashkenazi takes issue with this assertion by claiming two predications.⁵⁷ First, the reception of precedents does not constitute proof concerning any single doctrine. This is clear, according to Ashkenazi, to anyone who has studied the *Posterior Analytics* of Aristotle, in which reception is not even mentioned as a condition for proof and therefore falls outside the ken of all dialectical discourse. Should one nevertheless base any truth claim in regard to metempsychosis on precedent and its reception, it would then be necessary to mention three sects, *altan'asuk*, *albad*

⁵⁶ Ibid., fol. 203b.

⁵⁷ Ibid., fol. 205b.

and *alzigadi'in*,⁵⁸ who adopted the belief in metempsychosis from the writings of the pagan philosopher Pythagoras. Historical precedent in this case does not demonstrate the truth of the doctrine itself, but the truth of the fact that it is a foreign implant into kabbalistic thought that has its moorings in the pagan thought of Pythagoras, and not in the Jewish sources. Ashkenazi's second predication, based on the first, claims that metempsychosis is not in itself prophecy, but is an interpretation imposed upon prophecy by the kabbalists. Both Aristotle and Averroes attest to its foundations within the thought of Pythagoras, and if it were indeed prophecy, then Jewish leaders the stature of Rabbi Saadia Gaon, Rabbi Benjamin Metudela, and Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra would not actively deny it, but would rather accept it. Ashkenazi attempts to take the wind out of the sails of Balbo's arguments by showing that the doctrine of metempsychosis has no foundation in biblical prophecy. On the contrary, according to him, it is a pagan implant, contrary to the spirit of Judaism.

Ashkenazi lays the foundations for his philosophical battle campaign for the spirit of Judaism by writing that he will prove, with clear evidence, the invalidity of the belief in metempsychosis. He plans to do this by propounding three intertwined forms of sanction against Balbo and his kabbalistic predecessors. In his words:

I will advance against you and against them [i.e., the predecessors] three types of evidence that negate metempsychosis from its root and to its branches. The first is from the Torah and the Prophets and the Writings. The second is from the sayings of the Rabbis, may their memories be blessed, the wise men of the Talmud who all of Israel must accept. The third is intellectual, philosophical evidence that cancels out the doctrine of metempsychosis. "And the threefold cord will not be quickly severed" (Ecclesiastes, 4:12).⁵⁹

Herein lies a tacit and astute response to Balbo's threefold schema of the kabbalah as mentioned above. Ashkenazi takes up the cudgel by

⁵⁸ Professor Sarah Stroumsa has suggested to me that *altan'asuk* is probably related to the Arabic word "tan'asuk," meaning "transmigration." *Alzigadi'in* is probably an erroneous spelling of "*Diagzi'in*," a nation reported by Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela to believe in metempsychosis (see: Asher, *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela*, vol. II, pp. 72–23). Beyond this, I have been unable to identify these three groups, whose names recur in the debate (see Vatican ms. 105, fols. 205b, 206a, 221a, 226a).

⁵⁹ Ibid., fol. 204a. Ashkenazi is careful to use the term "evidence" (ראיה) as opposed to "proof" (מופת) here, as he mindfully reserves the latter term for philosophical proofs alone. This also allows him to criticize Balbo, as stated above, for misusing the word "proof" (מופת) in regard to received tradition.

counterpoising against Balbo's formulation of the kabbalah his own parallel, philosophical model. For Balbo, reasoned proof stands at the lowest level of true knowledge, whereas biblical prophecy and its subsequent transmission stand at the highest level. Bible, Talmud and reason act as one insofar as they hearken back to received tradition. For Ashkenazi, biblical as well as talmudic texts are integral, but all are necessarily permeated with intellectual reason. Bible, Talmud and philosophy act as one insofar as they hearken back to reasoned discernment.⁶⁰ The parallel threefold models of both thinkers, while divergent in their nuances, provide a common ground upon which battle can be waged over the veracity of claims concerning the human soul.

The battle begins with, and takes its most protracted expression in biblical exegesis. Indeed, biblical exegesis stands as a central pillar of the debate, occupying seventy percent of the arguments instituted by Ashkenazi against metempsychosis and, as a result, seventy percent of the refutations brought against these arguments by Balbo. This comes as no surprise since, as members of a text-centered community vying for ascendancy, the two thinkers had to show their respective thought to be congruent, and even embedded in the central textual authority, namely, the Bible. In the words of Gershom Scholem:

In a society based upon the acceptance of a truth which had already been revealed in a written document, originality could not be a central value. The truth is already known. We have naught to do but to understand it, and what is perhaps more difficult, to pass it down. In other words: originality and the creative impulse which acted here did not declare themselves as such, but preferred to manifest themselves in a form which was less pretentious but in fact was no less creative—namely, that of commentary.⁶¹

Despite their theoretical differences, Ashkenazi and Balbo shared common motives as two opposing interpreters of tradition. Each endeavored to be innovative enough in order to sway the disputation in his favor, while simultaneously garbing that innovation in the biblical tradition. Only through such a dialectical means of commentary could each of these thinkers bring his contemporary mode of thought to bear, by

⁶⁰ Within Ashkenazi's framework, Bible and Talmud are by no means abject, or even subordinate to philosophy. Indeed, among his twenty arguments against metempsychosis (the first 19 *ראיות*, the last one a long philosophical *מופת*), thirteen are based on the Bible, six are based on Rabbinic writings, and only one is based upon straight philosophical discourse. Rather, Ashkenazi sees the three elements as intertwined and as held together by their common metaphysical truth, namely, intellectual reason.

⁶¹ Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism*, p. 171.

attempting to show the divine authority of his, and not the other's, conceptions.

The debate, as it exists in the manuscripts that have survived, begins with a question concerning the biblical injunction for levirate marriage. Deuteronomy 25:5–6 states:

When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no children, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband's brother shall unite with her: take her as his wife and perform the levir's duty. The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel.

Through *g'zerah shava*, the hermeneutics of parallelism, Balbo associates the word “name” in the above verse, “that his name may not be blotted out in Israel,” with the word “name” in the verse in Genesis that states, “whatever the man called each living soul would be its name.”⁶² Through this exercise, Balbo seeks to associate the term “name” with the term “living soul,” claiming, based on the verse in Genesis, a parity between the two.⁶³ With this parity established, Balbo can forthrightly claim that the act of levirate marriage, in keeping the “name” of the deceased from being blotted out, in essence gives the “soul” of the deceased a chance to keep from being erased by allowing it to transmute into the child born of the levirate union.

According to Balbo and the kabbalists, the mystical implications of this seemingly absurd, bizarre commandment are clear and unmistakable. One who has not fulfilled the cardinal decree to be fruitful and multiply is punished by having his soul return to the lower, material world in the body of his nephew, while simultaneously being given an opportunity to rectify his shortcomings and to secure for himself a place in the upper realm of the world-to-come. Through punishment on the one hand and the chance for redress on the other, the expedient of metempsychosis as manifest within the command of levirate marriage contains within itself the characteristics of both stern judgment, known

⁶² Genesis 2:19. For Balbo's hermeneutic on these verses, see: Vatican Ms. 105, fol. 202a.

⁶³ Balbo most likely got this idea from “*Midrash ha-Ne'elam l'Rut*” in *Zohar Hadash*, p. 89, column 4, probably filtered through Recanati's commentary on “*VaYeshv*,” (see Recanati's *Commentary*, volume 1, pp. 302–303). Though the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* does not use this specific verse of Balbo's as a proof text, there it states: **בכל אתר דכתיב שם דא איהו נפש כמה דאת אמר ולא יכרת שם המת דא איהו נפש.**

in kabbalistic parlance as *din*, and supreme clemency, known as *rahamim*.⁶⁴ The biblical command of levirate union, then, displays within itself the *du-partsufim*, the two polar aspects of God that conjoin as He relates to humanity.⁶⁵ This is evinced by the conjoining of the widow with the deceased's closest redeemer, his brother, in the very act of levirate marriage itself. As such, the biblical enjoinder of levirate marriage contains within it a deeper, quintessentially divine layer, related to the two united countenances of God and manifest in the kabbalistic notion of metempsychosis.

Ashkenazi takes issue with this kabbalistic reading of the biblical injunction for levirate marriage, seeing in the commandment no correlation to the doctrine of metempsychosis, but rather the opposite, its categorical denial.⁶⁶ According to his rendering of the passage from Deuteronomy, the wife allegorically represents the body of the human being, whereas the deceased husband represents the departed soul. Within this representation, a certain, specific body has been sanctified and designated to a certain, specific, suitable soul, just as a wife is sanctified and designated specifically to her husband. In death, the soul separates from the body, just as the departed husband separates from the wife. Notwithstanding this separation, the body cannot take on a new soul nor can the soul take on a new body, contrary to the opinion of the supporters of metempsychosis. Hence the injunction that "the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger." This statement

⁶⁴ For more on these two countenances within metempsychosis, see one of Balbo's main sources: Rabbi Isaac of Acco, *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*, p. 48.

⁶⁵ In a passage concerning the secret of *du-partsufim*, first published by Scholem in his *Origins of the kabbalah*, Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquieres (Rabad) was the first known kabbalist to discuss the correlation between the feminine and masculine entities of humanity (specifically, the androgynous first human) and the two divine attributes of judgment and mercy. This is in contradistinction to the majority of Spanish kabbalists, including the author of the Zohar, who read the two countenances (*du-partsufim*) to be the *sefirot* of *tiferet* and *malkut*. According to the Rabad, in both the human and the divine realms, the two opposite factors stem from the same source, undergo a certain type of separation, and ultimately must collaborate and conjoin in order to insure the continuance of existence. Although the Rabad himself did not advance a notion of metempsychosis, considering the marked similarities of his thought on duality with that of Balbo as displayed here, the Rabad was probably the earliest source for such a subsequent reading of metempsychosis as based upon *du-partsufim*. For more on the concept of *du-partsufim* and part of the Rabad's text itself, see: Idel, *kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 128–136. See also Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 217–218.

⁶⁶ Ashkenazi's argument for levirate marriage can be found in his first tract, Vatican ms. 105 fols. 195b–196a, Vatican ms. 254 fols. 6b–7b.

of the Torah serves to teach against the belief in metempsychosis⁶⁷ and to reinforce the one-to-one body-soul relationship.

According to Ashkenazi, it is incumbent upon the Jew to produce children of the vital soul (בנים נפשיים), namely, physical children, as well as children of the intellective soul (בנים נשמיים), namely, conceptual achievements. The soul conjoins with the body as the man conjoins with his wife in order to make this propagation happen. This, he claims, is the true meaning of the term *du-partsufin* by which the human was created and actively continues in his capacity of creation. Children of the vital soul continue progeny while simultaneously physically representing children of the intellective soul, which ensure immortality. Should the human soul, which is in essence the first perfection of the corruptible body, fail, in conjunction with that body, to acquire intellectual achievements as represented by physical children, then it is doomed to perdition, as is the family line of one who leaves no children. Such a state of affairs cannot subsist, however, since “all of Israel has a share in the world-to-come”;⁶⁸ thus, God “devises means that none be banished or exiled from Him.”⁶⁹ In this case, those means are levirate marriage, in which the brother of the deceased, who is his closest redeemer, comes to preserve his name by having children on his behalf.⁷⁰ This acts both to maintain posterity and to symbolically show that his brother had

⁶⁷ Balbo argues on this point that if levirate marriage exists in order to deny metempsychosis through the analogy of the wife with the body and the man with the soul, not allowing the soul to apply to a new, or “outside” body, then the prohibition should be on marrying the brother as well, since he indeed would represent a different soul. Not only is this not the case, but it is in fact *commanded* for the widow to marry the brother, thereby nullifying Ashkenazi’s argument. Moreover, nobody can be on the same particular level of constitution of the deceased, including the brother; further, all, including the brother, are on an equal level according to the definition of man as a living, speaking creature that dies (חי מדבר מת). Thus, redemption cannot rest on particularities, since none outside the deceased, including his brother, constitutes the same particularities of the deceased. If it rests on the general form of the human being as it encounters matter, then no man should be any better, or closer of a redeemer than any other, since all possess equal form as human beings. See: Vatican ms. 105, fol. 198a.

⁶⁸ Mishna, tractate Sanhedrin, 10:1.

⁶⁹ Second book of Samuel, 14:14. (וחשב מחשבות לבלתי ידח ממנו נדח). This is one of the preferred proof-texts of the kabbalists in favor of metempsychosis, slyly being turned on them here by Ashkenazi.

⁷⁰ Balbo rebukes by noting that, following out Ashkenazi’s analogy, if the brother of the deceased is already married to another woman, then upon performing his duties as a levir, one soul applies to two separate bodies simultaneously. Such a situation is logically impossible, showing the invalidity of Ashkenazi’s entire analogy. See: Vatican ms. 105, fol. 198a.

indeed attained to a level of intellectual perfection high enough to be granted a place in the world-to-come. The physical children of the levirate union come to represent the spiritual, or intellectual children of the departed. According to Ashkenazi's understanding, the expedient of levirate union serves a dual purpose, to reconcile the Aristotelian soul-body relationship with the sages' view of immortality as it applies to all of Israel, and to ensure the physical continuity of Israel. Along with these inheres a third, more subtle purpose, namely, to tear down the foundations for the belief in metempsychosis, both by actively creating a system of physical continuity and by showing the deceased to have reached a sufficient state of perfection in order to attain to the world-to-come. Indeed, if continuity can be insured and, more importantly, if the deceased can be shown to have attained to a level sufficient for the world-to-come, then metempsychosis, which acts to allow him to perfect his grave imperfections in order that his soul may not be lost, becomes obsolete.

Ashkenazi goes on to discuss the cases in which one refuses to redeem the name of his dead brother, thereby, in his opinion, rejecting the notion of his soul's perfection and final salvation, and affirming the false doctrine of metempsychosis.⁷¹ Should this occur, according to Torah law, that is,

If the man does not want to marry his brother's widow, his brother's widow shall appear before the elders in the gate and declare, "My husband's brother refuses to establish a name in Israel for his brother; he will not perform the duty of a levir." The elders of his town shall then summon him and talk to him. If he insists, saying, "I do not want to marry her," his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull the sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and make this declaration: Thus shall be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house! And he shall go in Israel by the name of "the family of the unsandaled one."⁷²

According to Ashkenazi, the purpose of this entire exercise is to protect the name, and therefore immortal status of the departed by showing the utter baseness of the one who prefers to support the false doctrine of metempsychosis rather than support the idea of his brother's achievement of the world-to-come. His shoe is removed as a symbol of his degeneracy. Just as the shoe that one wears inevitably becomes filthy as

⁷¹ Vatican ms. 105, fols. 196a–196b.

⁷² Deuteronomy, 25:7–10.

it treads through dirt and mud, the specious notion of metempsychosis that the refusing levir dons as he makes his way down his degraded path of misbelief is soiled and squalid. He does not remove the shoe himself, but the woman, who is a metaphor for matter, removes it in order to show that he will never be able to set himself straight due to the crude nature of his belief, and will only be set straight when his body removes his soul from itself at the time of death. Through this contrivance, according to Ashkenazi, the Torah seeks to show the extremely depraved, misleading nature of metempsychosis.

Exegesis on the nature of levirate union brings the discussion between Ashkenazi and Balbo to the consideration of the only explicit biblical account of such a union, namely, the story in Genesis of Judah and his three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah.⁷³ According to the narrative in Genesis, Judah's eldest son Er, who is married to a woman named Tamar, is displeasing to God and is therefore slain by God, prior to leaving any progeny. Upon this occurrence, Judah commands his second son, Onan: "have intercourse with your brother's wife and perform the levir's duty and provide offspring for your brother."⁷⁴ Onan obliges; however, knowing that the seed will not count as his, he lets it go to waste every time he has intercourse with his brother's widow. This proves to be displeasing to God, who takes Onan's life and leaves him, as his older brother, without progeny. At this point, Shelah is too young to perform the levir's duty, and Judah, fearing that his third son might fall to the fate of his two older brothers, sends Tamar away to live in her father's house until the time that Shelah is of the proper age. An extended period of time elapses and, though Shelah reaches the appropriate age, Judah does not hold to his word; he forgets about his daughter-in-law Tamar, and disregards the need for her to enter into a levirate union. Later, while he is on a journey to Timnah, the place of Tamar's father's house, she dupes Judah into having intercourse with her in order to finally fulfill the levirate obligation. Judah comes

⁷³ While the *Ra'aya Mehemna* stratum of the *Zohar* (3:216b) and many others after it claim that Job was the product of levirate marriage, and while Nahmanides in his commentary to Genesis 38:8 and also to Deuteronomy 25:5 claims that the account of Ruth and Boaz (in Ruth, 3:1–1) is a story of levirate union (which does, indeed, seem to be the case), in neither of these biblical places is this expressly stated. In the account of Judah and his sons, however, levirate marriage is explicitly stated as a motive. For the account of Judah and his sons, see: Genesis, 38:1–30.

⁷⁴ Genesis 38:8.

to recognize her propriety in this act, and from the union come twins, Zerah and his brother Perez, the progenitor of the house of David.

According to the kabbalistic exposition of levirate marriage as outlined above, this seemingly bizarre display of incest, deception and death is not bizarre, incestuous or marked by death at all, but is rather marked by redemption and the chance for new life through the medium of metempsychosis. Commenting upon this story, Isaac of Acre, one of Balbo's main sources, states: "the Holy One, Blessed is He, instituted this measure, which is the measure of metempsychosis, from the side of His mercy on the soul of the wicked person. This is so that it might not be forfeited due to the short time that it was in its body, so that its sins could be purified in the body into which it would transmigrate, and so that it could obtain to the afterlife in the Garden of Eden."⁷⁵ No matter how base Er may have been in the eyes of God, he was nevertheless to be given the opportunity, through the medium of levirate marriage, to correct himself, an opportunity denied by Onan. This denial made Onan base as well, but he too was not to be denied an opportunity for rectification, neither by his younger brother nor, as the story has it, by the will of his father. It is the seemingly deceptive woman Tamar who finally takes matters into her own hands and sets the course straight, ultimately becoming the heroin of the story. Along with Judah, who had originally insisted on levirate marriage and never fully denied its supreme importance, Tamar becomes the progenitor to the house of David,⁷⁶ the great unifier and champion of Israel and the precursor of the messiah. Accordingly, a very subtle parallel exists in this reading, between the national plane of identity, namely, historical redemption through the line of David, and between the individual plane, namely, metempsychosis, which itself involves redemption for all inadequate individual Jewish souls. Levirate marriage in the story of Judah and Tamar allows redemption to happen on both planes, transforming both individual death and the stagnancy of the nation into life and progress.

Needless to say, Ashkenazi opposes the transmigratory reading of the passage in Genesis concerning Judah, his sons, and his daughter-in-law turned cohort, Tamar. His first objection rests in the association by the kabbalists of the actions in this story with the command of levirate

⁷⁵ *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*, p. 82.

⁷⁶ An interesting parallel can be made here to Ruth and Boaz, also seen as propagators of metempsychosis and also forbearers of the line of David.

marriage as outlined in Deuteronomy 25:5, and the subsequent extraction of the “secret” of levirate marriage from this association. He posits,

How is it that they [i.e., the kabbalists] learned from Judah that the secret of levirate marriage lies in the transmigration of the souls of Er and Onan into the bodies of Perez and Zerah? Isn't it the case that the decree of levirate marriage according to the laws of the Torah is not what is present here, since levirate marriage is specifically decreed to the brother? As it says: ‘When *brothers* dwell together;’ *not* the father-in-law, for *all* are ‘strangers’ next to the brother, according to the decree of this commandment.⁷⁷

Ashkenazi attempts to dissociate the story from the general commandment of levirate marriage, thereby seeking to dismantle one of the “proofs” of the kabbalists for the association of levirate marriage and metempsychosis. In this case, he does not attack the doctrine of metempsychosis itself, but rather adopts a different strategy of attacking its purported foundations. If he can show metempsychosis to have no legitimate ground of evidence on which to stand, especially as based in the Torah, then the whole theory will tumble. He continues:

Relations which are incestuous do not take part in this [i.e., levirate union], for according to the decree of the Torah, they are universally not permitted. This includes the father-in-law with his daughter-in-law.⁷⁸ Even to those who believe in metempsychosis, Rabbi Menahem Recanati has cautioned that he who has intercourse with his daughter-in-law damages the glory (פגום בהוד) and will reincarnate into a she-ass.⁷⁹ [From all of this], it is impossible that a commandment would appear in the Torah for a father-in-law to perform the levir's duty with his daughter-in-law.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Vatican ms. 105, fol. 208a. *Italics* mine for emphasis.

⁷⁸ See Leviticus 18:15. The following verse, 18:16 states, “Do not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is the nakedness of your brother.” This seems to present a problem to Ashkenazi's theory that such relations are universally forbidden, and therefore cannot be involved in levirate union. Indeed, in the case of levirate union, one is *commanded* to marry his brother's wife. According to Jewish tradition, it is only in the cases in which either the brother is alive or has passed away but has had children, that the prohibition in Leviticus 18:16 applies. Otherwise, the levirate command holds.

⁷⁹ Recanati, *Commentary*, volume 2, p. 104. Though Ashkenazi statedly got this from Recanati, the idea first appears in *Sefer ha-Kanah*, under the sub-section entitled “The Secret and Punishment of *Gilgul* for Illicit Sexual Practices”. See: *Sefer ha-Kanah*, p. 207.

⁸⁰ Vatican ms. 105, fol. 208a.

Ashkenazi fights fire with fire, attempting to dislodge the foundations of the transmigratory reading of the bible precisely by using biblical and kabbalistic foundations of his own selection. Not only does he use a decree from the Torah itself in order to refute the purported connection between the Judah story, the levirate decree and the subsequent connection to metempsychosis, he turns to Recanati, one of the cornerstones of the very belief in metempsychosis. In this case, kabbalistic commentary, as well as biblical law, serves Ashkenazi's anti-kabbalistic purpose.

Ashkenazi's point of departure at the question of Judah and Tamar's relationship to levirate union rather than at the question of their relationship to metempsychosis itself leads him to enter into the arena of national identity and its relation to the entire topic at hand. "The levirate decree does not apply to the sons of Noah (i.e., the non-Jews)," he states, "and it is not one of the seven commandments [that do apply to the sons of Noah]."⁸¹ This is in accordance with the idea that the Levitical command was specifically handed down, with the rest of the Torah, to the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. Judah and his sons, who lived well before the giving of Torah, were of the sons of Noah and were not of the nation of Israel. As such, this cannot possibly be a case of levirate union. Such a non-levirate reading of the story compels Ashkenazi to explain the punishment of Onan.⁸² Indeed, the text of the bible explicitly states concerning Onan, "What he did was displeasing to the Lord, and He took his life."⁸³ If Onan did not transgress a cardinal command, then what did he do that was so "displeasing" to God as to have his life taken from him? Ashkenazi answers that indeed Onan transgressed, but not regarding the impertinent command of levirate marriage. Rather, Onan transgressed to such a degree that his entire being participated, starting in his soul and ending in his body. The first part of this dualistic⁸⁴ sin involved his belief in the false and

⁸¹ Ibid. According to Jewish law, seven commandments are incumbent upon non-Jews, who are dubbed by the rabbis as "the sons of Noah": to refrain from idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, theft, and eating the limbs of a living animal, and to establish courts of justice. For the source of this complicated topic, see: Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin, 56a–b. See also Maimonides' highly influential interpretation of this topic, in itself quite complicated, which discusses the issue of 'righteous gentiles' (חסידים אומות העולם), in his *Mishna Torah*, Laws of Kings, 8:11.

⁸² For Ashkenazi's discussion of this issue, see Vatican ms. 254, fols. 23b–24a.

⁸³ Genesis, 38:10.

⁸⁴ Perhaps Ashkenazi's view of the sin as dualistic stems from tractate *Yebamot*, 63b, where it states that one who does not fulfill the biblical command to procreate is guilty of the twin sins of bloodshed and the diminution of the Divine Image.

indecent doctrine of metempsychosis. This belief is attested to by the fact that the verse in Genesis states that he “*knew* that the seed would not be his.”⁸⁵ What does it mean to *know* such a thing? According to Ashkenazi, this so-called “*knowledge*” derived from none other than Onan’s belief in metempsychosis. Not wanting to be partner to his brother’s transmigration, Onan committed the second, bodily part of his two-tiered transgression, namely, the wasting of seed. The first sin of thought led to the second sin of action, showing the extreme power of this false belief to cause one to keep from giving life. For this, Onan paid with his very own life. Such a punishment, according to Ashkenazi, teaches that those who believe in metempsychosis deserve no less than death at the hands of heaven. Here, Ashkenazi’s sharp polemic turns the purported life-giving force of metempsychosis, as touted by the kabbalists, into a veritable wasteland of death. Ashkenazi turns the tables of biblical exegesis on the proponents of metempsychosis, seeing in it not life, but death; this is both on the level of the soul for the believer in the false doctrine and on the level of the body in terms of the wasted seed, which characterizes the unfulfilled progeny of that selfsame believer.

Concordant to his shrewd polemic of providing proof from the Torah coupled with a kabbalistic stand as proof against the kabbalistic idea of metempsychosis itself as displayed above concerning the connection of the Judah story to the doctrine of metempsychosis, Ashkenazi is quick to point out a kabbalistic contradiction concerning national identity. The kabbalists themselves, he notes, have explicitly affirmed concerning levirate marriage and its implications that “this is a principle for Israel alone, and not for the sons of Noah.”⁸⁶ In other words, it applies to those who stood at Sinai and their descendants, and not to anyone outside of that specific fold. As “sons of Noah” who existed well before the giving of the Torah, Judah and his assemblage do not fit into the category specified by the kabbalists. Therefore, according to the principles of the kabbalists themselves, they cannot possibly be

⁸⁵ Genesis, 38:9. *Italics* mine for emphasis.

⁸⁶ “זאת התעודה בישראל לבד ולא בבני נח.” This is based on Ruth 4:7. Ashkenazi most probably derived this from Recanati (see his *Commentary*, p. 302), who took it from the “*Midrash ha-Ne’elam l’Rut*,” *Zohar Hadash*, p. 89, column 4. There, the quote is as follows:

“זאת התעודה בישראל (רות ד, ז), ולא בעובדי כוכבים [ברקאנטי: בשאר האומות], שלא נתנה להם מצוה זו. ועליהם כתיב, ‘אבדו מארעא ומן תחות שמיא אלה’ (ירמיה י, יא). ואין להם תקומה, לא בעוה”ז, ולא בעוה”ב.”

an example of either the levirate law of Deuteronomy or its putative connection to metempsychosis. Ashkenazi introduces this argument, not as a follower of Recanati and the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, nor as a fighter before his time for the equality of status for the souls of non-Jews, but in order to point out a grave incoherence within the kabbalistic schema itself. Metempsychosis as an effect of levirate marriage cannot both apply only to Israel and be exemplified by the non-Israelite. Herein lies an inherent contradiction that points to flaw and incertitude, thereby advancing Ashkenazi's campaign against the truth claims of the belief in metempsychosis.

Balbo's response to Ashkenazi's claims takes on a rather apologetic tone. He begins with the question posed by Ashkenazi as to whether the affair concerning Judah and his sons can be considered to be levirate marriage according to the dictates of the Torah, due to its occurrence prior to the actual giving of Torah. Indeed, he affirms, Judah and his ilk were of the sons of Noah and not of Israel, and indeed, levirate marriage is not one of the seven Noahide laws that would necessarily apply to them. By acceding on this point, he attempts to take the sting out of Ashkenazi's argument, but is still left with the task of explaining how the story relates to levirate marriage, and Judah's seemingly misfit role in the act as the father-in-law.

In order to accomplish an explanation, Balbo utilizes the same exact kabbalistic source that Ashkenazi had used in order to discredit the connection between the story and levirate marriage, Recanati's commentary on *Vayeshev*. "This *halacha* was changed after the giving of Torah," Balbo states. "For before the giving of Torah, the ancients knew the great value inherent in the levirate act, first by way of the brother and after him by way of any other of his close relatives who is an inheritor of his estate."⁸⁷ Herein lies a double message. First, only with the giving of the Torah was the act limited to the brother. Prior to that time, the brother was the preferred redeemer, but not the only option. Furthermore, before the giving of the Torah, no prohibition existed for the father-in-law to conjoin with his daughter-in-law. Thus, Judah could properly perform the act. Second, only with the giving of

⁸⁷ Vatican ms. 105, fol. 231b. Though not explicitly stated, this is almost verbatim quoted from Recanati. In his *Commentary*, volume 1, p. 302, it states, "החכמים הקדמונים קודם מתן תורה יודעים כי יש תועלת גדולה ביבום האב כי הוא הקרוב ואחריו שאר הקרוב אליו ממשפחתו אשר הוא יורש נחלה."

the Torah was the act limited to the nation of Israel. Prior to that time, the ancients performed the levirate act, not out of divine sanction, but because they knew of its value.

The Torah itself evidences the levirate link to the story and Judah's knowledge of the preference for the brother as the first redeemer. In Genesis the Torah states, "Judah said to Onan, 'Join with your brother's wife and perform *the levir's duty* with her, and provide offspring for your brother.'"⁸⁸ Judah commands the brother to perform the act and, when this fails, promises up the third brother for the act. Only when this ultimately fails does he serve as the redeemer. Moreover, levirate marriage is explicitly and indisputably stated by him to be the issue at hand. As such, it must be accepted as the central topic of the story, despite the characters' non-Israelite status. Balbo solves the problems of Judah's role and of the Noahide identity of Judah and his sons by employing both the Torah itself and Recanati's interpretation of it. Here, Balbo fights Ashkenazi with his own weapons in order to show the efficacy of levirate marriage for the ancients as contained within the doctrine of metempsychosis.

Balbo continues his defense, moving from Judah and his sons' connection to the biblical institution of levirate marriage to the ostensibly "false and indecent" belief of Onan in metempsychosis, as understood by Ashkenazi. According to Balbo, if Onan believed in metempsychosis due to the "knowledge" that he had of the consequences of his act, then Judah his father must also have believed in the doctrine. This, he claims, is evinced by Judah's insistence on Onan's cohabitation with his sister-in-law and, after the tragic failure of this act, his desire to give his third son Shelah over to Tamar. Judah believed the advantage of levirate union to be metempsychosis for the deceased, and wanted to give his departed sons that chance, but hesitated with Shelah for fear of Shelah's life. In the end, Judah was the one to command Onan to perform the levir's duty, to promise Shelah to Tamar, eventually to perform the act himself, and to approve of Tamar's act of taking the matter into her own hands and causing this to happen. Thus, according to Ashkenazi who claims that Onan died by the hands of heaven due to his improper belief, Judah should be regarded as even more base than his son and even more deserving of death. No death penalty, however, befell Judah. Rather, through his very belief and eventual act, Judah,

⁸⁸ Genesis 38:8. *Italics* mine for emphasis.

who was blessed by his father Jacob with the glory of kingship,⁸⁹ became the progenitor of the great unifier David and the basis for the line of the ultimate redeemer, the messiah. Such would seem to be an absurd fate for one advocating and propagating a belief that is destructive to the foundations of the Torah.

The auspicious fate of Judah, the great propagator of metempsychosis through levirate marriage, leads Balbo to question Ashkenazi's reading of Onan's transgression and subsequent punishment. According to Ashkenazi's two tiered reading of Onan's transgression, the first sin, a belief in metempsychosis, led to the second sin, the spilling of seed. If, however, the belief is "false and improper" and Onan did not act in accord with the physical procedure at the heart of the belief, then he should have been rewarded and not severely punished. This should be the case even if Onan himself believed in the false conviction, for first of all, he was then acting out of defiance and second, his resistance and his failure to bring children might break the chain and prevent others from believing in the idea. Moreover, according to Balbo, "the laws of God do not dictate the death penalty for thought, except for in the case of thought concerning idolatry;"⁹⁰ even in this case, the strict law does not apply to the sons of Noah. Therefore, Onan cannot be said to have been punished for his thought. Not only would such an assertion not accord with the dictates of the rabbis concerning the death penalty for thought, it would not accord with the contrary fate of his father, mentor, and fellow believer in metempsychosis, Judah. According to Balbo, Onan was punished for one transgression alone, having nothing to do with false thought. Onan intentionally spilled seed, thereby stopping both new life and the potential cycle of renewed life inherent in metempsychosis. Such opposes the entire idea of creation and ultimately, the Creator, and therefore warrants the most severe punishment, death.

⁸⁹ See Genesis 49:8–10 for Jacob's rather lofty blessing of Judah.

⁹⁰ Vatican ms. 105, fol. 232b.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EXTRA-DEBATIAL LITERATURE OF CANDIA AND QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY

There were many people who believed in the transmigration of souls, from our nation and from other nations outside of our own.¹

Much of the debate between Balbo and Ashkenazi hinges upon questions of identity, both national and personal. In order to better understand the thought processes of these two thinkers concerning the linkage of *gilgul* to questions of identity on the national and personal levels, it is necessary to examine the extant literature that both Balbo and Ashkenazi wrote outside of the confines of the actual debate proceedings but which is connected to the debate in subject matter. From the side of Balbo, this constitutes an epistolary exchange with one of his students concerning the topic of metempsychosis. From the side of Ashkenazi, the extra-debatial texts contain halachic responsa literature concerning the laws of levirate marriage, citations from precedent philosophic material, and satirical prose and poetry written against the 'blind faith' claims of the kabbalists. Within the external material, both Balbo and Ashkenazi expand upon ideas that are touched upon in the debate and address issues that are connected to the debate but which are not discussed there. Taken together with the debate proceedings, these external writings help to fill out the complex picture of both of these complex thinkers, sometimes with elements from the non-debate materials clarifying points of obscurity in their thought in the tracts of the debate, and sometimes with materials from the debate clarifying points within the external literature. Sometimes a simply complex, non-systematic picture ensues of complex, dynamic and erudite thinkers from very different national and ideological backgrounds.

Within his epistle, Balbo continues with the question of biblical precedent and masterfully links the sordid sin of Onan and, by association, of his older brother Er to the story of the flood, thereby showing

¹ Vatican 105, fol. 205b. מאומותינו הן מאומות הנפש הן בגלגול הנפש הן מאומות זולתינו.

a direct link to Noah and his sons. There, Balbo asks rhetorically, “Why did the Torah write about the secret of levirate marriage in the name of the sons of Judah and his daughter-in-law, three sons, two of whom died for the same reason, and why did Er spill all of his seed?” He answers, “Know that this matter is connected to the matter of the rainbow and to the matter of the flood.”² Though he does not explicitly state it, Balbo seems to be implying through the fact that both stories have three sons with one preferred and a father who is the favored of the Lord, that the souls of the sons of Judah are the souls of the sons of Noah. As such, Er and Onan knew the graveness of their sin, for it was the same sin as the generation of the flood. Balbo resorts to an ingenious play-on-words in order to make the association and to drive his point: like Er and Onan, beast and man alike during the generation of the flood were freely wasting seed (השחית כל בשר את זרעו על) (הארץ,) and therefore God brought the flood in order to put them to waste (הנני מביא את-המבול מים על הארץ לשחת כל בשר אשר בו”³). Male seed is wet bile, while female seed is warm blood. Wasting the first is equivalent to the spilling of the first (i.e., murder, שפיכת דמים), for the female seed needs the male seed in order to be fertile. Therefore, spilling on both ends is the responsibility of the male, and not of the female. This is hinted at, according to Balbo, by God’s statement to Noah after the flood: “Whoever spills the blood of man, by man shall his blood be spilled.”⁴ Such was the sin of the generation of the flood, which caused God to rain down water, representing the wet male seed, and to withdraw the sun, representing the warm female seed. The wasting of male seed below (השחתת זרע), which caused the spilling of female seed, equivalent to murder (שפיכת דמים), brought about a waste and destruction for all living things (קץ כל-בשר והשחתת הארץ) from on high. Only with the conjunction of the male and female in the formation of the rainbow was humanity finally promised certitude and salvation.

Balbo seems to be implying a deep parallel between the story of the flood and the story of Judah and his sons, further suggesting a circle

² Paris ms. 800, fol. 46b.

³ Genesis, 6:17. This is the same terminology used for Onan’s act in Genesis 38, השחתת זרע.

⁴ Genesis 9:6, cited in, Paris ms. 800, fol. 46a. “שפך דם האדם באדם דמו ישפך.” Significant to Balbo’s reading is the following verse in the bible (which he omits), which commands, “Be fertile, then, and increase; abound on the earth and increase on it.”

of transmigration that loops back upon itself. In his epistle, he states concerning the flood that “the sin of wasting seed does not depend on women, but upon the men who spill their seed.”⁵ Women cannot be blamed and, according to him, are considered to be upright. Similarly, Tamar is shown to be free of fault, while her first two husbands are sentenced to death for their actions. In the end, Tamar is the upright character, who takes matters into her own hands. In the flood story as understood by Balbo, death reigns supreme due to the spilling of seed. This is the case as well for Judah’s sons. Finally, the rainbow as the conjunction of the male and female aspects promises salvation, and Noah and his clan proceed to repopulate the earth. For Judah and his assembly, true conjunction in the act of levirate marriage renews and rejuvenates life, bringing about the ultimate promise of salvation in the line of David and the Messiah. “The secret of Tamar is the sun,”⁶ writes Balbo in his epistle, solidifying his parallelism of the two biblical stories. Just as the sun is sent away by God only later to be joined with moisture so that life may sprout, so too Tamar is sent away by Judah, whose name represents the name of God, only later to be joined with him in order to bring about progeny. “Judah and Tamar together equal the divine name squared,”⁷ continues Balbo, indicating the *du-partsufin*, the *panim ve’ahor*, the masculine and feminine that are separated in order to conjoin in order to create. For Balbo, the affirmation by Ashkenazi that Judah and his sons were sons of Noah and not sons of Israel hits the nail on the head more than Ashkenazi knows. Such an association, in fact, allows Balbo to better explain his understanding of Er’s and

⁵ Paris ms. 800, fol. 46b.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. יהודה ותמר in *gematria* = 676, as does the tetragrammaton squared. Balbo states that this idea does not come from the “masters of the *sefirot* (i.e., the theosophical-theurgical kabbalists) who only *think* that they received the secret of impregnation (סוד (העבור), but from those who “know the names” (i.e., the ecstatic kabbalists). This is further proof of Balbo’s partiality to a more philosophical, ecstatic type of kabbalah and therefore his neglect of the *Zohar* and his greater reference to philosophical language. Interestingly, this notion of Judah and Tamar as equal to the tetragrammaton squared appears in a very ‘theosophical’, *sefirotic* portion of the fourteenth century *Sefer ha-Peli’ah*. On p. 308, talking about the *sefirah* of *Tiferet* and its relation to the divine name as symbolized by Judah and Tamar, *Sefer ha-Peli’ah* states, “אם תעלה מספר שניהם ר"ל יהודה ותמר תמצא שם בן ד"א שהוא שם המפורש ומהללים לשם תפארתו ר"ל כ"ו פעמים כ"ו הם תרע"ו יהודה ותמר הם תרע"ו.” Though not explicitly stated, this may very well have been Balbo’s source, presaging Yohanan Alemanno’s later neutralization of the theosophical element in *Sefer ha-Peli’ah* (see chapter 6 of this book, pp. 198–201).

Onan's sin, the life-giving character of levirate marriage, and the nature of salvation in the conjunction of the masculine and the feminine.

Unaware of Balbo's kabbalistic reading of the flood story and his linkage of it to the account of Judah and his sons,⁸ Ashkenazi turns to the story as the first of his "evidences" against metempsychosis. Within the story, God regrets his creation and proposes to wipe out all living things. Indeed, in Genesis 6:7, God states, "I will erase from the earth the men whom I created—men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them." In Ashkenazi's opinion, God's "regret" and His will to "erase" life from the earth does not accord with the idea of metempsychosis as a purifying device stemming from God's attribute of mercy. Could the souls of sinners be refined through the medium of metempsychosis, then there would be no need for regret and no exigency to erase all traces of life. Inversely, had it been God's purpose to put an end to that specific generation in order to effect a purer generation through the medium of metempsychosis, then the verse should have said "I will slay men," and not, "I will erase" them. This, however, is not the case, and God determines to "erase" life from the universe. Moreover, in *mishnat helek*,⁹ the sages say that the generation of the flood has no share in the world to come. Thus, metempsychosis cannot possibly be said to be in God's nature.

Balbo answers Ashkenazi's contention succinctly, curiously avoiding all reference to his kabbalistic rendering as manifest in his epistle.¹⁰ Ashkenazi is correct, Balbo claims, to be precise concerning the biblical use of the word "erase" regarding the generation of the flood. This word does indeed carry the distinct connotation of obliteration, indicating the total destruction of the generation and its inability to return. Moreover, Ashkenazi's reference to *perek helek* in this regard is also correct. There, the sages concur that the generation of the flood has no share in the world to come, and as such, any believing Jew must accept this idea. In order to drive his point, Balbo goes even beyond

⁸ This is further proof that Balbo's epistle was not addressed to Ashkenazi, for had he known Balbo's reading of the story, his argument would have taken on a different character. For Ashkenazi's argument, see Vatican ms. 254, fols. 21a–b.

⁹ Tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 10, Mishna 3. There it states: **דור המבול אין להם חלק לעולם הבא ואין עומדין בדין, שנאמר (בראשית ו') לא ידון רוחי באדם לעולם.**

¹⁰ Perhaps this elusion has to do with Balbo's regard of secrecy concerning the kabbalistic reading, with his desire to fight Ashkenazi on his own analytical grounds, or with the extremely different contexts of the epistle and the debate. In any case, it is important to note this retreat within Balbo's thought.

the claims of Ashkenazi and quotes the entire discussion in the *gemara* of the *mishna* brought by Ashkenazi:

The Rabbis taught: The generation of the flood has no share in the world to come, as it is written, “All existence on earth was erased—man, cattle, creeping things, and birds of the sky; they were erased from the earth” (Genesis, 7:23). “All existence was erased” refers to this world. “They were erased from the earth” refers to the world to come.¹¹ These are the words of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Batrya says: They will neither live nor be judged, as it is written, “My breath will not abide in man forever.” (Genesis, 6:3) [Alternately: My spirit will not judge man for eternity].¹² Their soul will not return to be judged. [Alternately: Their soul will not return to its sheath].¹³ Rabbi Menahem son of Rav says: [The generation of the flood],¹⁴ even when the Holy one Blessed is He returns souls to dead bodies, their soul shall lament for them in Gehenom, as it is written, “He too is flesh” (Genesis 6:3),¹⁵ and “You will conceive chaff, you will bring forth stubble: your soul is a fire that will devour you” (Isaiah, 33:11).¹⁶

This rather lengthy quote from the *gemara* serves to reinforce Ashkenazi’s idea concerning an absence of a share in the world to come for the generation of the flood. According to Balbo, “if we are exacting with the words of these sages (of the *gemara*), we find that they do not differ at all from each other. Instead, each one wants to reveal more than his fellow.”¹⁷ Simply put, all of the sages quoted here wish to assert the total perdition of the souls of the generation of the flood due to the sordidness of that generation.

By quoting the *gemara*, Balbo is bringing even more evidence from Jewish sources than does Ashkenazi in regard to the souls of the generation of the flood. This is in an attempt to show a corroboration of ideas, and not their collision. Balbo wants to pacify Ashkenazi’s argument completely by emphasizing the fact that no contradiction exists between the assertion of the erasure of the generation of the flood and the doctrine of metempsychosis. In order to accomplish this task, he

¹¹ This sentence of the *gemara* is omitted by Balbo.

¹² The Hebrew: **לֹא-יִדּוּן רוּחִי בָאָדָם לְעֹלָם** can be read in variant ways, allowing ben Batrya to assert that they will both not live *and* not be judged.

¹³ **תְּהֵא נִשְׁמַתָּן חוּזֶרֶת לְנִפְנֵה**. “נִפְנֵה” can mean its (i.e., the soul’s) judgment, or its sheath.

¹⁴ This part is added by Balbo. It does not appear in the printed edition of the Talmud.

¹⁵ This is added by Balbo.

¹⁶ Tractate Sanhedrin, p. 108a, op. cit., Vatican ms. 105, fol. 229a.

¹⁷ Vatican ms. 105, fol. 229a.

resorts to two of the cardinal premises established by him toward the beginning of his final tract as “given facts” concerning metempsychosis. According to the first of these, metempsychosis applies neither to the completely righteous nor to the completely wicked, but only to those within the mean. According to the fourth of these, metempsychosis applies only to Israel and not to other nations.¹⁸ The generation of the flood was completely wicked, and therefore does not fit the criterion of the first premise. Moreover, it did not belong to Israel, and therefore does not fit the standard of the fourth premise. As such, according to Balbo, the complete and total annihilation of the generation of the flood, including its souls, fully accords with the mechanism of metempsychosis as established by God’s attributes of mercy and judgment.

Balbo’s speculation into the nature of the possible beneficiaries of metempsychosis naturally leads the discussion into the question of identity. If metempsychosis is a principle that applies only to Israel while the soul of the non-Jew is doomed to destruction, as Balbo asserts as one of his fundamental premises, based on the *Midrash ha-Ne’elam le’Rut*,¹⁹ then what account can be given of the ancients who existed before the giving of Torah? Moreover, what does this say about the nature of the souls of humanity? Beyond the question of the souls of Er and Onan, who existed before the giving of the Torah and therefore were not a part of the community of Israel, Ashkenazi observes other discrepancies within the kabbalistic account of metempsychosis and its national limitations. For example, “according to those kabbalists who believe in metempsychosis, the soul of Adam transmigrated into David and [will transmigrate] into the Messiah. The indication of this is [the name] ‘ADaM,’”²⁰ which is the acronym of ‘Adam,’ ‘David,’ ‘Messiah.’²¹ In a like manner, the name ‘MoShe(H)’ is the acronym for ‘Moshe,’ ‘Seth,’ ‘Hevel’ (Abel), indicating a chain of transmigrations.²²

¹⁸ The other two premises hold that we cannot know about the private individual and whether his soul is a new one at the beginning of its three possible transmigrations or at the end, and that we cannot know for how long a soul will reside in the other world before it returns in a transmigration or when it will return. See Vatican ms. 105, fol. 228b.

¹⁹ See footnote 86 in chapter 1, above. In this context, as opposed to the one above, he is discussing metempsychosis itself, and not the specific institution of levirate marriage.

²⁰ Vatican ms. 105, fol. 207b.

²¹ Ashkenazi seems to have drawn this idea from *Sefer Me’irat Einayim*, p. 83.

²² This idea also appears in *Sefer Me’irat Einayim*, p. 43. There, Isaac of Acco posits this acronym, stating as further exegetical proof that the “ת” that completes the name of “שֵׁת” stands for תורה, while the “בֶּל” that completes the name of “הֶבֶל” stands for

Like Er and Onan, Adam in the first example, and Seth and Abel in the second, were not of the community of Israel. They existed before the giving of Torah, “from which time the sons of Israel were favored. And from that time forward started the principle of metempsychosis in Israel,”²³ according to the kabbalists. As such, wonders Ashkenazi, how can figures like Adam, Seth and Abel, who were all prior to this time, be said to transmigrate at all?

Within the debate, Balbo answers Ashkenazi’s objection with Ashkenazi’s very own words. “As you said,” he replies, “from that time forward, that is, from the day on which the Torah was given and onward, the principle [of metempsychosis] started in Israel.”²⁴ As a general principle for an entire people, metempsychosis depends on the seminal, collective event of Mount Sinai. Ashkenazi’s observation is correct; the divine expedient of metempsychosis is contingent upon and interwoven with the Torah and the commandments. Without these, metempsychosis becomes ineffectual. How, then, does one account for the attribution of metempsychosis to the ancients? If one accepts the premise of Torah as a necessary condition, as does Balbo, then Ashkenazi seems to have a valid argument. Balbo answers, “The forefathers upheld the Torah as it was received by the nation.”²⁵ As with levirate marriage, which the forefathers performed because they knew of its merits, so they did with all the commandments of the Torah.²⁶ Even though it had not been institutionalized through its revelation at Sinai, the precepts of the Torah had been known and carried out by

the **ל"ב נתיבות חכמה**. Both of these, according to tradition, were handed to Moses at Mt. Sinai. The idea of the acronym also appears in *Tikunei ha-Zohar*, Tikunim 13 and 69, but there, the acronym stands for **הבל, שות, משיח**, *Me'irat Einayim* seems to be the more likely source for Ashkenazi, especially considering his explicit mention of the work in this context. See Vatican ms. 105, fol. 208b.

²³ Vatican ms. 105, fol. 207b.

²⁴ Ibid., fol. 230b.

²⁵ Ibid. **האבות קיימו התורה כמקובל באומה**.

²⁶ This idea is discussed in Babylonian Talmud, tractate Yoma, p. 29b. There, concerning Genesis, 26:5, which says, “Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My Torahs,” Raba claims that Abraham upheld both the written Torah and the oral Torah. Hence, “My Torahs.” Concerning the same verse, Nahmanides claims that the forefathers learned Torah from *ruach ha-kodesh*, were meticulous about it, and passed it onto their children throughout the generations, before the formal giving of Torah to the entire community at Sinai. See Nahmanides’ commentary to Genesis 26:5. In these cases, tractate Yoma and Nahmanides are talking about Abraham and his descendants, whereas Balbo is implying such a knowledge of Torah from Adam onward.

those select few who were to become the primogenitors of the people of Israel.

In order to comprehend Balbo's understanding of the precepts of the Torah, their relationship to national identity, and the relation of the precepts and of identity to metempsychosis, it is necessary to turn to his epistle. There, he makes the assertion that "the human species is really one alone, according to the true definition of man as a living, speaking²⁷ mortal."²⁸ The power of speech separates humanity from all other species, while simultaneously uniting all individual humans through that very same, exalted power. According to this definition, no human can be said to be inherently unlike his fellow. Nevertheless, national differences do exist as based upon the tools granted by the nations to their individual members for the possible achievements of the soul. Based on this criterion, Balbo immediately divides humanity into two groups:²⁹ the three nations which are the adherents of religion, and the rest of humanity. He does not discuss the latter at all, but focuses his efforts upon the three adherents of religion. These three, which he initially groups together as one for the purpose of explanation, are divided by Balbo into three respective parts each: those who follow their religion without any real knowledge of its teachings, those who follow their religion and understand its teachings according to the plain meaning, and finally, those who follow the religion and understand its teachings according to both the plain meaning and the hidden meaning. Despite these differences of comprehension, Balbo asserts, there are righteous and wicked people within each of the three divisions, regardless of levels of understanding.

Balbo does not directly address the question of the differences that exist between the three religions themselves, and claims that it is only for the third group of each religion, known as "masters of the kabbalah,"³⁰

²⁷ Shlomo Pines translates מדבר in the context of this definition of man as "rational." See his translation of *The Guide*, part III, ch. 12, p. 444.

²⁸ Paris ms. 800, fol. 44b.

²⁹ See Paris ms. 800, fol. 45a for Balbo's discussion of these national classifications.

³⁰ Here, Balbo is making a radical claim that "kabbalah" extends beyond the boundaries of Judaism per se. In this context, he states that the "master of kabbalah" is he who received the tradition from his teachers and from the books of his religion (שקבל מרבותיו ומספרי דתו). Accordingly, "kabbalah" could be taken to simply mean "tradition." Nevertheless, considering his above association of the third group with those who understand their religion according to both its plain *and* its hidden meanings (לפי נסתריה) (פשטה גם לפי נסתריה), something greater seems to be at work here. Balbo seems to

to ponder such issues. Nevertheless, he hints at such differences, thereby allowing his kabbalistic disciple to ponder for himself. Dissention, Balbo claims, stems from the various and variant received secrets among the members of the third division, namely, the masters of the kabbalah. Much of this variation involves the cosmic *gilgul*, the rotation of the spheres, which causes different dispositions within different people and the reception of different compositions from the cosmic order. This not only causes fraternal dissent, sometimes small and sometimes great, sometimes among the few and sometimes among many, it also acts as the base for dissent among those remote from each other, a form of dissent which is always constant and always great. This latter form of dissent can be traced back through the line of received tradition to the very beginning of civilization. "Adam's opinion was different than that of Eve," asserts Balbo, "And Eve's opinion was different than that of the serpent."³¹ Though he does not state it specifically, this statement, in relation to Balbo's earlier distinctions concerning the three adherents of religion, seems to be referring to the three separate religions which are always in constant, great dispute with one another, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Adam represents the father of all religions, Judaism; Eve represents the matronic religion of the virgin birth, Christianity; finally, the serpent represents Islam.

The idea of Balbo's specific, though subtly unstated identification of Adam with Israel holds consonance with and draws support from the particularistic idea, already expressed in talmudic writings and picked up on by thinkers such as Judah ha-Levi and Eleazar of Worms, that only Israel merits the appellation 'man'.³² Indeed, in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, a statement attributed to Rav Bun asserts, "The holy One, blessed be he, said: I have established prophets in Israel, for they are called men (*adam*), as it says, 'for you are men' (Ezekiel 34:31), but I have not established prophets in idolatrous nations, for they are called beasts (*behemah*), as it says, 'and many beasts' (Jonah 4:11)."³³ As Elliot Wolfson notes, in

be legitimizing the secret traditions of Islam and Christianity on both the historical and intellectual levels as "kabbalah," placing them on par with the final and highest of his three divisions within Judaism. He soon comes to degitimize them, however, along with the first two divisions of these religions, through the ultimate meta-historical and meta-intellectual medium, namely, the Torah given to Moses at Sinai.

³¹ Paris ms. 800, fol. 45a.

³² For an astute analysis of this theme, see: Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 42–57.

³³ *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, 3:2, quoted in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, p. 43.

this characterization, “Jews alone possess the human soul (*nefesh adam*) in its ideal or pristine sense and hence they are differentiated ontologically from other nations.”³⁴ The equation of Eve, who was enticed by the serpent, with Christianity, accords with the clandestine reference to Mary in relation to the demonic figure Lilith, as found throughout Zoharic literature.³⁵ As the partner of Samael, characterized by the serpent, Lilith parallels the Eve of enticement and is the base and evil mother of the demonic realm. Finally, the serpent as representative of Islam concurs with the Zoharic association of the serpent with Ishmael. Indeed, the author of the *Ra'aya Mehemna* stratum of the Zoharic corpus writes, “The serpent is appointed over the nation of Ishmael,”³⁶ thereby creating a clearly defined parallel between Islam and the sordid creature of the bible. In Balbo’s account, as based upon the bible itself, all three of these characters, Adam, Eve and the serpent, took part in eating from the tree of knowledge. This opened each one’s eyes to aspects previously hidden from them, for each to see from his or her respective view.³⁷ Simultaneously, it caused them to be banished from the Garden of Eden. The tree of life would remain out of their reach, and all would be sentenced to death.

Balbo goes on to claim that the biblical story relating the act of eating from the tree of knowledge contains “the secret of intercourse.”³⁸ When the serpent enticed Eve, “he threw filth upon her,”³⁹ and when she in turn enticed Adam to eat, she sullied him with the same filth. In other words, the serpent, who himself was impure, rendered Eve impure through his seminal seed, and then, in a state of contamination, she rendered Adam impure with the same bad seed through a like act of tainted intercourse. Balbo garners support for his equation of the eating from the Tree of Knowledge with a debased act of intercourse from the biblical verse that states, “And Adam knew Eve his wife, and

³⁴ *Venturing Beyond*, p. 43.

³⁵ See, for example, *Zohar* 1:27b, 2:148b, 3:273a, and the references made by Wolfson in *Venturing Beyond*, p. 93, fn. 307. Though Balbo does not mention or quote the *Zohar* specifically, as mentioned above, he most probably had access to, and familiarity with Zoharic literature. See footnote 17 in chapter 1, above, and the discussion surrounding it.

³⁶ *Zohar* 3:246b. “נחש ממונה על אומה דישמעאל.”

³⁷ This would be the base of the kabbalistic tradition (see note 30 above) of each religion, respectively.

³⁸ Paris ms. 800, fol. 45b. הוא הנחש על חוה הוא שעץ הדעת “אצלם הוא סוד המשגל.”

³⁹ Ibid., 45a. Cf. BT Shabbat 146a “משבא נחש על חוה הטיל בה זוהמה.”

she conceived and bore Cain.”⁴⁰ “Knowledge” in this verse clearly relates to a form of sexual intercourse, from which, in this case, the debased and evil Cain is conceived and born. Through a like act of ‘eating’ from the Tree of Knowledge, the three characters, the serpent, Eve and Adam, were polluted and impure, and all three were thrown out of the pristine Garden of Eden. Joel Hecker has noted that such a metaphorical parallel between sex and eating in mystical literature is not surprising, since “both are physiological appetites and as such can be used to reflect the kabbalah’s puritanical standpoint in which the physical appetites must be tended to for the sake of the maintenance of the body, whether human or divine. Simultaneously,” Hecker continues, “they must be cautiously monitored, as they are prone to excess or profane indulgence.”⁴¹ Such excess and profane indulgence seems to be the case that Balbo is making with his parallelism between impure intercourse and the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. In his opinion, only with the reception of and ‘consumption’ from the Torah, which is the highly guarded Tree of Life, could the nations purify themselves from the filth of the original act of improper eating/intercourse, but only Israel decidedly took upon itself the yoke of Torah, while the rest of the nations rejected it off-hand.

This last statement concerning Israel’s acceptance and the other nations’ rejection of Torah has consonance with the famous Midrashic tale that recounts God’s offering of the Torah to the nations of the world. Among these were the sons of Esau, who rejected the Torah on account of the commandment “thou shalt not kill,”⁴² and the sons of Ishmael, for whom the commandment “thou shalt not steal”⁴³ posed as a barrier to final acceptance.⁴⁴ According to this Midrash, in which the sons of Esau and the sons of Ishmael could later be interpreted as Christianity and Islam, respectively, only Israel accepted the Torah forthrightly and categorically. Balbo’s claim also finds support in the aggadic tale at the beginning of the talmudic tractate *Avodah Zarah*, in which at the end of times, God judges the Romans and the Persians on behalf of Israel, two kingdoms which could subsequently be read as

⁴⁰ Genesis 4:1, referenced by Balbo in Paris 800, fol. 45b.

⁴¹ Joel Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval kabbalah*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005, p. 3.

⁴² Deuteronomy 5:17.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *Talkut Shimoni* on Deuteronomy 33, and *Psikta Rabbati* 21.

representatives of Christianity and Islam, respectively.⁴⁵ There as well, a statement attributed to Rabbi Johanan insists that God presented the Torah to every nation, but that only Israel accepted it. Though Balbo does not explicitly cite these rabbinic sources in support of his idea that Israel received the Torah while the nations of the world rejected it, they most certainly lie in the background, and he goes on to cite other rabbinic sources in support of his overall theory of contamination and purification. “When Israel stood at Mount Sinai, the filth ceased” he writes, but with respect to “the nations that did not stand at Mount Sinai, the filth did not cease from them.”⁴⁶ In Balbo’s sexually gastro-nomic characterization of this statement, only eating from the Tree of Life, which is the Torah, can purify from the contamination of the past act of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, which is the original act of improper intercourse. As such, only Israel is truly pure.

Balbo’s theory has strong resonance with the thought of Abraham Abulafia as expressed in the latter’s *Hayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba*. There, Abulafia writes:

The secrets of ‘*arayot*⁴⁷ refer to the serpent’s sexual intercourse with Eve, as he is an adulterer and he throws his filth upon her. When Israel stood before Mount Sinai, the filth ceased, but with respect to the nations that did not stand at Mount Sinai, the filth did not cease. And this is the great and honorable matter that does not need explanation, for it is clear to the enlightened that the Torah is the cause of the life of the world-to-come... And also from this will be made clear the secret of [the verse] “And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden,”⁴⁸ and also the secret of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, which are planted in the garden. And the true Torah is the cause of the complete cessation from someone of the filth of the serpent.⁴⁹

The parallels between this passage and Balbo’s characterization are unmistakable. While Balbo labels the topic “the secret of intercourse,”

⁴⁵ BT *Avodah Zarah*, 2a–b.

⁴⁶ Paris ms. 800, fols. 45a–b; BT *Shabbat* 146a, *Yevamot* 103b, *Avodah Zarah* 22b. וְיִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁעָמְדוּ עַל הָרִי סִינַי פֶּסְקָה זוֹהַמְתָּן, גּוֹיִם שֶׁלֹּא עָמְדוּ עַל הָרִי סִינַי לֹא פֶסְקָה זוֹהַמְתָּן מֵהֶם.

⁴⁷ This is a subtle reference to the statement in *Hagigah* 2:1, quoted in footnote 33 in chapter 1, above, which acts as the basis for the consideration of illicit sexual relations as one of the three main esoteric subjects. For more on this idea in Kabbalistic literature, see: Moshe Idel, “Interpretations of the Secret of ‘*Arayot* in Early kabbalah” [Hebrew] *kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 12, 2004, pp. 89–199. See especially pp. 155–185 for an analysis of the topic as it appears in Abulafia’s writings.

⁴⁸ Genesis 2:8.

⁴⁹ *Hayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba*, p. 53.

Abulafia refers to it as “the secrets of *‘arayot*,” that is, of illicit sexual relations. Although the Talmud already indicates sexual mishap, only Abulafia, and later Balbo, bring it to its fullest expression under an esoteric rubric. Both thinkers rely upon the same Talmudic source, and both make the claim that only Israel, who received the Torah, is purified from the seminal filth of the serpent. Finally, both thinkers refer to the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge in relation to this secret, associating the Tree of Life with the Torah and implicating the Tree of Knowledge in the original sexual act of contamination itself. While Balbo does not mention Abulafia forthrightly, it seems reasonable, given these stark parallels, to assert that Balbo most probably relied upon Abulafia’s characterization in the formulation of his own ideas concerning the topic.

Whatever the source for Balbo’s theory may have been, he takes the idea that the Torah is the ultimate source of Israel’s exalted status among the nations even further than Abulafia and his Talmudic predecessors, asserting that this status is witnessed to by the very text of the Torah itself. He contends that the holy nation of Israel is called ‘the beginning,’ basing himself upon the verse in Jeremiah that states, “Israel is holy to the Lord, the beginning of his harvest.”⁵⁰ In his opinion, this identification of Israel as ‘beginning’ explains the reason why “the Torah started with the word ‘in the beginning’ and ended with the word ‘Israel,’ for Israel is the beginning of the Torah and its final purpose.”⁵¹ The Torah was given to the nation of Israel for purification and the attainment of righteousness as its final purpose. Nevertheless, as a holy nation of righteous men already from ‘the beginning,’ Israel held an ontologically superior status well before the epiphany at Sinai. This accords with Balbo’s statement that “God created and rules the world with the souls of the righteous, and the righteous in general are called ‘Israel’.”⁵² At first glance, this statement seems to be at odds with his earlier assertion that among the three parts of the three religions, namely, the ignorant followers of religious teachings, the followers who understand the simple meaning of their respective religious precepts, and the followers of religion who understand the hidden meaning,

⁵⁰ Jeremiah 2:3.

⁵¹ Paris 800, fol. 46a. **ישראל כי במלת בראשית והשלימה במלת ישראל כי**
ישראל הם ראשית התורה ותכליתה.

⁵² Ibid. **בנפשותיהם של הצדיקים נמלך וברא העולם. והצדיקים בכלל נקראו**
ישראל.

there exist “some righteous men and some wicked men, for the wicked that is in each part and also the righteous knows what he himself is.”⁵³ Nevertheless, in concurrence with his later claim of Israel’s righteousness as a whole, Balbo can be understood to be contending that within each of the three knowledge-based divisions, there exists one unified nation of righteous men whose unity cuts through the knowledge-based divisions, and that nation is Israel. The other two religious nations, whether the adherents are ignorant, simple, or well versed in the secret traditions, are inherently evil.

According to Balbo, the souls of the righteous of Israel do not transmigrate, but enter directly into a paradisiacal state of conjunction with the divine. Transmigration is reserved for those who are not righteous and who are still impure. In order to conclude this entire trend of thought, Balbo returns to and expands upon the original rabbinic dictum around which the thought revolves. “When Israel stood at Mount Sinai, the filth ceased,” he repeats, adding, “The conclusion of everyone from whom the filth did not cease is that his soul transmigrates, and everyone from whom the filth did cease is risen up and conjoined to God for all of eternity.”⁵⁴ With this statement, a contradiction seems to inhere in Balbo’s overall thought. Metempsychosis cannot be “a principle for Israel alone”⁵⁵ as Balbo affirms in the proceedings of the debate with Ashkenazi, if the filth ceased from Israel, causing an end to the need for transmigration for Israel and a situation of Israel’s eternal conjunction with God. Conversely, if metempsychosis is the fate of those from whom the filth did not cease, who are the Gentile nations, then it necessarily cannot be a principle for Israel alone.

Perhaps Balbo experienced a radical change of heart concerning the nature of metempsychosis between the time of writing his epistle and the proceedings of the debate. Perhaps the discrepancy can simply be chalked up to human disorder and an unsystematic nature in Balbo’s overall thought, coupled with the fact that he was responding to two disparate situations, the epistle being instructional and the debate being adversarial. Or perhaps the answer to this seemingly egregious

⁵³ Paris 800, fol. 45a. וכן הצדיק חלק שבכל חלק וכן הצדיק “קצתם צדיקים וקצתם רשעים כי הרשע שבכל חלק וכן הצדיק מכיר בעצמו מהו.”

⁵⁴ Ibid., 46a. “ישראל כשעמדו על הר סיני פסקה זוהמתו. סוף דבר כל מי שלא פסקה זוהמתו ממנו נפשו מתגלגלת וכל מי שפסקה זוהמתו ממנו נתעלה ונדבק בשם לנצח נצחים.”

⁵⁵ See note 86 in chapter 1, and the discussion surrounding it, above.

contradiction that someone with the sharp intellect of Balbo would probably do his best to avoid can be explained through his own enigmatic, often obscure writings.⁵⁶ In order to iron out the contradiction by means of Balbo's own texts, it is necessary to return to the tracts of the debate. As has already been noted, in his final tract, Balbo establishes cardinal premises concerning metempsychosis that, in his opinion, should be accepted as given truths. The first of these states concerning *gilgul*:

This measure does not act at all upon the completely righteous, those who walk before their Creator in truth, which is the attainment of truth until the point that no room will be found in their hearts to reject it⁵⁷ or to change it in any manner... And it also [does not act upon] the completely wicked, and they are those who sin in their souls... And indeed, this measure acts upon he who has merits and transgressions, and upon this type of person this institution [of *gilgul*] acts. That is to say, it acts upon those who have not actualized their soul in the attainment [of truth].⁵⁸

According to this formula, the completely righteous are those who uphold the Torah completely and entirely, and the nations of the world, who do not have the expedient of the Torah and therefore do not hold to its precepts at all, can be said to be the completely wicked who sin in their souls. *Gilgul* applies to those of Israel who have the potentiality for complete righteousness through the medium of the Torah, but who have not fully actualized that potentiality. Among the nations, *gilgul* applies only to Israel, who took upon itself the yoke of Torah in order to purify itself from the filth of the serpent that resulted from the act of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Through the act of receiving Torah, only Israel is of a pure enough level to receive the expedient of *gilgul*, which itself is a means of purification. *Gilgul* gives the completely righteous in potential the chance to actualize that righteousness in the attainment of truth, and only Israel, through

⁵⁶ Another possibility, which I do not categorically rule out, is that this is evidence that the epistle was indeed written by someone other than Balbo. For the time being, I accept Idel's arguments for the case that the epistle was written by Balbo. For reference to Idel's arguments, see footnote 12 in chapter 1.

⁵⁷ "It" refers to "the truth." This is probably an allusion to the Torah.

⁵⁸ Vatican ms. 105, fol. 228b. "זאת המדה איננה נוהגת כלל בצדיקים גמורים הם אשר הולכים לפני בוראם באמת שהיא השגת האמת עד שלא ימצאו מקום בלבם לדחותה ולא לשנותה בשום פנים... וגם לא ברשעים גמורים והם החטאים בנפשותם... ואמנם זאת המדה נוהגת במי שיש לו זכויות ועונות ובהם נוהג מנהג זה ר"ל באותם אשר לא הוציאו נפשם לפעל ההשגה."

the apparatus of Torah, is a nation of completely righteous men in potential. All of the rest of the nations are far too contaminated and impure, and their souls are essentially lost. As Balbo's disciple, who not only asks questions but also brings opinions that he seemingly surmises from his teacher, writes, "The nations of the world that spurned the Torah of Moses, peace be upon him, did not want to receive the yoke of the kingdom of heaven upon them. And God will not have mercy on their souls by transmigrating them, but they will immediately descend into hell."⁵⁹ As such, it is possible to read Balbo's thought concerning the application of metempsychosis as no contradiction at all, but as an assertion that on the national level, *gilgul* stands as "a principle for Israel alone," while on the personal level within the nation of Israel, it applies only to the incomplete, intermediate class. That is to say, as a general principle, metempsychosis only applies to those in Israel who have not attained complete righteousness through an upholding of the Torah, with its specific purpose being to allow them to further complete their righteousness by giving them another chance to fulfill commandments that they have yet to fulfill. Such a purpose would be futile for those outside of Israel and unnecessary for those within Israel who have already attained righteousness through the fulfillment of the commandments of the Torah.

As is the case with Balbo's epistolary exchange with his student that acts as a source external to the debate which sheds further light on his overall theory of metempsychosis, so too Ashkenazi has extant material that was not a part of the debate proper but that expands his view of the topic at hand. However, unlike Balbo's exchange, which took place outside of any readily visible influence from the debate and indeed makes no mention of it or of Ashkenazi at all, Ashkenazi's exterior material was written after his exchanges with Balbo and in direct response to those proceedings. These outside writings fall at the end of Vatican ms. 254, posterior to Ashkenazi's records of the actual debate, and span 18 folio pages in length. Like Balbo's epistle, they raise issues of national character and personal identity, but unlike Balbo's external disquisition, the national questions are internal to the overall Jewish populace while the questions of personal identity revolve around

⁵⁹ Paris ms. 800, fol. 47a. "אומות העולם שבטו [צ"ל: בעטו] בתורת מרע"ה ולא רצו לקבל עליהם עול מלכות שמים לא ירחם השם על נפשותם להיות מגלגלה אלא מיד תרדנה לגיהנום."

philosophical discourse. In addition to these points, several other topics in Ashkenazi's post-debate writings provide additional information concerning his stance within the debate and how and why he decided to take up the cudgel against the Jewish support of metempsychosis in the first place.

These texts begin with a set of halachic responsa literature concerning the laws of levirate marriage, and include a letter of inquiry concerning the matter, sent by Ashkenazi in 1467 to Rabbis Yaakov ben Shimshon and Yuda Obernik of Mestre and to the Jewish community of Jerusalem.⁶⁰ Ashkenazi's records include the letters of response by all of the three halachic authorities to which he turned, the first two of whom were of Ashkenazi stock and were residing in Italy, while the latter, Yosef ben Gedaliah ben Emanuel from Jerusalem, makes it clearly known that he is from Sephardi background, in both birth and in high pedigree education. "I was born and raised in Spain," he states. "And I served before my teacher and rabbi, the Rav Rabbi Josef Albo, may his memory be for a blessing, and before my teacher and rabbi, the Rav Mattatياهو Hitzhari, may his righteous memory be for a blessing, and before my teacher and rabbi, the Rav Eleazar Franco, may his memory be for a blessing, and before the great luminary the Rav Avraham Franco, may his memory be for a blessing."⁶¹ As it exists, then, the responsa literature not only elucidates the halachic question connected to Ashkenazi's distaste for the mystical explication of levirate marriage through metempsychosis, it reveals various sentiments concerning both the halacha of *yibbum* and the mystical doctrine of *gilgul* from different national centers of Jewish law and thought.⁶²

Within his letter of inquiry, Ashkenazi does not really inquire per se, but forcefully makes known his already formed opinion. This opinion, which strongly inclines against the laws of levirate marriage in consonance with Ashkenazi's anti-kabbalistic reading of the commandment

⁶⁰ Vatican 254, fols. 84b–86b. For more on this, and especially on the response of Obernik, see: Kupfer, "On the Cultural Image," pp. 125–130. See also: Gottlieb, pp. 376–377, especially footnote 19.

⁶¹ Vatican 254, fols. 86a–b. "נולדתי ונתגדלתי בספרד. ושמשתי לפני מורי ורבי הר"ר יוסף אלבו ז"ל ולפני מרי ורבי הר"ר מתתיהו היצחרי זצ"ל. ולפני מרי ורבי הר"ר אלעזר פראנקו ז"ל. ולפני המאור הגדול הר"ר אברהם פרנקו ז"ל."

⁶² For more on the halachic question of *yibbum* and *halitzah* as it took its various forms, see the superb analysis of Jacob Katz, "*Yibbum* and *Halitzah* in the Post-Talmudic Period." Katz paints a complex picture of the issue, which he shows to be far from black and white. For the Ashkenazi discussion, see especially pp. 136–144, and for the Sephardi discussion, see especially pp. 155–160.

within the debate itself, is based on the rulings of “the arbiters who have judged that the commandment of *halitzah* (the ritual of unbinding the shoe of the designated redeemer as a form of redemption) takes precedence in this era.”⁶³ In his opinion, levirate marriage has been replaced by its alternative, *halitzah*, as categorically ruled to be the case by halachic authorities the stature of Rashi and Ya’akov ben Asher, the Ba’al ha-Turim. Notwithstanding this definitive opinion as significantly based upon Ashkenazi halachic sources, Moshe Ashkenazi relates that his informed opinion was challenged. He gets to the heart of the matter, stating:

If Rabbi Isaac Alfasi and Maimonides judged that the commandment of levirate marriage takes precedence, those who say that the commandment of *halitzah* takes precedence are the majority, and the inclination is after the many, and Halacha is likewise according to the latter. And a kabbalist answered me saying that the commandment of levirate marriage takes precedence, for it is clarified from the secret of impregnation that the reason [for the commandment] is to transmigrate the soul into the eldest son that will be born, as Rabbi Menahem Recanati mentioned, as well as the author of the *Ma’arekhet*, and Nahmanides, and the book *Me’irat Einayim*, and many of the kabbalists.⁶⁴

In contrast to the Ashkenazi arbiters who serve as support for Moshe Ashkenazi’s opinion, here he mentions two major Sephardi authorities who hold the opposite opinion and who, in his opinion, are in the minority. He then immediately mentions the kabbalistic reason given for the commandment of levirate marriage, brought as proof of its precedence to *halitzah* in his own day by Balbo, and supported by the readings of Recanati, *Ma’arekhet ha-Elohut*, Nahmanides, *Me’irat Einayim*, and other, unspecified kabbalistic sources. Although the two Sephardi halachic authorities mentioned by Ashkenazi were far from being kabbalists and although within the debate itself he often refers to Maimonides in order to refute the doctrine of metempsychosis on both

⁶³ Vatican ms. 254, fol. 84b. “הפסקנים שפסקו שמצות חליצה קודמת בזמן הזה.” For more on the laws of *halitzah* in general, see: Yitzhak D. Gilat, “*Halutzah*—Is it a Rabbinic Law?” [Hebrew], in *Perakim B’Hishtalshelut ha-Halachah*, Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1992, pp. 273–280.

⁶⁴ Ibid. “אם ר' י' אלפסי והרמב"ל פסקו שמצות י"ב קודמת האומרים שמצות חליצה קודמת הם הרוב ואחרי רבים להטות והלכה נמי כבתרא. וישיבני איש מקובל לאמר כי מצות י"ב קודמת כי נתבאר בסוד העבור שהטעם הוא לגלגל הנפש בבכור אשר תלד כמו שזכר זה ר' מנחם מרקנט. ובעל המערכת והרמב"ן וספר מאירת עינים רבים מהמקובלים.”

halachic and philosophical grounds,⁶⁵ the connection that he makes between the law of levirate marriage as asserted by these authorities and its specifically Sephardi kabbalistic *raison d'être* in the mystical idea of *gilgul* is unmistakable.

It is important to note in this context that all of the kabbalists mentioned by Ashkenazi in relation to the kabbalistic reason for the commandment of levirate marriage were all either Sephardi or of Sephardi training⁶⁶ and that indeed, the idea specifically stems from Spanish kabbalah, even in its later Byzantine, Italian, North African and Mediterranean manifestations. Even though Ashkenazi does not mention the fact, prominent Ashkenazi kabbalistic sources such as Josef ben Shalom Ashkenazi's commentary on *Sefer Yetzira* make no reference to the association between levirate marriage and metempsychosis. Moreover, Abraham Abulafia's brand of kabbalah, while Spanish in origin, received much of its impetus from the literature of the group of Rhineland mystics known as *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, was ultimately rejected in Spain, and in a complex manner transforms the transmigratory readings of both the secret of *gilgul* and the secret of impregnation.⁶⁷ Thus, Ashkenazi's battle goes beyond mere halachic injunction and, as is evinced by his records of the debate itself, seeks to attack the specifically Spanish intellectual roots that stand behind the halachic primacy of levirate marriage. Whether aware of the inter-kabbalistic divide or not, Ashkenazi attempts to establish Ashkenazi halachic dominance by uprooting the Spanish kabbalistic idea, and though a philosopher attacking kabbalah in general, inadvertently elucidates the complex national interplay between Halacha and speculation, both of the philosophical and kabbalistic types.

The Ashkenazi-Sephardi national divide reflected in Moshe Ashkenazi's discourse is further supported by the international responses

⁶⁵ See, for example, Vatican 105, fol. 206b and Vatican 254, fol. 21b, in which he mentions the reason given by Maimonides for the laws of sacrifice as a weaning from idolatry, as opposed to Nahmanides 'incorrect' reading connected to *gilgul*. See also Vatican 105, fol. 213b/Vatican 254, fol. 29b and Vatican 105, fol. 214b/Vatican 254, fol. 30b. In both of these latter places, he discusses Maimonides' ideas of the essence of the soul as connected to the Acquired Intellect.

⁶⁶ Though Recanati was not Spanish per se, his ideas concerning the matter derive in large part from the *Zohar*, and though Isaac of Acco came from the city indicated by his name and was an eclectic thinker, most of his ideas on the subject derive from the school of Nahmanides.

⁶⁷ For a discussion of Abulafia's readings of these two secrets, see chapter 4, pp. 147–154.

that he received to his halachic inquiry. Indeed, Ya'akov ben Shimshon of Mestre writes, "That which I have heard, that this man allowed for levirate marriage in this era is a thing of force, and he is nothing but a person who arouses astonishment, one who puts his head between the great mountains."⁶⁸ Basing this opinion on an explicitly stated national bent, he continues, stating that "even in the land of Ashkenaz, in which it was customary to practice levirate marriage from ancient times," the practice has become obsolete. "Indeed," he writes, "many generations and eras and epochs have passed in which no man in all of the land of Ashkenaz has set his heart to perform levirate marriage."⁶⁹ Without mentioning Spain or the other non-Ashkenazi lands, Ya'akov seems to be tacitly stating the ascendancy of Ashkenaz in this specific matter. This is especially the case, he seems to be concluding, since it was one of the first regions in which levirate marriage was practiced and thus, should hold halachic precedential authority as one of the first to overturn the practice in favor of *halitzah*.

Similar to Ya'akov, his compatriot Yuda Obernik writes, "I am fifty-five years old and I remember three generations of the great men of the world that came before me, and all of them and their ancestors kept levirate marriage far away, and it was a strange thing and a great ugliness in their eyes."⁷⁰ Like Ya'akov, he mentions the long period of time without levirate marriage, mentioning the 'men of the world', but seemingly only referring to the world of Ashkenaz. Unlike Ya'akov, Yuda takes the discussion a step further than practice and enters into the speculative argument at hand. In regard to Balbo and the thought behind the allowance of levirate marriage, Yuda writes:

Concerning the man that professes to lead people to perform levirate marriage in these generations, if it comes from the side of a form of what he has heard that brought him to this, then he is not so guilty, since the opinions are many in connection to this matter, and those who allow will allow things which are forbidden. But if it comes from the side of kabbalah, there is a great offense here, which is sealed by the reasons [for the commandment of levirate marriage] that the masters of kabbalah give.

⁶⁸ Vatican 254, fol. 85a. The "great mountains" may be a reference to the great Ashkenazi halachic arbiters. "מה ששמעתי כי אותו האיש התיר לייבם בזמן הזה דבר של כוח הוא ואינו אלא מן המתמיהון מי שמכנים ראשו בין ההרים הגדולים."

⁶⁹ Ibid. "אפי' ארץ אשכנז שהיית מקדם מן המקומות שנהגו ליבם הנה עברו כמה דורות וזמנים ועדנים שלא נשא לב איש בכל ארץ אשכנז לייבם."

⁷⁰ Ibid., fol. 85b. "הנה אנכי בן נ"ה שנים וזוכרני ג' דורות שלפני גדולי העולם וכולם. המה ואבותיהם הרחיקו הייבום, והיה בעיניהם דבר זר וכיעור גדול."

And who brought this affliction upon us to believe them, as opposed to the intellect and as opposed to clear-cut philosophical demonstration, as Aristotle refuted the idea of *gilgul* completely.⁷¹

According to this highly important and telling testimony from one of the great rabbis of Mestre, it is not the issue of the allowance of levirate marriage that is critical, for many variant halachic opinions do inhere. Rather, the main issue comes down to kabbalah and the kabbalistic reasoning given for the commandment, as it opposes the intellect and seals off the commandment from rigorous philosophical speculation. Herein lies a halachic authority who is quite revealingly more concerned about the thought processes behind halachic decision making than the actual decisions themselves, a sentiment reflected in the entire philosophical, anti-kabbalistic tenor of Ashkenazi's debate itself.

The Sephardi Yosef ben Gedaliah provides a much different perspective than either of his Ashkenazi colleagues from Mestre. Responding to Moshe Ashkenazi's assertion that 'those who say that the commandment of *halitzah* takes precedence are the majority, and the inclination is after the many,' he writes, "If for you there are made thousands who say that the commandment of *halitzah* takes precedence, for us there are tens of thousands who say that the commandment of levirate marriage takes precedence."⁷² In support of this euphemism for the multitudes of halachists who hold levirate marriage to a position of pre-eminence above *halitzah*, he mentions not only the Sephardi rabbis Isaac Alfasi and Maimonides, already mentioned by Moshe, but also the French Tosafists Isaac ben Asher ha-Levi, Shmuel ben Meir, and Eliezer ben Yoel ha-Levi. Though Yosef does not explicitly state the Ashkenazi origins of these authorities chosen among the "tens of thousands," his decision to mention them as supporters of levirate marriage seems to be pointed. Even among the Ashkenazi arbiters, many of the more authoritative among them uphold the commandment, thus showing its hegemony across the Ashkenazi-Sephardi divide and thus rendering Moshe's specifically Ashkenazi argument ineffectual. Notwithstanding

⁷¹ Ibid. "על דבר האיש המתיימר להנהיג לייבם בדורות הללו, ודאי אם מצד צורת דשמעתן שהביא אותו על זה, אין עליו כ"כ אשם, לפי שרובו הדעות בדבר זה והמתירים יתירים על האסורים, אומנם אם מצד הקבלה בא, יש כאן אשם גדול, דמאן הוא חתום על הטעמים שנותנים בעלי הקבלה. ומי הביא עלינו הצרה הזאת להאמין להם נגד השכל ונגד המופת חתוך, שבטל אריסטו דעת הגלגול לגמרי."

⁷² Vatican 254, fol. 86a. "אם לך האלף שמצות חליצה קודמת, לנו רובי רבבה מצות יבום קודמת."

this highly valid and well thought out argument, a very real divide still exists, as witnessed to by Yosef's own Sephardi background and the Ashkenazi background of both Moshe and the anti-levirate rabbis of Mestre. This divide harkens back to the Spanish kabbalistic reading of the laws of levirate marriage through the medium of *gilgul*. Regarding this, Yosef writes to Ashkenazi in blatant dissatisfaction with the latter's stance:

That which you have done much to speak against the secret of *gilgul*, you have not been correct in this. And if it is a received tradition, a kabbalah, what is it to the master of judgment to differ? This is all the more so in that we have found this opinion by Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, the most beautiful of the Tana'im, and by other Tana'im and Amora'im. And they said that Job was a product of levirate marriage, and how will you answer in the face of the great luminary Nahmanides, may his memory be for a blessing?⁷³

Similar to the response of Obernik though on the other side of the fence, it is not the question of the actual act of levirate marriage that is important to Yosef, for, as he writes, "sometimes people perform levirate marriage and sometimes they do *halitzah*, according to the conditions that the masters of mating have given."⁷⁴ The law itself is not set in stone as, in his opinion, it is not categorically forbidden. The reason for the law, however, should not be questioned, based first upon what Yosef perceives to be rabbinic authorities but which in reality are figures of the Spanish Zoharic corpus,⁷⁵ and based secondly upon the great Spanish kabbalist Nahmanides. Yosef's response to Ashkenazi, then, offers further proof of a national divide of international proportions, revolving around the Spanish kabbalistic reasoning given for the commandment of levirate marriage in *gilgul neshamot*.

⁷³ Ibid., fol. 85b. ואם "מה שהרבית לדבר כנגד סוד הגלגול, הן לזאת לא צדקת. ואם קבלה הוא מה לבעל הדין לחלוק. כ"ש שמצינו זאת הדעת לר' שמעון בן יוחאי שופרא דתנאי. וכמה תנאים ואמוראים. והם אמרו איוב בן יבמה היה ואיך תשיב פני המאור הגדול הרמב"ן ז"ל."

⁷⁴ Ibid. "לפעמים מייבמין ולפעמים חולצין לפי התנאי שהיו מתנים בעלי הזווג."

⁷⁵ The Rashbi and Tana'im and Amora'im of transmigration are the Rashbi and Tana'im and Amora'im of the *Zohar*, and the idea of Job as a product of levirate marriage specifically shows up initially in the Zoharic context. See: *Zohar* 3:216b, which states, "Job was the product of levirate marriage, and because of this was punished for what had already happened to him." (איוב בן יבמה הוה, ובגין דא אתענש על מה.) In *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (p. 304, n. 39), Scholem notes that this idea was also expressed fairly early on in the school of Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, ms. Halbertstam 174, fol. 19a, and by Moshe de Leon in his *Sod 'Iyyan Pesach*, ms. Schocken, kabbalah 14, fol. 86b.

The divide attested to by the responses of the Ashkenazi rabbis of Mestre and by the Sephardi rabbi Yosef ben Gedaliah of Jerusalem is the divide that Ashkenazi took upon himself to dispute with Balbo in the small community of Candia. In so doing, he and his interlocutor Balbo reflected and amplified the greater, international inter-Jewish national sentiments of the Ashkenazi public on the one hand and of the Sephardi-based kabbalistic public on the other. Moreover, by seeking various outside opinions and receiving responses both from Ashkenazi authorities in Mestre and from a consummate Sephardi authority in Jerusalem, Ashkenazi brought this amplified, small-scale national debate outside of the confines of the small community of Candia and into the larger, international Jewish arena. Perhaps due to the more secluded nature of the Ashkenazi community of Mestre and the Sephardi community of Jerusalem as opposed to the closer contact in Candia, or perhaps due to the established positions of power of the rabbis of these communities as opposed to Ashkenazi's fresh competition for power, the international debate did not take on as full of a form as the debate between Ashkenazi and Balbo. Nevertheless, through the responses of the rabbis discussed above, this international debate of national character evocatively reflects the more expanded sentiments of both Ashkenazi and Balbo. This reflection is not necessarily in relation to the commandment of levirate marriage per se, but in relation to the commandment's mystical connection to metempsychosis, and the subsequent overall concern for the doctrine of metempsychosis itself, both from the side of its detractors and from the side of its supporters.

In addition to the international halachic responsa, another important and interesting text that sheds light upon the international, intra-national nature of both the Jewish community of Candia and the debate centering around metempsychosis made its way into Ashkenazi's addenda. Ashkenazi relates that in the year 1478, twelve years after the initiation of the debate, a certain Rabbi Yuda, the son of the great Efraim the Wise of Tlemcen, made his way to the island of Crete.⁷⁶ In Ashkenazi's report, he tells this Yuda about the debate concerning *gilgul*, and asks him if he has heard anything concerning the matter. Yuda informs Ashkenazi that not only has he heard about it, he indeed "has in his possession a book composed in the Arabic language, which discusses

⁷⁶ Vatican 254, fol. 86b.

this matter.”⁷⁷ Ashkenazi proceeds to ask Yuda to translate the Arabic text into Hebrew, a text which he informs in his report of the meeting and subsequent translation, is chapter forty-five of a book entitled *Amitat ha-Emet*, ‘the Truth of Truth’. The Hebrew version of this originally Arabic text is included by Ashkenazi within his writings, in Vatican 254, fols. 87a–88a.

Through various exchanges with Professor Paul Fenton of the Sorbonne, it has become clear that this previously unidentified text is none other than chapter 45 of the book *Amitat ha-Amitot* by the 14th century Egyptian Jewish thinker, David ben Joshua of the family of Maimonides.⁷⁸ According to Fenton, this is the only extant Hebrew translation, and indeed the only known citation, of any portion of David ben Joshua’s work.⁷⁹ The fact that it appears in a Western context, in the Hebrew language, and is brought forth as an authoritative text by an Ashkenazi thinker, is quite astounding. This is especially the case since David moved between, and not beyond, the cultural centers of Cairo, Aleppo and Damascus, and was so deeply entrenched in both the Maimonidean and the Muslim Sufi worlds, that he both translated the first four books of Maimonides’ *Sefer ha-Mada* into Arabic for a Muslim sage and relied upon the Arabic writings of certain Muslim Sufi masters of which no other Jewish thinker even makes mention.⁸⁰ This strongly Eastern, Arabic bent, coupled with the fact that he left a library in Aleppo so large and important that scholars continued to visit the city for the sole purpose of studying his manuscripts even after his death,⁸¹ would lead one to think that a citation or an excerpt of the above mentioned work would appear in an Eastern source, and not in the writings of an Ashkenazi thinker specifically fighting for Ashkenazi halachic supremacy concerning the commandment of levirate marriage.

⁷⁷ Ibid. “אמ’ לי כי יש עמו ספר מחובר בלשון ערב מדבר בענין זה.”

⁷⁸ For more on this author, see Paul Fenton, “The Literary Legacy of David ben Joshua Maimonides”; idem, “A Mystical Interpretation of the Song of Songs by Rabbi David ben Joshua Maimuni”; and ibidem, “The Literary Legacy of the Descendants of Maimonides.” I thank Professor Fenton for his great help in identifying this passage and in providing me with further information regarding the *Amitat ha-Amitot*.

⁷⁹ Professor Fenton made this known to me in an e-mail message, dated August 5, 2005.

⁸⁰ Fenton, “The Literary Legacy of the Descendants,” pp. 17–18.

⁸¹ Fenton, “The Literary Legacy of David ben Joshua,” p. 41.

In regard to the aforementioned Rabbi Yuda who carried out the translation for Ashkenazi, Professor Fenton has pointed out to me that he is probably none other than the son of the important Rabbi Efraim Al-Naqawa of Tlemcen.⁸² In this context, it is important to point out that Efraim was known for his defense of Maimonides against Nahmanides,⁸³ which may very well have had influence upon his son Yuda, thereby putting him in concurrence with Ashkenazi. Whatever the case may be, the above report of Ashkenazi attests to a philosophical text undoubtedly penned by an Egyptian Jewish Sufi from the Sephardi Maimonides family line, translated by a rabbi from Tlemcen for an Ashkenazi Rabbi on Venetian ruled Crete, who wants to utilize the translation in order to refute one of his Byzantine contemporaries, who supports the originally Spanish kabbalistic idea of *gilgul* as related to levirate marriage, with many philosophical, including Maimonidean, arguments of his own.⁸⁴ The text of David ben Joshua, then, to some extent comes full-circle in an international *gilgul* of its own, and ends up in the most unlikely, unexpected hands of Moshe Ashkenazi.

Yuda's translation for Ashkenazi is an abridged version of David's Arabic original and contains interesting philosophical ruminations on the soul-to-body relationship and on the individual nature of the human soul. The text immediately attacks the doctrine of metempsychosis by arguing that if a soul separates from its body and attaches to another body, which would already have a soul from its initiation due to the principle that new souls come into being with new bodies, then the impossible situation of two souls simultaneously inhering for one body would occur.⁸⁵ Conversely, if it were possible for the soul to attach to a body with no soul, that is, a dead body, then it would be much more probable for it to return to its initial body rather than to attach to another body. In this context of seemingly superfluous complexity, David asks, if the soul were to do all of this, then "why would it not [simply] remain attached to the first body?"⁸⁶ After all, David explains

⁸² E-mail message of August 5, 2005.

⁸³ Efraim Al-Naqawa, *Sha'ar Kavod Hashem*, Tunis: Castro and Friend, 1902.

⁸⁴ For more on Balbo's uses of Maimonides, see: Ravitzky, pp. 128–131.

⁸⁵ Astoundingly, within his own treatment of the subject, Isaac Abarbanel brings this same exact argument against metempsychosis, which he then proceeds to refute. For more on Abarbanel's argument, which is more expanded than the one set down here, and for more on his possible familiarity with the text of the *Amitat ha-Amitot*, see chapter 3 of this book, pp. 109–110 and p. 112.

⁸⁶ Vatican 254, fol. 87a. "למה לא נשארה דבקה עם הגוף הראשון."

in Aristotelian terms, a specific soul is the first perfection of a specific body, which itself is a corruptible natural substance.⁸⁷ The corruptible natural body which the soul perfects is of a composite nature, to the effect that each separate composition individualizes each separate individual, and each soul, which is the individual form of each body, relates to each individual body separately and individually. This is a re-working of the Aristotelian formula which states that:

It is the soul which is the actuality of a certain kind of body. Hence the rightness of the view that the soul cannot be without a body, while it cannot *be* a body; it is not a body but something relative to a body. That is why it is *in* a body, and a body of a definite kind. It was a mistake, therefore, to do as former thinkers did, merely to fit it into a body without adding a definite specification of the kind or character of that body, although evidently one chance thing will not receive another.⁸⁸

In David's articulation of this idea, when the composition of the individual body corrupts and breaks down, the soul which is its individual form cannot stay with the body, separates from it, and the body dies. Upon death, he writes, "it is impossible for another body to exist in succession with the same composition as the first," and in general "it is impossible for a second body to exist that is equal in composition to the first,"⁸⁹ a situation that makes the transmigration of the soul from body to body impossible.⁹⁰ Rather, the natural (i.e., vegetative) and vital souls, which provide for the physical life and action of the body, pass away with the passing away of the body, while the intellective soul attaches to its Source as based on the perfection of its intellectual attainment.

⁸⁷ שלמות ראשון לגשם טבעי כלי. This definition of the soul is based on Aristotle's definition of the soul in *De Anima* book II, chapter 1 as "an actuality of the first kind [i.e., the first entelechy] of a natural organized body" (*Complete Works*, p. 657), and recurs within the debate itself, both in Ashkenazi's and in Balbo's arguments. See: Vatican 105, fols. 195b, 198b, 214b, and 248b.

⁸⁸ *De Anima*, book II, chapter 2 (*Complete Works*, p. 659).

⁸⁹ Vatican 254, fol. 87a. כשזה המזג הראשון באותו תכף אחר תכף באותו המזג הראשון כשזה המזג הראשון. "ונמנע המצא גוף אחר תכף באותו המזג הראשון כשזה המזג הראשון."

⁹⁰ A similar argument is brought forth by Abraham ibn Daud in his *Sefer ha-Emunah ha-Ramah*, Jerusalem, 1967, p. 39. Ibn Daud, who also defines the soul as 'the first perfection of a natural, corruptible matter,' insists on the dependency of the individual soul upon the special composition of the body for which it is that perfection. For more on this, see: Gottlieb, p. 387. Interestingly, this exact argument is also brought and refuted by Abarbanel. See my discussion of this, and of the question of bodily composition and of the soul-body composition in Abarbanel's thought in general, in chapter 3, p. 110 and pp. 111–112.

Even though neither Ashkenazi nor Balbo was cognizant of the *Amitat ha-Amitot* during the time of the debate itself, David ben Joshua's text reflects much of the tenor of their philosophical discussions within the debate concerning individual psychology. In his own twist that will later have repercussions on his argument, Ashkenazi claims that the soul "is the first natural corruptible perfection"⁹¹ of the body. Significantly, in his wording, not only the body, but the soul itself is natural and corruptible. As such, the soul relates to the body in a one-to-one manner as its singularly destined first perfection, and "one should not think that the soul of Reuven," for example, "would apply to the corpse of Shimon after its separation from Reuven."⁹² For this reason, the Deuteronomic laws of levirate marriage stipulate that "the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger," the wife representing matter and the deceased husband representing the form of that matter as its first perfection.⁹³ In Aristotelian fashion, Ashkenazi relates specific matter, in this case the human body, to a specific form, in this case the human soul that is the body's first perfection. If it is the case that specific matter shall not apply to a form that is "a stranger," then the reverse must also logically hold true. This is especially the case if the form itself is "natural and corruptible," in relation to its natural and corruptible body.

Balbo corrects Ashkenazi's subtle change in the classical Aristotelian definition as stated by the likes of David ben Joshua, stating that even if the soul is "the first perfection of a natural, corruptible *matter*,"⁹⁴ it can still apply to another matter and be its first perfection, as it was the first perfection of the former matter. Indeed, he states, "the soul will always be the first perfection of matter, whether that matter is the first, second, or third carrier of that soul."⁹⁵ In this reading, the natural, corruptible body is the subject, and with its novel coming into being, an old, incorruptible soul can, and indeed will logically and validly be its first perfection. Notwithstanding the logic of this argument, it does not answer to Ashkenazi's claim of the soul itself as being natural

⁹¹ Vatican 105, fol. 195b. "היא שלימות ראשון טבעי כלי."

⁹² Ibid. "לא יחשוב חושב שנפש ראובן תחול בגויית שמעון אחרי הפרדה מראובן."

⁹³ See pp. 55–56 above for more on Ashkenazi's Aristotelian form-matter reading of the laws of levirate marriage, and Balbo's refutation.

⁹⁴ Ibid., fol. 198b. Italics mine for emphasis. "שלימות ראשון לגשם טבעי כלי."

⁹⁵ Ibid. "אני אומר כי לעולם תהיה הנפש הראשון לגשם היה הגשם ההוא. הנושא לנפש ההיא ראשון או שני או שלישי."

and corruptible in connection with the natural, corruptible body. Nevertheless, Balbo perspicaciously picks up on Ashkenazi's change in definition, stating,

They [i.e., the Aristotelian philosophers] said "first perfection of a natural, corruptible *matter*," and indeed, you left out the '*matter*' in order to maintain your opinion. Added to this is that from the side of the teaching of this [your own, changed] definition, there exists no valid argument, for everyone can define it [i.e., the soul] according to his own opinion.⁹⁶

Balbo has no problem with the classical Aristotelian definition of the soul as the first perfection of a natural, corruptible body, and does not find in it any contradiction with the doctrine of *gilgul*. He does have a problem with Ashkenazi's corruption of this definition as applying to the natural, corruptible nature of the soul itself, and within that definition, finds a contradiction that later manifests itself in Ashkenazi's thought concerning the immortal nature of the soul.

In his second tract, after a long disquisition concerning the philosophical problem of multiplicity among non-corporeal beings and the question of the one and the many,⁹⁷ Ashkenazi corrects his original definition of the soul, stating that "the definition of the soul is that it is the first perfection of a natural, corruptible matter, and this is undeniably true."⁹⁸ Whether he was influenced by the criticism of Balbo to emphasize the undeniable truth of the matter of the soul as the perfection of *matter*, his original opinion of the soul as corruptible undeniably still holds firm. "The souls are as multiple as the number of bodies and are made anew with the making new of each and every body, designated for each and every soul,"⁹⁹ he states, "and it is correct that the vital and the vegetative and the intellectual souls are bodies within matter. And therefore, all of these perish with the perishing of the matter that carries this personal perfection [i.e., the soul]."¹⁰⁰ Though Ashkenazi changes his

⁹⁶ Ibid. Italics mine for emphasis. "אמרו שלימות ראשון לגשם טבעי כליי ואמנם אתה עזבת הגשם לקיים דעתך. מצורף שמצד הוראת גדר זה אין טענה כי כל אחד יכול לגדור אותה כפי דעתו."

⁹⁷ For more on these problems as discussed within the debate, and the Avicennan vs. the Averroen doctrine, see: Ravitzky, pp. 139–145.

⁹⁸ Vatican 105, fol. 214a. "ויהיה גדר הנפש שהיא שלמות ראשון לגשם טבעי כליי. וזה אמת ויציב."

⁹⁹ Ibid. "הנפשות הם רבות כמספר הגופות ומתחדשות בהתחדש כל גוף וגוף. מיוחס לנפש נפש."

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. "ונכון כגדר הנפש החיונית והצומחת והמדברת שהם גופות בגשם. ולכן יפסדו כל אלה בהפסד הגשם הנושא לשלמות הזה האשי."

definition of the soul as the perfection of corruptible matter to fit with the Aristotelian model, he does not change his outlook concerning the corruptible nature of the soul and its intricate, personal connection to the corruptible matter which is its designated body. This is the case not only with the vital and the vegetative souls, but with the intellectual soul as well. In his opinion, the intellectual soul acts as a net that captures the intelligibles, which then become the Acquired Intellect. Here, he is following the idea of Alexander of Aphrodisias that the “material intellect... is simply a capacity for a certain sort of entelechy and soul and a capacity of receiving forms and thoughts.”¹⁰¹ According to this opinion, the intellectual faculty within man is a mere disposition that dies away with the death of the body. Nevertheless, Ashkenazi takes this idea a step further, and in the footsteps of Gersonides claims that the Acquired Intellect that is received by the material intellect, which itself is neither matter nor a force within matter, remains as the immortal human soul after the death of the individual.¹⁰² In any case, the Acquired Intellect has no direct connection to matter and, in his opinion, there still exists no room for metempsychosis.

Balbo rejects the Gersonidean theory of the intellect and the connection made by Ashkenazi between the intellect and the soul proper, and sees in it a grave contradiction. Efraim Gottlieb has perceptively noted that according to variants between Vatican ms. 105 and Vatican 254, Balbo seems to have missed the paragraph in Ashkenazi's tract that details the distinction between the material intellect, which fades away, and the Acquired Intellect, which remains for eternity.¹⁰³ Indeed, Balbo cannot understand how at one point, Ashkenazi can claim that the soul is a power and a disposition in the body that comes into being with the body and perishes with the perishing of that selfsame body, and then immediately claim that the soul is an eternal, separate intellectual

¹⁰¹ *De intellectu* 107.15 in *Two Greek Aristotelian Commentators*, p. 47.

¹⁰² For more on this central idea in Gersonides' thought, see: Herbert Davidson, “Gersonides on the Material and Active Intellects,” *Studies on Gersonides: A Fourteenth Century Jewish Philosopher-Scientist*, edited by Gad Freudenthal, Leiden: Brill, 1992, pp. 195–265; Menachem Kellner, “Gersonides on the Role of the Active Intellect in Human Cognition,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 65 (1994), pp. 233–259; Seymour Feldman, “Gersonides on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Agent Intellect,” *AJS Review*, volume III (1978), pp. 99–120; and Tamar Rudavsky, “Individuals and Individuation in the Thought of Gersonides,” *Gersonide en son temps: Science et philosophie médiévales*, edited by Gilbert Dahan, Louvain-Paris: E. Peeters, 1991, pp. 185–197.

¹⁰³ Gottlieb, p. 390. See Vatican 105, fols. 213b–215a, and Vatican 254, fols. 29b–31b for variations of the same philosophical proof.

entity and is not a disposition in the body. Notwithstanding his possible failure to see Ashkenazi's clarification regarding the Acquired Intellect, he does pick up on the idea, but states that there is a contradiction in Ashkenazi's terminology in that "the Acquired Intellect does not become anew with the bodies, but the disposition does become anew with the coming anew of the body."¹⁰⁴ As such, if the disposition is the *principium individuationis* of the human soul, as Ashkenazi claims, then the Acquired Intellect provides no advantage or individuation to the individual in his or her eternal existence after the death of the private body, and therefore cannot be properly deemed an individual soul.¹⁰⁵ According to Balbo, the individual cannot both be defined by an individuating disposition that dies with the body and by the eternal, universal intelligibles that are always collective and active and make up the Acquired Intellect. Thus, even if he would have read Ashkenazi's clarification concerning the Material and the Acquired Intellects, Balbo seems as if he regardlessly would have taken issue with the equivocation of the term 'soul' for the bodily disposition and for the immaterial Acquired Intellect and with the fundamental, necessary link between the two. This is evident from his statement that if the Acquired Intellect is purely immaterial and completely separate from the physical realm, then it cannot have anything to do with the disposition, which is physically rooted, and therefore cannot come into being through the individual. Moreover, "it is a lie that the perfection of man and his corruption will be something outside of his kind,"¹⁰⁶ and thus, the completely immaterial Acquired Intellect that does not mix with matter at all cannot be said to be the first perfection of the embodied human being. According to this reading, Ashkenazi's attack on metempsychosis as based upon the idea of the soul as the first perfection of a natural, corruptible body, in relation to the Acquired Intellect, holds no ground.

In the final tract of Ashkenazi's addenda, he writes, "Wisdom with inheritance is good, and this is the essence of belief and of kabbalah. But he who believes in kabbalah without wisdom under his hand, this is a

¹⁰⁴ Vatican 105, fol. 247b. **השכל הנקנה אינו מתחדש עם הגופות אבל ההכנה היא מתחדשת בהתחדשות הגוף.**

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., fols. 245b and 249a. Ravitzky has shown that this argument was taken from Hasdai Crescas, *The Light of the Lord*, 2:61. See: Ravitzky, pp. 146–150 for a discussion of Balbo's unstated usage of Crescas for this, and other arguments concerning the Acquired Intellect.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., fol. 248a. **"מן השקר שיהיה שלמות האדם והפסדו לזולת מינו."**

pitfall.”¹⁰⁷ This statement summarizes the type of battle that Ashkenazi sets out to fight against metempsychosis from the outset, and it is with this sentiment that he concludes his treatises, with a long, sardonic tract concerning the nature of proper belief as opposed to blind, unexamined faith.¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, however, Ashkenazi’s interlocutor Balbo is far from blind to reason and careful examination, and forcefully takes up the shield in defense of the doctrine of *gilgul neshamot*. Whether or not Ashkenazi intended the result, his reasoned attack and his adversary’s well thought out defense indeed led to a full, unadulterated examination of the kabbalistic belief in metempsychosis, both from the side of one of its learned detractors and from the side of one of its erudite supporters. For the first time in recorded history, an open exchange of reproach and rejoinder between two coexistent Rabbis from very different backgrounds, and based upon philosophic as well as kabbalistic speculation, brought the tradition of censure and defense concerning metempsychosis to its peak in an open, dynamic disputation. This in turn opened the gates for further speculative inquiry into the doctrine, commencing a whole new stage in the history of Jewish thought concerning the soul. As a result, the debate in Candia stood as a liminal point from which the speculative analysis of metempsychosis was able to break forth onto the scene of thought and, in typical Renaissance fashion, to confront other conceptual notions, both ancient and contemporary, of identity, individuality, and the nature of the human soul.

¹⁰⁷ Vatican 254, fol. 90a. אבל, “טובה חכמה עם נחלה וזהו עקר האמונה והקבלה. המאמין בלי חכמה בקבלה תחת ידו זאת המכשלה.”

¹⁰⁸ Vatican 254, fols. 88a–103a. While this could potentially be considered to be the final tract of the actual debate itself, as it is mostly addressed to Balbo and answers to questions posed within the debate, Gottlieb surmises that this tract was most probably not sent to Balbo and was probably written independently of the other exchanges. Given the fact that it does not exist in Balbo’s records in Vatican 105 and that there is no mention of it in his other writings, Gottlieb is probably correct in his conjecture.

CHAPTER THREE

PHILOSOPHICAL AND MYSTICAL POSSIBILITIES OF METEMPSYCHOSIS: ISAAC ABARBANEL

The intention of the Rabbi [Nahmanides] is that the soul that transmigrates does not apply to any matter that it happens upon; and that the Holy One, blessed is He, wanted to exonerate the soul of the deceased, that it will return to the land as it was.¹

Don Isaac Abarbanel was a rather fluxional figure who lived in constant motion between disparate worlds. This is the case not only with his spatial biography of constant exile and relocation and his temporal existence between the medieval and the early-modern periods,² but with his thought as well. As a sharp critic of philosophy who himself resorted to speculative language, and as a self-avowed non-kabbalist who nevertheless supported kabbalistic ideas and enlisted kabbalistic works as proof-texts, Abarbanel is difficult to locate on the map of Jewish thought. Indeed, scholars have characterized him in many different ways, as an anti-rationalist thinker in the line of Rabbi Sa'adia Gaon and Rabbi Hasdai Crescas,³ as a fundamentally medieval Aristotelian thinker with occasional Neoplatonic seeds that erupt out of his medieval soil,⁴ and as a Jewish philosopher with an extreme sense of respect for certain kabbalistic notions.⁵ Recently, Eric Lawee has offered a more nuanced picture of Abarbanel as an erudite thinker whose modes of thought cut through vast cultural and intellectual boundaries, thereby representing a wide cross-range of diverse, sometimes seemingly conflicting, religious and theoretical themes.⁶ This last characterization most certainly ensues

¹ Isaac Abarbanel, Commentary on Deuteronomy 25:5, p. 384. “כונת הרב, שהנפש, המתגלגלת, לא תחול באיזה חמר שיזדמן. ושרצה הקדוש ברוך הוא לזכות נפש המת, כשישוב אל הארץ כשהיה.”

² For the best biography to date, see Benzion Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher*.

³ Isaac Barzilai, *Between Reason and Faith*, pp. 72–79, and Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, pp. 96–99.

⁴ Seymour Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*, p. 184.

⁵ Moshe Hallamish, *An Introduction to the kabbalah*, p. 282.

⁶ Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, pp. 2–4, and pp. 45–48.

in regard to Abarbanel's thought concerning the transmigration of souls. In regard to this topic, Abarbanel expresses an inclination toward a Neoplatonically "rationalized" kabbalah, characteristic of the Italian Renaissance milieu in which he wrote the bulk of his works on this topic, while maintaining a sense of esteem for and even deference to the more arcane Nahmanidean kabbalah of his prior Iberian environs. Within this one illustrious thinker, the "exoteric" and the "esoteric" trends meet in a synthetic attempt to safeguard and to expound upon the kabbalistic notion of *gilgul neshamot*.

Though he exhibits an inclination toward philosophical speculation, as a proponent of the kabbalah, Abarbanel takes strong issue with "Aristotle and the interpreters of his books...and also the Christian wise men...both of whom sought ways to deny"⁷ the real possibility of transmigration. According to Abarbanel, such attempts at denial are fundamentally mistaken. "Those who deny it," he writes, "they are the people who walk in darkness."⁸ Not only is the idea philosophically possible despite the false claims of Aristotle and his interpreters and the wise men among the Christians, as a received tradition⁹ from the mouths of the prophets who saw the light of Torah, it is Truth and must be accepted. As a direct tenet of the Jewish kabbalistic tradition, Abarbanel has no need to be careful or to conceal his support for transmigration, and can argue forcefully in its favor. This, in fact, is what he does, attempting to moor the doctrine as expressed within the writings of Plato and other ancient thinkers in his own understanding of the *prisca theologia* tradition as based upon the Jewish kabbalah.

Abarbanel's longest and most definitive treatment of transmigration, which specifically deals with the idea of human reincarnation, lies within his commentary on Deuteronomy 25:5–6. This is the commandment appertaining to the institution of levirate marriage, and there the Torah states:

When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband's brother shall unite with her: take her as his wife and perform the levir's duty. The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel.¹⁰

⁷ Commentary on Deuteronomy 25:5, p. 385.

⁸ Ibid., p. 386.

⁹ Here, the idea of "received tradition of the prophets," *kabbalat ha-nevi'im*, seems to refer directly to the Jewish mystical tradition of kabbalah.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 25:5–6.

According to the kabbalistic reading of this passage,¹¹ the soul of one who dies without leaving any offspring will be cut off and blotted out. In order to prevent this, the brother of the deceased is commanded to procreate with the wife of the deceased. The soul of the dead brother, which would otherwise be cut off, transmigrates into the first-born son of this new union in order to be given a chance to rectify its wrong of not originally bearing children. In this reading, transmigration acts as a device for rectification, and its logical possibility is not questioned. Rather, it is a received tradition whose validity rests on prophecy. As a spokesman for the Jewish people and as a complex thinker with both philosophical and kabbalistic leanings, Abarbanel attempts to strike a balance between philosophy and kabbalah by proving the logical validity of the doctrine of transmigration, thereby allowing for its authenticity. With this foundation, he can then assert the need to ultimately accept the doctrine on faith, due to its mooring in the divinely received prophetic tradition as expressed in the ancient theology of the kabbalah.

Abarbanel's attempt to logically validate an ultimately mystical doctrine, coupled with his connection of this doctrine and its validity to the nascent Renaissance notion of *prisca theologia*, shows Abarbanel to be a complex, cross-cultural, eclectic thinker. Nevertheless, it has been mistakenly asserted that he was the first Jewish thinker to present a philosophico-kabbalistic argument on behalf of the doctrine of transmigration. Indeed, Moshe Hallamish has hailed him as "The only Jewish philosopher who accepted the doctrine of transmigration,"¹² while Saul Regev has indicated his original attempt to fuse philosophy and kabbalah in regard to the doctrine.¹³ In fact, however, the debate concerning this doctrine, in Candia on the island of Crete, occurred thirty years

¹¹ See, for example, Nahmanides' commentary to Genesis, 38:8, where the idea of transmigration as connected to levirate marriage is certainly alluded to but not discussed explicitly, and Isaac of Acco's *Me'vat Einayim*, p. 45, which is an interpretation and fuller elucidation of Nahmanides' Genesis commentary.

¹² Hallamish, *An Introduction to the kabbalah*, p. 282.

¹³ Saul Regev, "Reasons for the Levirate Command," p. 68. While Regev does not explicitly state an unequivocal novelty in Abarbanel, he does state that unlike his philosophical predecessors Crescas and Arama who faithfully accept the idea on kabbalistic grounds despite its seemingly logical impossibility, Abarbanel attempts to combine kabbalah and philosophy in order to allow for both logic and faith in regard to the issue. Considering the mention of these precedent philosophical thinkers yet the lack of mention of any actual positive philosophical approach to the issue, Regev seems to be indicating an innovation in Abarbanel.

prior to Abarbanel's completion of his Deuteronomy commentary, in which he philosophically discusses the kabbalistic doctrine. As has been shown in the first two chapters of this book, much of this debate, which was spurred by the halachic question of levirate marriage, took on a philosophical tenor. This philosophical charge includes the argument of Michael Balbo, whose positive espousal of the very mystically charged doctrine of transmigration took on a predominantly philosophical character, as based upon more Platonic notions of the soul as a separate entity.

The philosophical tone of Balbo's kabbalistically driven defense of transmigration and its relation to the commandment of levirate marriage stand as important precedents to Abarbanel's own approach to the same topic. Though he mentions neither the debate nor its participants, Abarbanel's knowledge of it is certainly not unlikely, especially considering the fact that he carried out a detailed correspondence with Saul, the peripatetic son of Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi of the debate,¹⁴ and considering the extreme parallelism between his approach to transmigration and that of Balbo. Both Abarbanel and Balbo resort to philosophical proemia in order to allow for the logical, philosophical possibility of transmigration, and both ultimately leave its definitive veracity in the hands of kabbalah. Given these facts, the affinities between the debate in Candia and Abarbanel should not be overlooked. The debate may very well have been an important precedent for Abarbanel, who rides out the same arguments as introduced within the debate and introduces to them Italian Renaissance notions of *prisca theologia*.

Indeed, Abarbanel moves beyond the discourses of Balbo through the concept of *prisca theologia*, and begins his own discourse on the veracity of the doctrine of transmigration by leaning on three ancient authorities: "the words of the divine Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai," "the words of the divine Socrates" through the mouth of Plato in his *Phaedo*,¹⁵ which Abarbanel significantly calls *The Immortality of the Soul*,

¹⁴ See: *Questions of the Rabbi Saul Cohen*.

¹⁵ According to Seymour Feldman, this is only one of three references that Abarbanel makes to Plato's dialogues by name. The others are the *Timaeus*, referenced in *Mif'alot Elohim*, 2.3, and the *Republic* in *Nahalat Avot*, introduction. Feldman notes that Abarbanel's use of the *Phaedo* was probably either from the translation of Bruni, completed in 1404–5, or that of Ficino, completed around 1484. This would lend more evidence to the postulate that Abarbanel was familiar with and influenced by Renaissance Christian Neoplatonism. See Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*, p. 152 and p. 200, fn. 8, 12.

and “Pythagoras and also the rest of the ancients.”¹⁶ Here, Abarbanel seems to be laying out a hierarchy with the purported author of the kabbalistic masterpiece, the *Zohar*, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai at the top, with the ‘divine’ philosopher Socrates through the works of Plato following, and with Pythagoras and the rest of the ancients still important, yet at the bottom of the ladder.¹⁷ Such a hierarchy of *prisci theologi* seems to follow that of the leading theorist of the *prisca theologia* tradition, Marsilio Ficino, though with kabbalah at the apex as the ultimate point of departure, instead of Christianity as the ultimate objective. This follows what Moshe Idel has referred to as a ‘unilinear’ theory of *prisca theologia*, in contradistinction to the ‘multilinear’ theory of Ficino.¹⁸ Unlike Ficino who sees in *prisca theologia* several independent strands of ancient thought culminating and conjoining in Christian theology, Abarbanel sees kabbalah (which literally means ‘received tradition’) as The ‘ancient theology’ of the Jews, tracing its line back to direct, prophetic revelation from God. All other viable forms of truth, including those of Plato, are viable and true precisely because they derived their ideas from the divinely revealed source of the kabbalah.

Interestingly, Hermes Trismegistus is not mentioned within the commentary on levirate marriage, though in a highly related context in one of Abarbanel’s later writings, Hermes is brought as the sole pagan witness to the Jewish tradition of levirate marriage. In his book *Yeshu’ot Meshiho*, written less than two years after the completion of the commentary on Deuteronomy,¹⁹ Abarbanel writes that the rabbinical dictum

¹⁶ Commentary to Deuteronomy 25:5, p. 385.

¹⁷ Though at the bottom of the ladder, Abarbanel’s inclusion of Pythagoras as one whose espousal of transmigration lends precedent support to the ‘Torah’ idea of metempsychosis is significant. This is due to the fact that for the leading proponent of the *prisca theologia* tradition, Marsilio Ficino, while Pythagoras consistently holds a position before Plato as his immediate predecessor in the line of *prisci theologi*, in regard to the specific notion of transmigration, he is scape-goated in order to salvage Plato for Christianity (see the discussion surrounding footnote 45 in chapter 8 below). Prior to the Renaissance, Pythagoras was generally seen in a negative light within the Jewish milieu. As such, Abarbanel represents a new approach of appropriating Pythagoras positively in support of Torah, an approach influenced by new translations of Greek texts and by the listing of Pythagoras, by those such as Ficino, among the *prisci theologi*. For more on the status and usage of Pythagoras within the Jewish and Christian Renaissance, see Idel, “Introduction to the Bison Book Edition” of *De Arte Cabalistica*, pp. xi–xvi.

¹⁸ See: Idel, “*Prisca Theologia* in Marsilio Ficino,” especially pp. 137–150. For more on the notion of *prisca theologia* within the thought of Abarbanel specifically, see idem, “kabbalah and Ancient Philosophy,” especially pp. 75–79.

¹⁹ According to Netanyahu, the commentary on Deuteronomy was completed in

at the base of the kabbalistic reading of levirate marriage, which states that “he who does not have children does not have a part in the world to come,”²⁰ has an important Hermetic parallel. Indeed, in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, II, 17, Hermes states:

Prudent people...regard the making of children as a duty in life to be taken most seriously and greatly revered, and should any human being pass away childless, they see it as the worst misfortune and irreverence. After death such a person suffers retribution from demons. This is his punishment: the soul of the childless one is sentenced to a body that has neither a man's nature nor a woman's—a thing accursed under the sun. Most assuredly then, Asclepius, you should never congratulate a childless person.²¹

Though clearly from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Abarbanel states that the Hermetic work that runs parallel to the Rabbinic injunction against childlessness appears in the book *The Immortality of the Soul and the Divinity* by Hanoch the Egyptian, who is called “Ermes Trimigisto.”²² Given the high contextual degree of relation between this discussion in *Yeshu'ot Meshiho* and Abarbanel's commentary on Deuteronomy 25, the virtual titular identity ascribed by Abarbanel to the *Phaedo*²³ and to this passage from the *Corpus Hermeticum* seems to be no mistake. Here in *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, Hermes replaces the role of Socrates in the Deuteronomy commentary as the main pagan philosophical servant to Jewish notions of the soul; moreover and seemingly not insignificantly, both pagan sources carry a very similar title to the subtitle of Marsilio

Monopoli on February 6, 1496, while *Yeshu'ot Meshiho* was completed on December 16, 1497. See Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, pp. 75 and 59.

²⁰ The saying, which appears in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Nedarim 64b actually states, “He who does not have children is thought of as dead.” The *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* of the *Zohar* on the Torah portion dealing with levirate marriage picks up on this and writes, “He who does not have children in this world, it is as if he were never created and never existed, and he is called ‘barren’ from this world, and from the world to come.” (See: *Zohar Hadash*, ‘Ki Teze,’ p. 8). Perhaps this Kabbalistic source is the source for Abarbanel's reading.

²¹ *Hermetica*, p. 12. The identification of this passage as the one referred to by Abarbanel was made by Idel, “kabbalah and Ancient Philosophy,” p. 98, fn. 20.

²² *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, p. 11. As Idel has noted (“kabbalah and Ancient Philosophy,” p. 97, fn. 14), the spelling of Hermes' name here suggests an Italian source. This could very well have been the vernacular version of Ficino's Latin text, produced by his fellow philosopher Tommaso Benci in September 1463. It is known that this translation met with extraordinary success, well beyond the borders of Florence. See: Sebastiano Gentile, *Marsilio Ficino and the Return of Hermes Trismegistus*, p. 27.

²³ As was mentioned above, Abarbanel refers to the *Phaedo* in his Deuteronomy commentary by the title *The Immortality of the Soul*.

Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, "On the Immortality of the Souls." Given the likelihood of Abarbanel's exposure to both the *Phaedo*²⁴ and to the *Corpus Hermeticum* through Ficino, and given the high, almost parallel level of importance of both Plato and Hermes to Ficino's philosophy, this titular interplay suggests a strongly possible connection, through both Plato and Hermes, between Abarbanel and Ficino. Like Ficino, Abarbanel raises Plato and Hermes to a high level of significance; unlike Ficino, he makes them subservient to kabbalah.

In order to argue on behalf of the kabbalah against the Aristotelians and the Christian wise men, Abarbanel resorts to Hermetic and Platonic notions wrapped in Aristotelian language. According to the Hermetic philosophers, he writes in *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, the soul is prior to and connected to the perfection of the body, though the perfection and/or lack appertaining to the mixed entity²⁵ affects the state of perfection and/or lack of the soul itself. The composite entity acts as both a mirror and a catalyst for the soul, and therefore one who is fruitful by bearing children will have a fruitful soul, either by way of reflection on the essential nature of the soul or by way of action that affects the otherwise barren soul. One that does not produce children has a soul that is in a desolate state, and according to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, is "a thing accursed under the sun" that will suffer retribution. According to Jewish tradition, such a soul is barren, and will be cut off from its people.

In order to prevent this state, the device of transmigration was given to the Jewish people through the act of levirate marriage. This device serves three purposes according to Abarbanel. The first is to allow for a perfected soul *in potentia* to perfect itself *in actu* within the composite state. This world is the world of work, whereas the next world is the world of reward; one needs to perfect himself through the fruits of his work in the composite state in order to ensure reward in the world to come. Therefore, one who has died early and was not given a chance to be fruitful in the world of work will be reincarnated. The second purpose of transmigration is to allow for the sinning, barren soul to repent. Perhaps in a different composite state with a different body, the sinning soul will realize its errors, will desire God, and by being fruitful,

²⁴ See footnote 15 above.

²⁵ 'Mixed entity' here refers to the composite of soul and body, i.e., the living human being.

will return to God. Finally, the third purpose involves the punishment of the truly sinful soul. At this point, radical metempsychosis enters into the picture and, like the *Corpus Hermeticum* in which the soul is “sentenced to a body that has neither a man’s nature nor a woman’s,” Abarbanel claims that “the soul of the evil person will transmigrate into the body of a dog, or any other of the non-speaking animals.”²⁶ This is in order to punish the soul in this world so as to ease its punishment in the world of souls. Within all three of the purposes for transmigration, the idea of the composite state of two separate existents leading to a state of perfection, or lack thereof, stands as a central element. Indeed, it is this idea of composition and perfection that acts as the main axis around which Abarbanel’s argument for the possibility of transmigration revolves.

In the scholastic fashion of the *quaestio disputata*, Abarbanel brings six arguments waged against the possibility of transmigration, thereby allowing him to subsequently show these arguments to be faulty, and in so doing, to allow for the philosophical soundness of the proposed doctrine. The first argument against the possibility of transmigration states that the soul as form is always made anew with the creation of its matter, i.e., the body. Based on the Aristotelian idea of the inseparability of form and matter, this notion holds that if there is a new soul with a new body, as there inevitably always will be, and an old soul transmigrates into this new body, then the impossible situation of two souls existing for one body would obtain. This exact argument appears in chapter 45 of the book *Amitat ha-Amitot* by the 14th century Egyptian Jewish thinker David ben Joshua Maimuni.²⁷ Though Abarbanel most probably did not have access to the original Arabic work, he may very well have been familiar with the Hebrew translation of the pertinent chapter as it exists in the manuscript proceedings of the 1466 debate in Candia.²⁸ This is especially possible, not only considering the rarity of this specific argument in relation to transmigration,²⁹ but also

²⁶ Commentary on Deuteronomy 25, p. 385. Unless this is understood in a metaphorical sense, a contradiction ensues, as later Abarbanel denies the possibility of the transmigration of human souls into animals. See p. 387 of his commentary, to be discussed further.

²⁷ See footnote 85 in chapter 2 above.

²⁸ See above, chapter 2, pp. 93–96 for a discussion of this text as found in the proceedings of the debate in Candia.

²⁹ In my perusal, I have only encountered this specific argument against transmigration up until this point in history in the *Amitat ha-Amitot* and in Abarbanel.

considering the extensive correspondence between Abarbanel and Saul ha-Cohen Ashkenazi,³⁰ the son of the author of the very proceedings in which the Hebrew translation of the chapter from *Amitat ha-Amitot* appears. If indeed this work asserted influence upon Abarbanel, then we have here an interesting situation of a Judeo-Arabic text making its way into the thought processes of an originally Iberian Jewish thinker writing in the Italian Renaissance milieu, via an Ashkenazi author in Crete.

The second through fourth arguments that Abarbanel claims are brought against transmigration are closely associated with each other and relate to the question of bodily composition. The second argument states that specific form only applies to specific matter; as such, the second body of a soul that transmigrates would have to be exactly like the first in composition and nature; such is an impossible situation, considering the unique composition of each individual body.³¹ This leads to the third argument: Were it a body of the same composition and nature, as it would have to be according to the second argument, then it would not be transmigration at all, but would simply *be* the first, initial person. The fourth argument extends the question of the composition and nature of the body and holds that according to the need for correspondence between form and matter, a better body the second time around would destroy that body due to the discord between it and its inferior soul, a worse body the second time around would wreak havoc upon the soul for the same reason, and an equal body would provide no advantage for either the soul or the body. In any case, there would be absolutely no benefit to transmigration and therefore no real need for it.

The fifth argument leans on the question of memory and mental continuity, and poses the problem that a soul that has achieved wisdom and erudition and applies to a newborn baby should remain wise and erudite; the child born with such a soul should be born learned. This is especially the case if the soul is held to be a separate entity from the body and intellection is held to be a separate, internal process of the soul. Time and again, however, experience shows that infants are never born wise and learned, but rather, the opposite; newborns must start from the very beginning in their attainment of knowledge and

³⁰ See footnote 14 above.

³¹ This argument is present in Abraham ibn Daud's *Sefer ha-Emunah ha-Ramah* and also exists in *Amitat ha-Amitot*. See p. 96 above, and Vatican ms. 254, fol. 87a, respectively.

wisdom. This precise argument was proposed by Abarbanel's 14th century predecessor Hasdai Crescas in his book *The Light of the Lord*,³² as his only philosophical foray into the question of transmigration before reluctantly allowing for its acceptance as 'kabbalah,' as received tradition.³³ According to Crescas, "the doors of inquiry are closed"³⁴ to the doctrine of transmigration, as it is beyond all logical reasoning and even, according to his interrogation of it through the question of intellection and memory, goes against the dictates of practical reason. "If it is kabbalah," writes Crescas, "we will accept it affably."³⁵ If it is not, then according to his questioning of it, the doctrine is absurd and clearly has no logical support.

The sixth and final argument against transmigration comes from "one of the wise men of the Christians"³⁶ with whom Abarbanel had discussed the topic, and holds that according to the Jewish dictates of resurrection, the soul and the body will rise together at the end of times in order to be judged as one unit. If, according to the doctrine of transmigration, one soul applies to more than one body through its multiple incarnations, then an impossible situation will exist at the end of days. According to transmigration, each individual body stands in equal relation to the same soul at different times of that soul's incarnation. At the end of times, however, time will no longer be a distinguishing factor, and multiple bodies will arise to one soul. This is impossible, according the logical principle that one form cannot apply to more than one body simultaneously. Thus, since the doctrine of resurrection is itself taken from the Torah, "taken from the roots of religion"³⁷ and therefore cannot be false, then the doctrine of transmigration must be false.

Abarbanel refutes these arguments one by one by resorting to the previously discussed Platonico-kabbalistic idea, later developed further by him in subsequent works, of the separate and independent nature of the soul from the body and its conjunction with the body for purposes

³² Crescas, *The Light of the Lord* [Hebrew], Jerusalem, 1990, Chapter 4, part 7, p. 405.

³³ For more on the Kabbalistic bases within Crescas's thought, see Ze'ev Harvey, "Kabbalistic Foundations in the Book *The Light of the Lord* by Rabbi Hasdai Crescas."

³⁴ *The Light of the Lord*, p. 405.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Abarbanel, Commentary on Deuteronomy, p. 386. I have been unable to identify this figure.

³⁷ Ibid.

of perfection. The soul is a separate essence that is prior to the body, and therefore the first argument of two souls for one body due to the new form of the new body as a new soul, would not apply. As Abarbanel states in a later, related work, “The wise men of the Torah and of the Truth³⁸ established and received [the idea] that [souls] do not come into being with the body.”³⁹ In transmigration, then, two souls do not subsist in one body, as there is no new soul created with the new body. Rather, either a previously created soul that has not yet been incarnated will conjoin with the new body, or a transmigrating soul will enter into a new composite state with the new body. In the second case, only the transmigrating soul applies to and, in a sense, is actualized by the new body in a separate yet symbiotic state.

Since the soul is a separate essence from the body, it can enter into a symbiotic relation with several different types of body. Abarbanel’s claim against the second argument against transmigration holds that different human bodies are indeed similar enough in composition in that they are human, that they can take on variations of the same form, that is, the separate human soul. “Indeed,” writes Abarbanel, “a change in composition will cause a change in characteristics, but it will not cause a change in form, in that they [i.e., human souls] are in the same wide class of that which is fitting as the human form.”⁴⁰ Though he holds the soul to be a separate entity, here, Abarbanel’s own sense of the soul’s relationship to the body takes on a very Aristotelian flavor. Nevertheless, the idea of “the human form” is broad enough that the soul that reincarnates is incarnated into a body that is physically appropriate for it, and Aristotle’s law of form and matter is satisfied.⁴¹ This broadness of human form and matter, which allows for variations in characteristics through disparate compositions, answers to the third argument as well. Indeed, the second person in transmigration is not the same as the first, precisely due to these composite and character differences.

Due to the wide range of souls and bodies that fit under the category “human,” a soul can potentially transmigrate into a body that is

³⁸ This is a reference to the kabbalists.

³⁹ *Mif’alot Elohim*, pp. 170–171. According to Idel (“Sources for the Circle Metaphor,” p. 160), this work was written in 1499, three years after the Deuteronomy commentary.

⁴⁰ Commentary on Deuteronomy, p. 387.

⁴¹ This entire argument directly contradicts the third purpose of transmigration as outlined by Abarbanel (see note 26 above), in which radical metempsychosis into animals is posited.

qualitatively equal to, better, or worse than first. In fact, given the three purposes of transmigration as outlined by Abarbanel, this is the entire idea behind the doctrine. Like the metaphor of the captain who steers and utilizes his ship, the body is a tool for the soul. One who receives a qualitatively similar body can complete the perfections of the soul that he did not have a chance to realize within the first body. A better body can help to purify and perfect a previously contaminated soul. Finally, a worse body the second time around serves to punish the sinning soul. Hardly disadvantageous and unnecessary, it is precisely through various compositions between soul and body that the entire purpose and advantage of the doctrine of transmigration becomes realized.

Abarbanel's response to the fifth argument, concerning memory and wisdom, is by far the longest and most detailed. Here his theory of composition between two separate entities, the soul and the body, reaches its peak. We know that the soul is a separate entity, he claims, by the mere fact of the matter that with old age, even though the body becomes frail, the intellect becomes sharper. "There is no escaping," however, "that the health of the body and its balance help in the process of learning, and that sickness and [bodily] change in temperament impede the process of learning."⁴² Indeed, as has been shown by experience, a wise man who undergoes an extreme sickness or change in temperament can lose his sense of fine comprehension and his wisdom can grow dim. This is due to the dependence of the soul upon the body within the composite state, again, like the dependence of a captain upon his ship; if the ship begins to collapse, then no matter how skillful the captain, he will become more and more limited until a point at which he may become entirely ineffectual. If this happens already within a specific composite state, according to Abarbanel, then it will happen all the more so in a state of the separation of the soul from one body and its subsequent conjunction with another body. The soul may have attained wisdom in its former composite state, but the extreme change of temperament in the new body and its different relation with the new body are cause for it to need to educate itself anew. Once it has understood the new relation and has mastered its new bodily temperament, then it can achieve to the heights of its former existence⁴³ through the process of memory. Here Abarbanel explicitly

⁴² Commentary on Deuteronomy, p. 388.

⁴³ This argument may be a derivative of an argument in the *Timaeus*, in which Plato

relies upon “the divine Socrates” of the *Phaedo*, interpreting the theory of recollection to fit with and support his own theory of transmigration and composition. Abarbanel writes, “Most of the knowledge attained by people is not attained anew, but is attained through the process of memory.”⁴⁴ It is because of this memory of transmigrated souls that there exist young people who are much more intelligent than those who are older than they; in most cases, these people are transmigrated souls that have formerly achieved wisdom and who have come to master their new bodily temperaments.

In order to refute the sixth and final argument, concerning resurrection, Abarbanel steers away from Platonic doctrine and relies upon biblical exegesis. “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake”⁴⁵ according to the book of Daniel; “many,” emphasizes Abarbanel, and *not* “all.”⁴⁶ This is proof, according to him, that at the end of times, the soul will conjoin with the first body only. The soul is the first body’s first perfection, and after its subsequent transmigrations, will become the first body’s final perfection at the end of days. At that point, the subsequent bodies will have served their purpose, will have no use, and will remain asleep in the dust of the earth.

In a final short, though highly important clause at the end of his long philosophical exposition on transmigration within his commentary on Deuteronomy, Abarbanel writes: “Its affirmation and justification are not with us according to philosophical proof, but rather [are based upon] the kabbalah of our holy ancestors, which is fitting for us to affably and

discusses sensations and bodily affections. There, Plato writes, “Precisely because of all these affections, both now and in the beginning, soul first becomes unintelligent whenever she’s bound within a mortal body. But whenever the stream of increase and nutriment comes upon her . . . [and] if some correct upbringing assists in education, the man becomes perfectly sound and healthy” (44b, Kalkavage, p. 75).

⁴⁴ Commentary on Deuteronomy, p. 388. This is a reference to the Socratic idea advanced by Cebes, who states, “that what we call learning is really just recollection. If that is true, then surely what we recollect now we must have learned at some time before, which is impossible unless our souls existed somewhere before they entered this human shape” (*Phaedo*, 72c).

⁴⁵ Daniel 12:2.

⁴⁶ Compare this to a similar argument as based on the same verse from Daniel, made by Azriel of Gerona in his epistle to Burgos concerning the matter of resurrection: “Whoever is not worthy of long life in the world of life and deserves to receive measure for measure in the world of bodies comes back through resurrection (*tehiyyat ha-metim*). That is why it says ‘and many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake’ (Dan. 12:2) and it does not say ‘and all’ (Quoted in Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 112).

purely accept.”⁴⁷ Here, Abarbanel has clear recourse to the language of Hasdai Crescas.⁴⁸ The main difference lies in Abarbanel’s explicit statement that “the idea of transmigration is possible in itself.”⁴⁹ Even though it is not in the hands of philosophy to affirm it definitively, it is certainly logically possible. This suggests a subtle polemic against Crescas that rests upon positive philosophical foundations. Crescas is correct, according to Abarbanel, that the doctrine must ultimately be accepted on faith; he is wrong, however, in his assertion that it has no logical support. It is certainly logically possible; only the step from possibility to final affirmation rests on faith.

Abarbanel hints that the final step of faith in which possibility turns into reality concerning transmigration, human to human or otherwise, rests within the Neoplatonic theory of the soul vehicle. As Gershom Scholem has keenly noted, the entire theory of transmigration throws into question the unique and irretrievable nature of human existence.⁵⁰ If an immaterial soul transmigrates, then what is its *principium individuationis*, what is it that allows it to do so while maintaining its individuality? For Abarbanel, who follows here in the Neoplatonic tradition, the separate soul of the individual is able to move through the cosmos, from its place in the supernal realm to the sublunar realm and back again, only by means of the soul vehicle; a *minori ad maius*, its movement as a non-corporeal entity between two human beings must depend upon that vehicle.

Abarbanel’s exposition of the theory of the soul vehicle comes in his *Mif’alot Elohim*, written in 1499, some three years after the completion of his Commentary on Deuteronomy. Within *Mif’alot Elohim*, he establishes the essential separateness of the human soul from the body, thereby allowing for its separate movement within the cosmos and the possibility of its entrance into a new body upon its circulation out of a previous body. Basing himself on the *prisci theologi*, who in his interpretation had the Torah as their foundation, he asserts:

The Torah Truth is that all of the human souls were created before the existence of bodies, at the beginning of creation. And indeed, this was the opinion of the great ancient philosophers like Hermes Trismegistus

⁴⁷ Commentary on Deuteronomy, p. 388.

⁴⁸ See the language referenced by note 35 above.

⁴⁹ Commentary on Deuteronomy, p. 386.

⁵⁰ See Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, p. 251.

who is called Hanoch,⁵¹ and Pythagoras, and Plato, and others beside them. And indeed, we have not found anything [of favor] concerning this within Aristotle.⁵²

For the soul to be able to transmigrate, it must be a separate entity from the body that, from time to time, enters into a relation with the body. For this to be the case, Aristotle's theory of the fundamental connection between soul and body must be incorrect. According to Aristotle, "we can dismiss as unnecessary the question whether the soul and the body are one: it is as though we were to ask whether the wax and its shape are one, or generally the matter of a thing and that of which it is the matter."⁵³ The soul is the form of the body and only has any real relevance or substance in a state of unity. Abarbanel rejects this idea off hand; for him, as confirmed by the same precedent sources that would be important to the likes of Ficino⁵⁴ yet with the "Torah Truth" as the ultimate base, the soul must be prior to the body and ontologically superior to it. Indeed, the view of the Torah, according to Abarbanel, is that the relation of the soul to the body is "like the relation of the captain of a ship to the ship,"⁵⁵ his existence is separate from the ship both before and after he is on it, and even when he is on it, his essence is different than that of the ship, even though he steers it and is moved by it in a certain symbiotic relationship. Unlike Aristotle, the 'true' *prisci theologi*, who received their ideas in accordance with this true Torah view, support and give credence to the idea of a soul that can transmigrate, both through the spheres and among bodies. The soul is separate and prior to the body, and therefore can logically cycle through the cosmos, and in and out of different bodies.

The existential priority of the soul to the body is more ontological than temporal, as the soul derives from an essence that is beyond time, namely God. Indeed, according to Abarbanel, "The creation of

⁵¹ For more on the association of Hermes with Hanoch within Jewish literature, see Idel, "Hermeticism and kabbalah," pp. 387–388. See also idem, "Hermeticism and Judaism."

⁵² *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 170.

⁵³ *De Anima*, book II, 412b 5–8, *Complete Works*, p. 657.

⁵⁴ Abarbanel never explicitly mentions Ficino or the Christian Neoplatonists within his works, though his reference to Hermes Trismegistus here and elsewhere suggests a possible familiarity with Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Moreover, his reliance upon Hermes, Pythagoras and Plato as common and kindred authority figures suggests a familiarity with and an influence from Christian Neoplatonism.

⁵⁵ Abarbanel, *Commentary on Deuteronomy* 25:5, p. 387.

the intellective souls was not like the creation of the substances, filled with the factor of corruption; rather, the souls were hewn from the Throne of Glory, which really is a hint at the world of Glory of the holy *sefirot*.⁵⁶ These ‘holy *sefirot*’ were emanated from the Eternal as the ‘separate intellects,’⁵⁷ and as such, share in a sense of unity and eternity. Concerning them Abarbanel writes,

The kabbalists said that the holy *sefirot* are not created but are emanated from Him, may He be blessed, and that they are unified with Him. And with all of this, nobody will say that one of the *sefirot* will be the first cause, but that they are unified in Him, may He be blessed, and He in them; they are not another thing or another essence. And the wise, accomplished Abubacher ben Tufayl already wrote in his epistle of *Hay ben Yaktan* that within the separate intellects there is no plurality and no unity, no number and no distinction.⁵⁸

Here, Abarbanel explicitly equates the *sefirot* to the separate intellects and establishes their essential divinity, consequentially establishing the divinity of human souls, which are carved from their essence. According to Moshe Idel, Abarbanel was probably influenced here by Yohanan Alemanno who, by the time of the writing of *Mif'alot Elohim*, had already completed his *Heshek Shlomo*, in which he relies upon ibn Tufayl and equates the *sefirot* to the separate intellects.⁵⁹ While Abarbanel may have been familiar with the works of Alemanno, the evidence clearly shows that already in Lisbon, he was familiar with ibn Tufayl and Moses Narboni, whose *sefirotic* interpretation of the separate intellects through the work of ibn Tufayl most probably influenced Alemanno.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 171.

⁵⁷ See *Ibid.*, p. 167, in which he expounds upon Maimonides' idea of the separate intellects, identifying them as the ‘Throne of Glory.’

⁵⁸ *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 174.

⁵⁹ Moshe Idel, “Between the Conception of Essence and the Conception of Vessels,” pp. 99–100, fn. 70. For more on other possible influences by Alemanno on Abarbanel and his son Judah, see: *idem*, “Sources for the Circle Metaphor,” and “The Study Program of Rabbi Yohanan Alemanno,” p. 324, fn. 125. See also: Menahem Dorman, “The Personal History of Judah Abarbanel,” in his “Introduction” to Judah Abarbanel, *The Dialogues of Love* [Hebrew edition], translated by Menahem Dorman, Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1983, pp. 56–58, and Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, pp. 45–46.

⁶⁰ Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, p. 30. Lawee notes that in his early work entitled *Surot ha-Yesodot*, which concerns the four elements, Abarbanel shows a familiarity with the works of ibn Tufayl and Moses Narboni, among others. For more on Narboni's *sefirotic* reading of the separate intellects in ibn Tufayl, see: M. Hayoun, “Moïse de Narbonne.”

Moreover, while Alemanno argues against the essentialist view of the *sefirot* as expounded by the Spanish kabbalist Isaac Mor Hayyim, Abarbanel expositis a clearly essentialist view, and while Alemanno allegorically likens the workings of the soul in the human body to the workings of God within the *sefirot*,⁶¹ Abarbanel literally attaches the fate and substance of human souls to the fate and substance of the *sefirot*. In addition, the nature of the *sefirot* has been a popular subject of discourse for Jewish thinkers the likes of Abraham Abulafia and the *Ẓohar* before Abarbanel's day and Moshe Cordovero posthumously. Given Abarbanel's prior knowledge of the same sources as Alemanno, the fundamental divergences between Abarbanel and Alemanno, and the extreme popularity of the subject for discourse, it is more likely that here, Abarbanel is offering his own Philosophical-kabbalistic interpretation of the *sefirot*, as based on an essentialist-emanationist view that takes into account the divine nature of the human soul, than that he is influenced in any measure by the writings of Alemanno.

Indeed, Abarbanel develops the idea in his own unique fashion, linking kabbalah, Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism and biblical exegesis. In an interesting passage that is filled with the kabbalistic imagery of radiance, the Neoplatonic idea of emanation, and the Aristotelian idea of generation and corruption, Abarbanel links the emanation of the separate intellects/*sefirot*, to the coming into being of light on the first day of the biblical account of creation:

Always from the nature of their Creator in their essential living and intellection, the spiritual intellects were emanated from the same divine source. They overflowed and emerged from Him, may He be blessed, at the time of creation, at the time that His word came forth and His will arrived, like the emergence of sparks and their emanation from the sun. For this reason, the Torah called those spiritual creations by the name 'light', and said concerning their creation: 'Let there be light. And there was light',⁶² in order to liken them, in His merit, may He be blessed, to the light that emerges from the sun. And because of this, you will find in the story of creation that all that was *created* and *made* is spoken of in terms of *creation*, like 'God *created* the heavens and the earth',⁶³ 'And God *created* the sea creatures';⁶⁴ or in terms of *making*, like 'And God *made* the

⁶¹ See: Idel, "Between the Conception of Essence and the Conception of Vessels," pp. 106–107.

⁶² Genesis, 1:3.

⁶³ Genesis, 1:1.

⁶⁴ Genesis, 1:21.

firmament',⁶⁵ 'And God *made* the two great luminaries',⁶⁶ 'And God *made* the beast of the land',⁶⁷ or in terms of *formation*, like 'And The Lord God *formed* man'.⁶⁸ And indeed no metaphorical term is used with light, but it is said 'Let there *be* light, and there *was* light,' in order to hint that their [i.e., the intellects'] creation was spiritual, from Him, may He be blessed, that He is their source. And therefore only the word *Being*, whose matter is attributed to Him, may He be blessed, and which is derived from his abstract four letter name and his absolute Reality, is applied to them, without saying about them *making*, or *creation*, or *formation*, whose meanings are connected to 'corruption'.⁶⁹

In Aristotelian fashion, Abarbanel asserts here that generated, material existents, marked in the Torah by terms such as 'creation,' 'making,' and 'formation,' face an inevitable end in corruption. There are existents that do not face such an end, however, as they are not generated, but are emanated from the one true *Being*, namely, God. These emanations are marked in the Torah by the light that is not generated, but comes into *being* from *Being* on the first day. Not only do the separate intellects, which according to Abarbanel are synonymous with the holy *sefirot*, partake in *Being* in a divinely essentialist manner that is beyond material generation and corruption, so do human souls. Indeed, Abarbanel writes, "The intellectual souls were created with the separate intellects with the saying, 'And God said: Let there be light,' as the intellectual souls are of the nature of the separate intellects that God created on different levels, and from their level they are the souls of men."⁷⁰ Human souls are divine in nature, since they are not generated but are hewn from the Throne of Glory, which is the divinely emanated *sefirot*. This falls in direct line with the thought of Nahmanides who, Moshe Idel notes, "attributes a special position to the soul among the existents of the lower world, on account of its special manner of coming into existence: directly from God Himself."⁷¹ Abarbanel seems to have picked up on this idea and holds that the root of human souls is in the One through the medium of the *sefirot*. In Abarbanel's thought, the human souls will ultimately return to their root, but as the final

⁶⁵ Genesis, 1:7.

⁶⁶ Genesis, 1:16.

⁶⁷ Genesis, 1:25.

⁶⁸ Genesis, 2:7.

⁶⁹ *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 168.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁷¹ Moshe Idel, "The Divine Soul," p. 346.

point of emanation from the One, they temporarily yet consistently extend into the world of matter, acting at once as the vitalizing force of that corruptible world and as the node that conjoins that lower world to the upper world in God.

In order to be able to do this, the separate, immaterial human souls conjoin with what Abarbanel calls “thin spiritual bodies from the nature of the heavens,”⁷² i.e., astral bodies. These spiritual bodies are distinguished from the ‘vital spirits’ of the animals, as attested to, according to Abarbanel, by King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 3:21: “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upwards, and the spirit of the beast goes downwards to the earth?” Unlike the vital spirits of the animals that fade away with death, human spirits live on and “the souls will not separate from these thin spiritual bodies all the days of the world, whether before their coming into the body or whether in their being with the body, and also after their separation from it [i.e., the body].”⁷³ As long as the world subsists, individual souls will remain with their individual astral bodies and, just as the immaterial and sublime Creator relates to His creation through “a divine intellectual spark emanated from the Creator,”⁷⁴ so too the sublime soul relates to the cosmos and the body by means of the ‘spiritual body.’ Here again, the image of the emanated divine spark from the Creator plays a central role. As God can relate to humans through his emanated essence in the *sefirot* and from there to the world through the axis mundi, which is the human soul, so the human soul can finally conjoin with the body and partake in the world through a likewise emanated form known as the astral body, emanated, albeit, from the heavens and not, like the soul itself, directly from God.

Abarbanel clearly makes the distinction between the two types of emanation, writing that the astral bodies come into being from the “world-soul, which gives profusion to the powers that come into being and decay. And therefore this soul [i.e., the world-soul] does not have the power and active spirit of divine, eternal intellection, for this [power] exists only in the souls and spirits that were created and emanated from Him, may He be blessed, at the beginning of creation, as they are of the divine intellectual nature.”⁷⁵ Since human souls were emanated from

⁷² *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 171.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

the *sefirot* and do partake in the 'divine intellectual nature,' it would seem that this 'world-soul' is on a lower level than the *sefirot*, acting, again, as some type of intermediary between the world of emanation and the world of generation. Through the notions of the world-soul and its emanated astral bodies, which link the divinely, *sefirotically* emanated human souls to their earthly bodies, Abarbanel is cleverly able to link Neoplatonic and Aristotelian ideas and to lend them a kabbalistic flavor. He also tries to give the idea of the astral body direct kabbalistic legitimacy by attributing the idea to his kabbalistic predecessor, Nahmanides. According to Nahmanides in his *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, the sinning soul will be punished in purgatory by being burned with a thin fire.⁷⁶ If this is the case, reasons Abarbanel, then the 'thin fire' must be burning the soul through the medium of the thin material that is the astral body; otherwise it would have no effect upon the fundamentally immaterial soul.⁷⁷ Nahmanides, then, according to Abarbanel, hints here at the existence of the ethereal, astral body.

Notwithstanding Abarbanel's attempt to frame everything under a kabbalistic rubric by invoking the *sefirot*, by utilizing the imagery of the emanated spark, and by citing precedence in the kabbalistic figure of Nahmanides, it is important to note that his language concerning the soul vehicle is much closer to the Neoplatonism of Iamblicus, Synesius and Ficino than it is to the kabbalah. Though the *Zohar* and other kabbalists support the idea of the astral body, they refer to it by the term *tselem*, image, as derived from Genesis 1:27, in which man is created "in the image of God." These kabbalists understand the *tselem* as having the physiognomy of the individual and as being a person's individual emissary and means of self-revelation.⁷⁸ In contradistinction, Abarbanel uses the term 'spirit' for his conception of the astral body, links it directly to Plato, and understands it to move in a naturally circular motion. The "human spirit," he writes,

is of the nature of the heavens and from the sphere of the upper things, and it always moves in a circular motion from itself, like the movers of the heavens and the stars. And it is according to this that the wise Plato said that the soul moves by itself in a circular motion, while it is in the body and also when it is outside of the body, before it enters it and also after

⁷⁶ Nahmanides, *The Writings of Rabbi Moses ben Nahman*, volume 2, p. 265.

⁷⁷ *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 175.

⁷⁸ For more on this, see Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, pp. 251–273.

it is separated from it. And [Plato also said] that it is through this motion that it [i.e., the soul] will attain its essence and will know its Creator.⁷⁹

Despite its specifically stated Platonic nature, Abarbanel again links the idea back to the Jewish tradition. According to Abarbanel, Plato “was one of the students of Jeremiah the Prophet,”⁸⁰ and it is from him that Plato learned this idea of the spirit’s heavenly nature and its circular motion. As such, it is an essentially Jewish idea that has its base within the ‘true’ prophetic teachings that were passed down intact through the generations in the form of kabbalah. Anchored in the teachings of Jeremiah, Plato’s theories of the astral body and its circular movement⁸¹ can, and indeed do have authority for Abarbanel. By Judaizing the Neoplatonic theory and, in so doing, by bringing Plato into the Jewish camp, Abarbanel is philosophically better able to assert the supremacy of the Jewish kabbalistic tradition and by extension, the veracity of the Platonico-kabbalistic doctrine of transmigration.

Abarbanel’s theory of the soul vehicle and its connection to transmigration comes to its conclusion in a rather fascinating passage in *Mif’alot Elohim* that deals with the concepts of *shmittot* and *yovelot*, the cosmic sabbatical and jubilee years. According to Israel Weinstock, this idea of cosmic cycles was for Abarbanel, as well as for other wise men of his time, one of the central foundations of faith.⁸² The idea finds its base in Leviticus 25, in which God commands:

Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the Lord...it shall be a year of complete rest for the land...You shall count off seven weeks of years—seven times seven years—so that the period of seven weeks of years gives

⁷⁹ *Mif’alot Elohim*, p. 172.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁸¹ As has been shown and as will be discussed further, this idea is more of a Neoplatonic idea than it is Platonic. Nevertheless, Abarbanel, as other Neoplatonists, felt that this idea was traceable directly back to Plato. *Mif’alot Elohim* was written in 1499 while Abarbanel was on Italian soil and as such, this idea was most probably influenced by the Italian Neoplatonist milieu.

⁸² Israel Weinstock, *In the Circles of the Revealed and the Concealed*, p. 215. The centrality of this theme holds true not only for thinkers of Abarbanel’s time, such as Yehuda Hayyat and Pico della Mirandola, but for his predecessors as well, as can be witnessed to by the centrality of the doctrine in *Sefer ha-Peli’ah*, *Sefer ha-Kanah*, *Sefer ha-Temunah*, parts of *Ma’arekhet ha-Elohit*, portions of the *Zohar*, and above all, portions of the writings of Nahmanides, among others.

you a total of forty-nine years...and you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim freedom throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family...It shall be holy to you.⁸³

The rabbis of the Talmud discuss this rather peculiar biblical passage, concerning the seven year cycles and the sabbath of the land, in large-scale, cosmological terms. According to their interpretation, a year really represents a thousand years, and the fruitfulness and subsequent sabbatical rest of the land really represent global subsistence and then devastation.⁸⁴ Indeed, in the section of the Talmudic tractate *Sanhedrin* known as *Perek Helek*, which acts as a proof-text for much of Abarbanel's own complex cosmic theory,⁸⁵ the rabbis maintain: "Six thousand years shall the world exist, and one [thousand, the seventh], it shall be desolate."⁸⁶ According to their understanding of the Leviticus passage, the world is to exist for a total of six thousand years from the point of its creation to its rest and final desolation in the last one thousand, the seventh thousand years. How the *yovel*, the fiftieth year, fits into this cosmic portrait remains a bit unclear, and this question therefore remains for later interpreters, the likes of Abarbanel.

The six thousand year period of existence followed by a thousand year period of desolation as outlined in the Talmud, is substantiated, according to Abarbanel, by the story in the biblical book of Genesis of the six days of creation followed by a seventh day of rest.⁸⁷ Each day of creation, and the subsequent day of rest, represents a thousand years, as attested to by Psalm 90:4, which states, "A thousand years in your sight are but like yesterday when it is past."⁸⁸ Hence, for the discerning reader, the story of Genesis goes beyond mere creation and alludes to the cyclical time of the existence of the world, its ensuing

⁸³ Leviticus 25:3–12.

⁸⁴ See: Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin*, 97, BT *Rosh Hashanah*, 31, and BT *Avodah Zarah*, 9.

⁸⁵ See, for example, *Mif'alot*, p. 173, and his commentary to Leviticus, p. 296.

⁸⁶ BT *Sanhedrin*, 97a.

⁸⁷ See his Commentary on Genesis, 1:1–2, and his Commentary on Leviticus, p. 289. He is probably getting this idea directly from Nahmanides who, in his commentary to Genesis 2:3 writes: "The six days of creation are all the days of the world, for its existence will be for six thousand years (according to the talmudic sources cited in footnote 84 above). And therefore it is said (in *Bereshit Rabba*, 19:8): 'A day of the Holy One, blessed is He, is a thousand years.'"

⁸⁸ Abarbanel indicates this connection in his Commentary on Leviticus, 25:1, p. 295.

destruction, and its regeneration, *ad infinitum*.⁸⁹ All of this, according to Abarbanel, has its roots in the Biblical tradition as properly understood through the sages and through select, traditionalist commentators like Nahmanides.

Abarbanel links this idea of cosmic cycles to the theory of soul vehicles and their cycles, stating that in the seventh thousand year period, “the pure souls will not be lost. They will also not separate from the spirits (i.e., the astral bodies) that carry them, but will remain within their chariots, just as the separate intellects will remain with the movers of the heavens.”⁹⁰ Indeed, according to Abarbanel, within that period, “the Holy One, Blessed be He, makes wings for them [i.e., the righteous, pure souls], and they sail upon the surface of the waters.”⁹¹ Though the idea of wings for the righteous is explicitly stated in Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin*, 92b, Abarbanel gives it a distinctly Neoplatonic twist by specifically linking it to the souls of the righteous, which rise up to a state of conjunction with the divine. He also seems to be playing on the idea as described in the *Phaedrus*, in which the philosophers grow wings and, through their chariots, rise to the celestial realms.⁹² Moreover, according to Abarbanel, ‘the waters’ mentioned, upon which these souls sail, indicate the ‘spiritual bodies’ by means of which the righteous souls can rise up. These waters signifying the spiritual bodies are known as “the waters above,” in contrast to “the waters below,” which signify lower, terrestrial bodies. Within the seventh thousand year period, the former remain, while the latter become desolate.

Although the upper matter is preserved during the *shmittah* years while the lower matter is laid to waste, during the jubilee, no matter remains whatsoever.⁹³ Abarbanel writes:

In the great *yovel*⁹⁴ (the fifty-thousandth jubilee year), all of the bodies will be lost, upper and lower. And then the separate intellects and the

⁸⁹ For more on Abarbanel’s detailed calculations concerning these issues, and especially the calculation of the date of destruction of the present world, see Netanyahu, pp. 223–225.

⁹⁰ *Mif’alot Elohim*, p. 173.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² See references 52 and 53 in chapter 8, below.

⁹³ In his Commentary on Leviticus 25:1, p. 297, Abarbanel makes the distinction between “partial loss” (הפסד חלקי) and “total loss” (הפסד מוחלט) in regard to *shmittah* and *yovel*, respectively.

⁹⁴ Moshe Idel notes that this term, “the great *yovel*,” commonly recurs within kabbalistic writings on the fifty-thousandth cosmic year. See Idel, “kabbalah and Ancient Philosophy,” p. 107, fn. 69.

pure souls, with the negation of the illustrious bodies that were their chariots and their carriers and were separating them from the place of their holiness, will return to the place from which they were carved and will conjoin and unify with their creator. They will no longer sail upon the surface of the waters, for their wings will be plucked.⁹⁵

At this point, pure souls will separate from their astral bodies, which will fall by the wayside, and these pure souls will return to their immaterial state within their Creator. Yet since all matter, both upper and lower, will be laid to waste in any case, they will no longer have the need for their ‘chariots’, since there will no longer be any spheres through which to migrate. Pure souls will return to their God, and sinning souls, in order to be punished, will fall by the wayside along with their spirits. This holds consonant with a cosmic picture of *gilgul* that Abarbanel bases on Isaiah 34:4, which states, “And all the host of heaven shall rot away, and the heavens shall be rolled together like a scroll.”⁹⁶ In a fascinating passage concerning this, Abarbanel, basing himself upon *Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer*, writes,

Like a man that reads from a book and rolls it and returns and opens and reads and rolls, so in the future the Holy one, Blessed is He, will roll them (i.e., the heavens), and will return and will renew them to their place, as it is written, they “shall be rolled together like a scroll,” “And the earth shall grow old like a garment” (Isaiah, 51:6). Like a man who takes off his tallit and folds it and returns and opens it and puts it on and folds it, so in the future the Holy one, blessed is He, will fold the earth like clothing.⁹⁷

Both the heavens and the earth take part in a constant cycle of desolation and rebirth. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Abarbanel uses the metaphor of the book for the heavens, as during the same period, other thinkers such as Yohanan Alemanno and Pico della Mirandola came to an astrological understanding of the relationship between *liber legis* and *liber dei*.⁹⁸ Moreover, the metaphor of the garment for the earth seems to have clear resonance with the kabbalistic notion of the *malbush*, the material garment that acts as the sheath that allows for the influx of the immaterially divine into the cosmos.

⁹⁵ *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 173.

⁹⁶ וּנְמָקוּ כָּל-צִבְאָ שָׁמַיִם וּגְלוּ כִסֵּף הַשָּׁמַיִם.

⁹⁷ Commentary on Leviticus 25:1, p. 296. It is not clear which version of *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* Abarbanel is using, but he clearly states his usage of chapter 50 in this context.

⁹⁸ For more on this, see Idel, “‘Book of God’ and ‘Book of Law’ in Late 15th Century Florence.”

Moshe Idel has astutely noted that while much of Abarbanel's cosmic theory of *shmittot* and *yovelot* is generally based upon the early kabbalah, Abarbanel does not emphasize a theosophical understanding, as do his kabbalistic predecessors.⁹⁹ Idel goes on to claim that Abarbanel limits his discussion to happenings that are outside of the divine. While he is correct to claim that much of Abarbanel's theory is stripped of intricate kabbalistic theosophical language, much of his theory does indeed deal with intra-divine workings. This is apparent through his perception of the divine nature of the *sefirot* and the human souls and, associatively, his conception of emanation and return. In explaining the cosmic events and the distinction between intra and extra divine happenings, Abarbanel has recourse to the Aristotelian idea of corruption as the dissociation of the elements in each one's striving to return to its source. He writes:

The nature of all things is circular, to return, each thing to the place from which it came; if it came from the elements it will return to them, and if from the first matter, it will return to it, and if from [a state of] corruption, then to corruption it will return, in any case. And if it emerged and was emanated from Him, may He be blessed, then to Him it will be gathered, as the saying of Solomon, "The dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it."¹⁰⁰ For behold, the creation of the world and its regeneration are true Torah.¹⁰¹

Here, Abarbanel is setting up a system of duality in which the material entities, both in the upper and lower realms, were generated from a corrupt state that is fundamentally outside of God and will return to that corrupt state, while the separate intellects and human souls were emanated from God and ultimately will return to Him. Unlike the material entities that suffer corruption in the fifty-thousandth year of the cycle, "the idea of their [i.e., the immaterial substances'] end is that they will be gathered to their divine source from which they were hewn and they will cleave¹⁰² to the root of their emanation, and

⁹⁹ For Idel's discussion, see his: "kabbalah and Ancient Philosophy," pp. 88–89. As examples of early Kabbalists who expounded upon the idea, Idel mentions Rabbi Ezra of Gerona and his student, Rabbi Ya'akov ben Sheshet. Nahmanides should also be mentioned as a clear and explicitly stated influence upon Abarbanel, perhaps along with the later commentator upon Nahmanides, Rabbi Isaac of Acco. These latter two hold many affinities to Abarbanel's own cosmic theories.

¹⁰⁰ Ecclesiastes, 12:7.

¹⁰¹ *Mif'alot Elohim*, pp. 166–167.

¹⁰² וּתְדַבֵּקוּ. Here Abarbanel is entering into the complex theory of *unio mystica*, the idea of the cleaving of the immaterial entities to God.

nothing will be cancelled of them except the separation and the multiplicity that they had after their creation and their connection to the material substances."¹⁰³ Hence, it is not proper to speak of the immaterial entities in terms of generation and corruption, terms which are applicable to material entities; rather, since they stem from and also return to the Eternal God, thus having a share in eternity and divinity, it is more fitting to speak of their existence, their coming into being within the material world, and their exit there from, in terms of 'emanation' and 'ingathering'. Human souls and the separate intellects/*sefirot* from which they are carved are essentially divine; hence, the Neoplatonic description of their existence in the upper realms during the *shmittah* years and their eventual return to and conjunction with the One in the *yovel* years is essentially a depiction of intra-divine occurrences.

According to Netanyahu, Abarbanel's whole theory of the prolonged existence of the heavenly entities through the forty-nine thousandth year cycle, after which they are subsumed within their root, and the destruction of the lower entities seven times during that same cycle, calls into question any anthropocentric idea of the universe. With the destruction of the lower entities comes the destruction of the human entity, and hence there are seven cyclical periods of one thousand years in which the human does not exist but the upper entities do. Netanyahu writes concerning Abarbanel's theory:

It is difficult...to assume that he failed to notice that it stood in contradiction to his anthropocentric conception of the universe. What sense is there—the question presents itself—in the existence of the lifeless celestial bodies, when humanity for which they were created exists no longer? We cannot be far wrong if we assume that Abravanel had this question in mind when he said in obvious bewilderment: "Why God in His divine wisdom ordered that the sublunary world should exist six thousand years while the heavenly circle should last forty-nine thousand years, is one of those mysteries which God concealed from us."¹⁰⁴

Indeed, Abarbanel's bewilderment expressed here is not due to the destruction of the human entity and the subsequent questioning of the anthropocentric conception of the universe, as this would not be a point of confusion for Abarbanel. The human soul remains eternal regardless

¹⁰³ *Mif'alot Elohim*, pp. 168–169. Abarbanel reiterates this idea in his Commentary on Leviticus, in which he states that in the *Yovel*, "the soul will cleave to its Creator and will leave behind its material endeavors" (p. 294).

¹⁰⁴ Netanyahu, p. 134.

of the corruption that the human body faces, because it is a part of the Eternal. Anthropocentrism meets deocentrism in Abarbanel's theory, as the human soul is essentially divine.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, perhaps no theory could be more anthropocentric than that which asserts the essential divinity of the human soul. According to Abarbanel, discussing the circle of emanation from the divine purpose to the human purpose, the sages write that "Man was the purpose of this [lower] world, since he is the purpose of all parts of the universe; but the final purpose of all is the conjunction with Him, may He be blessed, for he is our God, the purpose of the world in general, and He is the purpose of the circle of emanation."¹⁰⁶ This statement seems rather enigmatic and incongruent; how can man, God and the conjunction of the two all be the purpose? If man is the purpose of all parts of the universe and God is the purpose of the world in general, then at a certain point on the circle of emanation, God and man must be shown to be one, not as separate entities within the universe that share in the same essence, but as conjoined in the same source. This, indeed, is stated by Abarbanel to be the final purpose of all, namely, *devekut*, conjunction with the divine. All three purposes of creation, then, man, God, and the conjunction between the two, become one in that never-ending circle of emanation and conjunction, of which God is the purpose.

Hence, anthropocentrism and the corruption of matter pose no problem for Abarbanel. Rather, the point of *devekut* on the circle of emanation and conjunction is the enigmatic point of bafflement for Abarbanel concerning the *shmittah* and *yovel* cycles, because it calls into question both the survival of the human soul as an individual entity,¹⁰⁷ and the simple, unique, eternally unchanging nature of God.¹⁰⁸ How

¹⁰⁵ Elliot Wolfson notes regarding this theme that it is widely regarded and confirmed in kabbalistic literature. It is supported in sources such as *Zohar Hadash* 120c by the numerical linkage of the four letter name of God which, when written out in full (*yod he vav he*), equals 45, the numerical equivalent of the word *adam*, man. See Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁶ Netanyahu, p. 148.

¹⁰⁷ For more on the survival of the soul as an individual entity as one of Abarbanel's psychological criteria, as laid down in his commentary on I Samuel 25:29, see Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*, pp. 123–124.

¹⁰⁸ Concerning this last point, Abarbanel would follow Maimonides, who asserts concerning God, "There is one simple essence in which there is no complexity or multiplicity of notions, but one notion only; so that from whatever angle you regard it and from whatever point of view you consider it, you will find that it is one, not divided in any way and by any cause into two notions." See: *The Guide*, 1:51 volume 1, p. 113.

can the human soul remain an immortal individual identity, and how can God remain eternally absolute, with that point of *devekut* on the cosmic cycle? Such a point of *devekut* would seem to violate the ‘doctrine of divine immutability,’ which states that God cannot undergo any real or intrinsic change in any respect, ‘real’ change being a transitive change that makes a real difference in the world, and ‘intrinsic’ change being an intransitive change that occurs within the changing item.¹⁰⁹ This doctrine, based upon the Aristotelian idea that change has a final source in an unchanged changer and that something is eternally unchanged only if unchangeable,¹¹⁰ was widely accepted in the philosophical milieu of Abarbanel’s day. *Devekut*, however, violates both the idea of real change and the idea of intrinsic change, forcing either a reevaluation of the doctrine of divine immutability, which is impossible as based upon the concept of logical priority¹¹¹ and the Aristotelian idea of the unchanged changer, or a reevaluation of the idea of the immortality of souls. Indeed, the complex philosophical problem of the immortality of the individual soul and the unicity of the intellect in *devekut* was a rampant problem for Abarbanel’s intellectual predecessors such as Averroes, Aquinas, ibn Ezra and Maimonides, to name a few, and through Abarbanel’s day for the likes of his philosophical contemporary, Elia Delmedigo.¹¹² Most of these thinkers cautiously claimed that the philosophical answers to these questions, such as the nullification of the possibility of individual survival after bodily death, are outside the tenets of faith. This includes Delmedigo, who followed a non-individualist, Averroist outlook of unicity in his philosophy but warned his readers, “I will not verify everything I will say, especially regarding those matters which may perhaps conflict with the holy

¹⁰⁹ See: Brian Leftow, “Immutability,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2002, www.stanford.edu/entries/immutability.

¹¹⁰ See, for example, *Physics* 8:6, in *The Complete Works*, pp. 432–434, which discusses the ‘unmoved mover’, motion being a necessary condition for change.

¹¹¹ This idea, outlined by Maimonides in premise 21 of the introduction to part II of the *Guide* (volume II, p. 238) states: “Everything that is composed of two notions has necessarily that composition as the cause of its existence as it really is, and consequently is not necessarily existent in respect to its own essence, for it exists in virtue of the existence of its two parts and of their composition.” Under this premise, if God is both A and B, then His cause is at least the composition of these two together, and not Himself; if God is composite or undergoes any change, which would entail composition or decomposition, then He has a cause. *Devekut* and emanation would seem to violate this premise.

¹¹² See Kalman P. Bland, “Elijah Del Medigo, Unicity of Intellect, and Immortality of Soul,” pp. 3–5.

Torah.”¹¹³ Abarbanel’s cosmic theory of emanation that begins and ends in *devekut* is but another interpretation of this complex, enigmatic problem. His approach, however, stresses philosophy’s and the human mind’s limits, and ends up, concerning divine souls and their relation to their divine source, in the Neoplatonic problem of the One and the many; this enigmatic problem is then ultimately explained by Abarbanel, not by philosophical or rational means, but through the enigmatic symbolism of kabbalah.

Unlike Delmedigo who sees a possible conflict, or his philosophical predecessors who subscribe to some type of double-truth theory, Abarbanel attempts not only to harmonize his theory with the bible, but to offer it authority by interpreting it into biblical texts. The bible talks of such matters, according to Abarbanel, and where the human intellect cannot grasp these matters, kabbalah takes over, as they are an express part of the theory inherent within the texts but are ontologically beyond human understanding. For example, Moses is talking about the return of the souls of the righteous to their dwelling place in God during the great *yovel* when he writes, “Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.”¹¹⁴ This indicates a point to which the souls of the righteous constantly return home from generation to generation, where they rest from the creation of one world to the creation of another. Even though he does not include the continuation of the Psalm within his textual exegesis, Abarbanel seems to have it in mind, as it fits quite nicely with his theory. The Psalm states, “Before the mountains were born, and before you ever formed the earth and the world, and *from one world to another world* You are God.”¹¹⁵ God is the Everlasting, from the creation of one world to the creation of another, and is the dwelling place of the righteous from generation to generation; read in this manner, Psalm 90 seems to support the cosmic *yovelot* cycles, in which the righteous return home at the end of the cycles for their own sabbatical rest in God. Abarbanel perspicaciously lends this idea of *devekut* as the return home to God in the *yovel* years even greater authority by tying it back into the levitical verses dealing directly with the *yovel*. Concerning the hallowed fiftieth year, Leviticus

¹¹³ Paris 968, 150r, Milan 128, 48v, quoted in Bland, p. 19.

¹¹⁴ Psalm 90:1.

¹¹⁵ Psalm 90:2. Italics mine for emphasis. Abarbanel uses another proof-text to express the same exact idea: Psalm 103:17 states, “The mercy of the Lord is *from one world and to another world*.” See *Mif'alot Elohim*, pp. 176–177.

25:10 states, “You shall return every man to his holdings, and every man to his family shall return.” According to Abarbanel, the return of every man to his holdings signifies the return of pure souls to God, who is their stronghold and the rock from which they were hewn. The return of every man to his family, on the other hand, is the ingathering and corruption of matter, both upper and lower. Abarbanel writes that the word ‘family’, *mishpacha*, in this case derives from the word *shifcha*, maidservant.¹¹⁶ This is to show the return of matter to its utterly base status in total corruption during the *yovel*.

Notwithstanding the exegetical proofs, the point of *devekut* remains a sticky issue for Abarbanel due to the philosophical implications for the individual souls and for God. “Indeed,” he asks, “after the ingathering of the separate intellects and the pure souls to their source, and before their emergence and their emanation, what will be the matter of their existence there? Do they conglomerate completely with their source, in such a manner that there is nothing there except for His simple essence alone, and they exist as if they were not intelligences?” He continues further on, “Or if there were multiplicity and separation at all between the gathered entities and the gatherer and between the bundles [i.e., the gathered entities] themselves, this one from that one, this is really a place of great speculation, and the hand of the human intellect cannot touch the attainment of these truths, for they are things that the Ancient of Days covered.”¹¹⁷ Even though the state of *devekut* is true as attested to, according to Abarbanel, by the biblical sources, what happens and what exists during that point of ultimate embrace of the intellectual soul by God is ultimately beyond the embrace of the human intellect in its lowly, bodily state.

Hence, the state of the union of the One and the many in *devekut* is one of the ontological arcana of the Torah that must be accepted as received tradition; that is, it is a numinous secret that is secret by its very nature, and can only be understood by God and by the disembodied soul, both of which take part in and *experience* that state of being. Though the phenomenon itself cannot be explained due to its ontologically numinous nature, its enigmatic character as something naturally beyond the grasp of embodied human thought can be perceived by the perspicacious reader of the text through the filter of the very tradition

¹¹⁶ See *Mif'alot Elohim*, pp. 173–174 for this entire exegetical argument.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

of which it is a part, namely, the kabbalah. Abarbanel writes that “the kabbalists said that the souls would return to the *sefirah* of *binah* and there would attach themselves¹¹⁸ and would be delighted.”¹¹⁹ This is based on the kabbalistic idea that *teshuvah*, return, is synonymous with *binah*, understanding, which is synonymous with *‘oneg*, pleasure, all three of these names referring to the third *sefirah*.¹²⁰ The return of the soul and its *devekut* to God, then, is fundamentally attached, so to speak, to the third *sefirah*, *binah*. It is within this return to and conjunction with the source in God that the soul receives true understanding and true pleasure. This type of understanding and pleasure in *devekut* takes place during the *shmittah* years in a fashion that is comprehensible to prophets and wise men, “for,” writes Abarbanel in line with his predecessor Nahmanides,¹²¹ “every *shmittah* is one gate of *binah*, understanding.”¹²² During the *shmittah* years *devekut* takes place, but it is the conjunction of the soul in its composite state with its astral body to the *sefirah* of *binah* in its emanated state as a separate intelligence, and therefore is comprehensible to the discerning thinker. Indeed, such a type of *devekut* would seem to involve compound conjunction and the maintenance of individuality, allowable through the medium of ethereal matter.

It is the *devekut* of the great *yovel*, when all matter is desolated, that is beyond the ken of embodied human understanding and is the great mystery of the One and the many. Rather than denying this mystery, ignoring it, or trying to rationalize it in some sense, however, Abarbanel embraces it. Still basing himself upon the commentary of Nahmanides, he quotes the Talmud: “Fifty gates of *binah* were created in the world, and all of them were given to Moses except for one.”¹²³ The *sefirotic* and numeric symbolism derived by Nahmanides from this rabbinic dictum and then further elaborated by Abarbanel are highly significant. The

¹¹⁸ יתדבקו.

¹¹⁹ *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 174.

¹²⁰ Moshe Idel perceptively makes a distinction, noting that this is an idea first developed in the school of Nahmanides and especially apparent in the writings of Shem Tov ibn Gaon, as opposed to the non-theosophical, more Neoplatonic reading of the *yovel* in the Geronese school of the followers of Isaac the Blind. See: Idel, “The Yovel in Jewish Mysticism,” especially pp. 74–80.

¹²¹ Here he is quoting Nahmanides’ commentary on Leviticus, 25:2. Nahmanides, however, has it: “כל שמיטה שער בית אחד”.

¹²² *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 175.

¹²³ Babylonian Talmud *Rosh Hashana*, 21:2, and BT *Nedarim*, 38:1. Quoted in *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 175, in Nahmanides, commentary on Genesis, 1:1 and commentary on Leviticus, 25:2.

forty-nine gates of *binah* given to Moses signify the seven times seven *shmittot* within the greater *yovel* cycle. This is hinted at, according to Nahmanides, already in the story of the six days of the creation of the world and the seventh day of rest; not only is the *shmittah* indicated there, as discussed above,¹²⁴ each day also represents a *shmittah*, corresponding to the seven *shmittot* within a *yovel* cycle.¹²⁵ Though he does not explicitly state so, this cycle of seven as connected to the gates of *binah* could also be understood to be referring to the seven lower *sefirot* in cycles of seven, with the eighth, *binah* itself, inaccessible to human understanding, in accordance with the rabbinic dictate of the forty-nine gates given to Moses and the fiftieth withheld.¹²⁶ Though Abarbanel does not enter into such complex symbolism, he does make the link between the fiftieth gate of *binah* not given to Moses and the fifty-thousandth *yovel* year in which the pure souls and the separate intelligences, which are the *sefirot*, return to a state of completely disembodied conjunction with their source in God. This point is beyond embodied human understanding, including that of a prophet as great as Moses, as it is ontologically prior to the creation of the body and the creation of the human in the composite, bodily state, be it astral or earthly.

The freeing of the pure soul during the *yovel* from its bodily confines is indicated by the biblical verse dealing with the *yovel* that states: "And you shall proclaim *freedom* in the land for all its inhabitants."¹²⁷ According to Nahmanides, the word 'freedom' in this verse, *dror*, is derived from the double mention of the word *dor*, generation, in the verse in Ecclesiastes that states: "One generation goes, and another generation comes."¹²⁸ Nahmanides does not expand upon this idea other than to mention that it is the 'way of truth,' *derech ha-emet*, a phrase characteristically utilized by him to denote kabbalistic ideas within his commentary. Interestingly, however, this verse from Ecclesiastes is typically employed by kabbalists as a proof-text for transmigration.¹²⁹ Following this line of thinking,

¹²⁴ See footnote 87 above, and the discussion there.

¹²⁵ See Nahmanides' commentary on Genesis, 1:1, and Abarbanel's *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 175.

¹²⁶ The idea is developed and elaborated in this way in *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, pp. 70–71 and in *Sefer ha-Kanah*, p. 169.

¹²⁷ Leviticus 25:10. Nahmanides claims that 'land', *eretz*, in this verse, signifies 'the land of the living,' *eretz ha-hayyim*. Understood as the last *sefirah*, this would accord with and support Isaac of Acço's interpretation of Nahmanides, to be discussed shortly.

¹²⁸ Ecclesiastes, 1:4. See Nahmanides on Leviticus 25:10.

¹²⁹ See, for example, Abrams, *The Book Bahir*, ¶104, p. 187; *Zohar* 3:216; and *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*, 100:1 and 110:2.

Isaac of Acco, a thirteenth century kabbalist and commentator upon Nahmanides, understands Nahmanides to be applying the Ecclesiastic verse here to the cosmic *yovel* theory in terms of metempsychosis. "The intention of the Rabbi [i.e., Nahmanides]," he writes, "is to inform us that as the secret of metempsychosis acts upon man, that a generation that has already gone is the generation that comes now, so too the 'small *yovel*' will return to the 'great *yovel*' in which are its roots. That is, the roots of the '*atarah*'¹³⁰ are implanted in *binah*, for *binah* is the soul of all the souls."¹³¹ According to this reading of Nahmanides, the cosmic *yovel* cycles are mirrored in the transmigration cycles of men, which are mirrored in a cyclical process taking place within the *sefirotic* structure of God himself. Though Abarbanel does not delve into such elaborate theosophical detail and maintains much more of a Neoplatonic stance, his theory as developed on the base of Nahmanides also picks up on and develops the relation between cosmic cycles and soul cycles, resulting in an interesting theory of transmigration.

According to Abarbanel, during the fifty-thousandth year period of *devekut* that is beyond human understanding but is accepted as a kabbalistic truth, the pure souls will remain within God "until the passing of the year of the *yovel*; and then their youth will be renewed like the eagle."¹³² Here, Abarbanel strongly implies a specific idea of reincarnation known as palingenesis. According to Shalom Rosenberg, this theory of palingenesis has Pythagorean roots and was most strongly advocated by the fifth century BCE thinkers Alcameon of Croton and Empedocles.¹³³ Based on the Greek *palin*, 'again', and *genesis*, 'coming into being', this idea is fundamentally connected to the concept of cosmic cycles, and in the thought of Alcameon, has the connotation of a return of the same body an infinite number of times. In later, Stoic thought, the concept was more specifically associated with the re-creation of the universe, including its animating principles, by the demiurge, after the universe's absorption into himself.¹³⁴ This Pythagorean theory of palingenesis has great consonance with Abarbanel's thought and may very well have acted as his source. Indeed, concerning the concept of cosmic cycles, Abarbanel states that "this idea was also accepted by the wise men of

¹³⁰ Literally, 'crown', one of the names of the tenth *sefirah*.

¹³¹ *Me'irat Einayim*, p. 231.

¹³² *Ibid.* This last part is based upon Psalm 103:5.

¹³³ Shalom Rosenberg, "The Return to the Garden of Eden," p. 54.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

the nations and their ancient philosophers, as will attest Empedocles, who said that the world comes into being and is destroyed many times.”¹³⁵ Given the explicit mention of Empedocles as an ‘ancient’ authority among the nations for the whole idea of cosmic cycles, and given Empedocles’ strong support of palingenesis as connected to the idea of cosmic cycles, it is reasonable to assume that Abarbanel may have been influenced in his own, parallel formulation. In Abarbanel’s thought, after the great *yovel*, with the recreation of the cosmos, the pure souls will be reincarnated from their source in God, first into newly created astral bodies, then into lower bodies. As a proof-text, he relies again upon Psalm 90: “You turn man back to dust; and you say, ‘Return, you children of men.’”¹³⁶ According to Abarbanel, this indicates that “the souls will return, to fall upon ‘spirits’ in order to revive the spirit of lower entities.”¹³⁷ Though he does not go so far as to explicitly pronounce reincarnation, Abarbanel’s language, coupled with his proof-text, seems clear. God turns man back to dust from man’s place within God, telling him to return to the lower realms: Within the renewed cosmos, the pure souls reemerge from God, remount astral bodies, and from there reincarnate into lower bodies in order to revivify the world.

Concerning this long exposition of cosmic cycles that ends in a revivification of the world through reincarnation, Abarbanel writes:

This is the essence of the opinion of the Ramban concerning the *shmittah* and the *yovel*, even though he covered it with his secrecies. And I do not see the need for this secret and concealment. For indeed, the divine Torah revealed all of the dear sciences through the order of its commandments and their matter, and it was stricter concerning the *shmittah* than concerning all the other negative commandments,¹³⁸ and revelation concerning it is necessary.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Commentary on Leviticus 25, p. 297.

¹³⁶ Psalm 90:3.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ That is, the 248 prohibitive commandments of the bible, which receive a punishment of thirty-nine lashes when a more severe punishment is not indicated. For the long list of extremely severe punishments for the violation of the commandments of the *shmittah*, see: Leviticus 26:14–42.

¹³⁹ Commentary on Leviticus, 25, p. 298. אם לא, בשמיטה וביובל, אז לא יהיה עוצמו דעת הרמב"ן בשמיטה וביובל, כי הנה התורה האלהית גלתה כל שכלה אותה בסודותיה. ואיני רואה בזה צורך הסוד והעלמה. המדעים היקרים בסדר מצותיה וענינם והחמירה בשמיטה יותר מכל הלאוין, וחייב הגלות עליה.

Here, Abarbanel expressly diverges from his master, Nahmanides, in two ways. First, he indicates a symbiotic relationship in which, through ‘the sciences’ revealed by the Torah in its commandments, the secret traditions of these very commandments can be revealed. As Saul Regev has keenly noted for a trend in Jewish thought which he terms ‘ratio-mystical’¹⁴⁰ and in which he includes Abarbanel, “The tools for retrieving the secrets are given first and foremost in the hands of the kabbalists, but the philosophers can also acquire these tools and can reveal the secrets with their help.”¹⁴¹ Since ‘the sciences,’ including philosophies of creation and emanation, are revealed by the Torah itself, their use in revealing its secret traditions remains legitimate. The second way in which Abarbanel deviates from Nahmanides connects to the fact that not only can he reveal the secrets of cosmic cycles and not only is he ready to do so, he sees it as imperative. This is due to the severity of not adhering to the biblical commandments of *shmittot* and *yovelot* and the need for people to understand the cosmic implications of such commandments.

Notwithstanding this compulsion to reveal these secrets as explicitly stated in his Commentary on Leviticus, in his earlier *Mif'alot Elohim*, he states in classical Maimonidean philosophical and Nahmanidean kabbalistic fashion: “This is the end of what is possible to clarify concerning this profound and divine discourse and concerning these things, which are really bodies of the secrets of Torah and the fruit of all of *ma'aseh bereshit* and the essence of the essences of *ma'aseh merkavah*, which are not suitable to transmit except through titular introductions.”¹⁴² Whence the discord between the need to both reveal and to conceal? Perhaps Abarbanel’s dissonance hearkens back to the paradoxical phenomenon of ‘the secret,’ in which the act of shrouding is dialectically related divulgence.¹⁴³ Perhaps Abarbanel is referring in the first instance to the revelation of that which is possible to reveal, and in the second to the ontologically secretive character of the *yovel* and *devekut*, which is by its very nature beyond the ken of this-worldly human understanding. Or

¹⁴⁰ Regev uses the term “הזרם הרציונל-מיסטי”, indicating a complex phenomenon which is neither fully rational philosophy nor fully mystical thought, but an astonishing combination of the two. For Regev’s deft analysis, see his: “Ratio-Mystical Contemplation.” For the treatment of Abarbanel specifically, see pp. 181–186.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁴² *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 175.

¹⁴³ For more on this phenomenon, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 15.

perhaps Abarbanel simply had a change of opinion from the time that he wrote *Mif'alot Elohim* to that which he laid down his Commentary on Leviticus. Whatever the case may be, Abarbanel definitely expositis beyond the point of his predecessor Nahmanides, yet at a certain point realizes the limits of human understanding in regard to the secrets of cosmic cycles and their relation to the creation and cosmic movement of human souls.

Within his assertion of the need for secrecy in *Mif'alot Elohim*, in which he mentions the "bodies of the secrets of Torah" in connection to *ma'aseh merkavah* and *ma'aseh bereshit*, Abarbanel is keenly linking his ruminations concerning *shmittot* and *yovelot* to the most profound secret matters of the Torah, defined in the Jewish tradition since Mishnah Hagigah 2:1 as *ma'aseh merkavah*, the workings of the chariot, and *ma'aseh bereshit*, the workings of the beginning. For Abarbanel, *ma'aseh merkavah* seems to be the idea of the soul vehicle and the conjunction of the divine soul with matter and its disjunction there from; this reading of Abarbanel seems to be supported by his explicit use of the term *merkavah*, which can mean either 'chariot' or 'compound,' in order to discuss ideas of souls, bodies and soul vehicles.¹⁴⁴ *Ma'aseh bereshit*, for Abarbanel, seems to refer to the infinite cycle of the creation and destruction of worlds. This seems to be corroborated by his specific use of the term *beriah*, creation, in relation to the coming into existence of the material entities.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, for Abarbanel *ma'aseh merkavah* and *ma'aseh bereshit* are respectively connected to 'atzilut, emanation, and *beriah*, creation, two fundamental cosmogonic kabbalistic concepts that, for Abarbanel, are respectively connected to the Neoplatonism and Neoaristotelianism of his day, yet are subsumed under and are ultimately explained by his own Neonahmanidean form of kabbalah.

Within his theory of cosmic *shmittot* and *yovelot* cycles, charged with the Neoplatonic theory of the soul vehicle, Abarbanel enunciates a much more affirmative theory of transmigration than that within his Commentary on Deuteronomy. Unlike in his Deuteronomy commentary, in which he discusses the logical potentiality of human to human soul transmigration, here he offers a more assertive, albeit complex and somewhat veiled theory of metempsychosis. Like his Deuteronomy passage, he discusses the idea at length and then, at least in *Mif'alot Elohim*,

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, *Mif'alot Elohim*, p. 173 and p. 175.

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, *Mif'alot*, p. 169 and p. 171.

finally denies the suitability of delving into it. Unlike his Deuteronomy passage, he discusses the idea's actual workings rather than its mere possibility. In the former he scholastically discusses matters of logic; in the latter he discusses the secret matters of the Torah, *ma'aseh merkavah*, and *ma'aseh bereshit*. In both places, he relies heavily upon Neoplatonic notions, but only in the latter does he exhibit a fundamental knowledge of and affinity to the kabbalah. The idea, or at least the supra-rational nature of the idea and its final ontological assertion, can be known through kabbalistic speculation; it is simply not appropriate to reveal such speculation. Nevertheless, Abarbanel reveals plenty, enough for his theory to break through the veil of secrecy and to enlighten his earlier, more purely philosophical discussions of the topic.

CHAPTER FOUR

SPANISH AND ITALIAN CONCEPTIONS OF METEMPSYCHOSIS IN JUDAH HAYYAT

Do not be enticed by the opinions of the philosophers.¹

With the above words, the Spanish kabbalist Joseph Alcastiel concludes his response to an inquiry concerning *gilgul neshamot* posited to him by his compatriot Judah Hayyat. In a series of eighteen questions, six of which directly relate to philosophical psychology and two of these which involve *gilgul*, Hayyat asks, “In regard to the matter of *gilgul* I have great doubt concerning the matter of Pinchas and those like him who will reincarnate from two: how is it possible for two forms to apply to one body?”² Here Hayyat is referring to the idea expressed in the *Zohar* that the biblical Pinchas is none other than the reincarnation of the souls of Nadav and Abihu,³ and is taking the very philosophical stance that the soul is the form of the body and that only one form can apply to one mass of matter. At other points in the same series of questions, Hayyat addresses the impossibility of grasping a portion of God due to His simple and complete nature,⁴ the question of a change in God’s will, and thus a questioning of His ultimate perfection, due to His creation of the world at a specific point in time,⁵ the doubt of God’s perfect omniscience in the assertion of His creation and destruction of manifold worlds,⁶ and the question of the true essence of the

¹ Joseph Alcastiel, “This is What the Rav Rabbi Joseph... Answered to Judah Hayyat,” p. 196. “ואל תתפתה אחר דעות בעלי המחקר.” For purposes of simplicity, from now on, quotations from both Alcastiel and Hayyat in connection to the responsa will be cited as a part of Scholem, “On the Knowledge of the kabbalah.”

² Ibid., p. 176. “בענין הגלגול יש לי ספק גדול בענין פינחס ודומה לו שיגולגלו משנים.” “This is the same argument of the *Amitat ha-Amitot* as it appears in Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi’s records of the debate in Candia, and the same argument brought forward by Isaac Abarbanel in his commentary on Deuteronomy 25:5. See chapter 2 above, footnote 85.

³ See: *Zohar*, 3:57b and 3:217a.

⁴ Scholem, “On the Knowledge of the kabbalah,” p. 177.

⁵ Ibid., p. 174.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 174–175.

soul as it applies to the body.⁷ All of these are highly philosophically charged questions to kabbalistic modes of discourse from one who has been perceived as “the main representative of his generation of Spanish kabbalists”⁸ and who, in his better known and more prevalent work *Minhat Yehudah*, explicitly lashes out at the philosophical mysticism characteristic of the Italian milieu. This combination points to a more complex picture of Judah Hayyat than has generally been recognized, of a thinker drawn to philosophical speculation yet contrastingly eager to preserve the more mythical kabbalah of his Spanish heritage. Even in his blatantly Zoharically driven *Minhat Yehudah*,⁹ traces of the influence of the philosophical kabbalah against which Hayyat fights can be detected, throwing Alcastiel’s warning of philosophical enticement into relief.

Despite a rather lengthy and well documented autobiographical account in the introduction to his *Minhat Yehudah*, not a lot is known about Hayyat’s life in Spain prior to his expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492. He alludes to only one person who taught him kabbalistic matters, the unknown Shmuel ibn Shraga, who Gershom Scholem conjectures may have been a relative of Joseph ibn Shraga, another prominent Spanish kabbalist who made his way to Italy and who was an in-law of Joseph Ya’avetz,¹⁰ and who only receives a one time mention throughout the entirety of *Minhat Yehudah*. It is important to note in this context that Joseph ibn Shraga seems to be the only known person who had a copy of the responsa between Hayyat and Alcastiel already in Spain, and that he mentions the opinion of Alcastiel concerning *gilgul* in a responsa letter of his own that treats the subject.¹¹ Notwithstanding this possible connection, beyond the unknown figure of Shmuel ibn Shraga, no mention of Hayyat’s possible other teachers of kabbalistic or other speculative lore, and no reference to the centers in

⁷ Ibid., p. 176.

⁸ Idel, “Encounters,” p. 198.

⁹ For more on the role of the *Zohar* in *Minhat Yehudah* and Hayyat’s role in the process of the *Zohar*’s canonization, see the interesting lecture by Boaz Huss at the workshop on “Early Modern Jewries” held at Wesleyan University, August 23–25 2004: <http://www.earlymodern.org/workshops/summer2004/videos.php>.

¹⁰ See: Scholem, “On the Knowledge of the kabbalah,” p. 170.

¹¹ This mention exists in ms. British Museum Margoliot 1176, fol. 91a. I hope to examine this responsa of ibn Shraga and the complex question of the possible relation between ibn Shraga, Hayyat and Alcastiel, which would take the current discussion too far a field, in a separate study. For the time being, see Scholem, “On the Knowledge of the kabbalah,” p. 170.

which Hayyat engaged in study, is made. Moreover, while he presents himself in *Minhat Yehudah* as a respected figure already in Spain, Hayyat's precise role in the community there is not known, and it is not known where, what, or whom he may have taught. It is also not clear what his own kabbalistic and philosophical views were while still in Spain, even though he explicitly states a great esteem for Zoharic literature. This uncertainty concerning Hayyat's earlier, Spanish thought is especially the case if we accept Gershom Scholem's contention¹² that Hayyat's exchange with Alcastiel, which is rife with philosophical inquiry on the part of the former, took place in Spain in 1482.

Indeed, Hayyat's autobiographical story tells very little of his former life and begins with the Iberian expulsion, telling of his exile via ship from Lisbon sometime in the winter of 1492/1493. According to Moshe Idel, the fact of Hayyat's exit from Lisbon reveals a preference for a western trajectory of movement, and thus indicates that he was most probably Castilian and not Catalan.¹³ Hence, from what can only be conjectured from the scant evidence, Hayyat was a Castilian kabbalist of some stature who had great esteem for the *Zohar* yet seemingly had some philosophical proclivities, and may have had a connection to Joseph Ya'avetz, who asked him to comment upon *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, already in Spain through the medium of his teacher Shmuel ibn Shraga, a possible relative of Ya'avetz's in-law, Joseph ibn Shraga. Beyond this, nothing is really known of Hayyat's life prior to his journey to and settlement upon Italian soil, where he would eventually write his magnum opus, *Minhat Yehudah*.

Even less is known about the figure of Joseph Alcastiel than is known about his purported Castilian compatriot Hayyat. It is known that he was active in the town of Jativa in Spain, and that he was involved in the controversial act of writing of medicinal amulets.¹⁴ Moshe Idel surmises that Alcastiel too may have made his way to Italy, though he notes that the sole piece of evidence for this is a mere insinuation offered by the kabbalist Isaac ben Hayyim ha-Cohen.¹⁵ Beyond this, Alcastiel's character is veiled in mystery. Judging from Hayyat's turn to him in question, though, it can be assumed that he was a figure of

¹² Scholem, "On the Knowledge of the kabbalah," p. 169.

¹³ Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 136.

¹⁴ Scholem, "On the Knowledge of the kabbalah," p. 170.

¹⁵ This appears in ms. Oxford Neubauer 2770, fol. 48b. See: Idel, "Encounters," p. 339, fn. 22.

stature, and indeed, his responsa enjoyed great subsequent influence throughout the kabbalistic world. Meir ibn Gabbai, who was born in Spain in 1480, lived most of his adult life in Turkey, and was one of the most important kabbalists of his day,¹⁶ refers to Alcastiel's letter no less than five times, both within his *Tola'at Ya'akov* and throughout his masterwork *Avodat ha-Kodesh*. Ibn Gabbai quotes at length from the letter, including portions relating to the concept of *gilgul*.¹⁷ Moshe Cordovero also refers to the letter, as does Shlomo Alkabetz, Ovadia ben Zecharia Hamon, and Isaiah Horowitz.¹⁸ In addition, Scholem has shown that Isaac Luria most probably had access to the contents of Alcastiel's letter, and ideas such as *partsufim* as opposed to *sefirot* to explain the upper hypostases, *tsimtsum* as the cosmic withdrawal of God into Himself, and *'olam ha-tohu* as a term to explain the primordial shatter and disrepair of creation, may not have originated with Luria, as had been previously thought, but may in part have been drawn by him from Alcastiel.¹⁹ Hence, despite the lack of knowledge concerning Alcastiel's life and any other known writings from his hand, there is no doubt about the fact that his small treatise had a big effect upon the future course of Jewish thought.

The question as to whether Hayyat's inquiries and their responsa by Alcastiel were written in Spain in 1482, as asserted by Gershom Scholem, or whether they were possibly composed on Italian soil after the Expulsion, as suggested by Moshe Idel,²⁰ remains in doubt, leaving unanswered questions of the nature of Hayyat's relationship to Alcastiel and the bent of his kabbalistic views prior to the expulsion. Notwithstanding these lacunae, Hayyat's ample autobiographical details beginning from the point of his expulsion²¹ attest to an interesting and complex confrontation between his own particular Iberian kabbalistic views, whether pre or post-expulsion cognized and constructed, and the philosophical form of kabbalah that he was to encounter upon his arrival

¹⁶ For more on this figure, see: Roland Goetschel, *Meir Ibn Gabbay: Le Discours de la Kabbale Espagnole*, Leuven: Peeters, 1981.

¹⁷ See, for example, *Avodat ha-Kodesh*, part 2, chapter 37, Jerusalem: Yerid ha-Sefarim, 2004, p. 205, in comparison to Alcastiel's letter, clause 2, p. 180 in "On the Knowledge of the kabbalah."

¹⁸ See: Scholem, "On the Knowledge of the kabbalah," pp. 171–173.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Idel, "Spanish kabbalah after the Expulsion," p. 167, note 4, and idem, "Encounters," p. 198.

²¹ For an analysis of these, see: Oron, "Autobiographical Elements."

in Italy. Whatever his prior views may have been and whenever and wherever his exchange with Alcastiel may have taken place, Hayyat's own testimony leaves no doubt about the fact that his seminal commentary on *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, entitled *Minhat Yehudah*, was written in Mantova, most probably between the years 1494 to 1496. The *terminus ad quem* is determined by Yohanan Alemanno's *Collectanaea*,²² which were completed in 1496 and which Moshe Idel has perceptively determined to contain lengthy passages copied from *Minhat Yehudah*.²³ The *terminus post quem* is determined by Hayyat's own account in his introduction to *Minhat Yehudah*, in which he tells of his departure from Naples upon the French invasion of that city in 1494, and his subsequent arrival in Venice, and shortly after, in Mantova. Hayyat recounts his meeting there of his fellow Spanish expellee Joseph Ya'avetz²⁴ who, along with "other respected wise men" encouraged him to write a commentary on *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*.

Seemingly by no dint of accident, Hayyat opens his famed autobiographical account of how he arrived at the meeting with Ya'avetz, which led to the eventual writing of his *Minhat Yehudah*, by recounting the fact that while still in Spain, he set out on the project of going from place to place collecting various fragments of Zoharic literature. He proceeded with this project until, according to his account, he had succeeded in gathering most of its parts. This collation and consolidation, in his opinion, is what had protected him in his trials and tribulations upon expulsion. Beginning with the tale of his Spanish Zoharic activities and their efficacy in his protection in order to explain how he ended up on Italian soil commenting upon *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, a pillar of Italian kabbalah, seems strange indeed. After all, it is not the *Zohar* that Hayyat is to explicitly treat, nor is it a specifically Spanish audience that he is to address. Nevertheless, upon further analysis it becomes clear that Hayyat sets out in his autobiographical account on a neatly organized agenda.

Moshe Idel has taught concerning Hayyat that "scholars must read the personal story of the kabbalist in its context, namely, as an illustration

²² Ms. Oxford Bodleian 2234, especially fols. 135a–165a.

²³ Idel, "Encounters," p. 204 and p. 342, note 57.

²⁴ For more on this important figure, see: Gedaliah Nigal, "The Opinions of Rabbi Joseph Ya'avetz Concerning Philosophy and Philosophizers, Torah and the Commandments" [Hebrew], *Eshel Be'er-Sheva*, 1, 1975, pp. 258–287, and Barzilay, *Between Reason and Faith*, pp. 133–149.

of the nature of the *Zohar*, a book relatively well known in Spain but almost unknown in Italy.” He continues, “History, to the extent it is mentioned, is introduced to prove the uniqueness of the mystical classical book, not vice versa.”²⁵ In Idel’s opinion,²⁶ Hayyat’s inclusion of personal history in his account does not seek to show any messianic change of thought at the hands of the Expulsion, as has been asserted by previous and contemporary scholars,²⁷ but rather aims to establish the supremacy of Spanish, Zoharic kabbalah in an Italian, non-Zoharic, philosophico-kabbalistic environment. Idel’s basic premise of cultural difference and polemical intent seems to be correct; nevertheless, in the actuality of execution, the picture becomes much more complex, paralleling the complexity of Hayyat’s own variegated cultural encounters. Indeed, the invocation of personal history commencing in the Zoharic meanderings of Hayyat in Spain, continuing with his travails of exile and his concurrent protection by the *Zohar*, and concluding with his commentary upon *Ma’arekhet ha-Elohut* while in Italy enunciates Hayyat’s own intellectual and cultural polemic as laid out at the end of the introduction. At the same time, however, it gives insight into the complex perceptions and intellectual developments that are to follow him throughout the course of his commentary, perhaps even more so than the polemic itself.

At the end of his introduction, Hayyat suggests extreme reticence in regard to the kabbalistic works of Isaac ibn Latif,²⁸ Abraham Abulafia, Shmuel ibn Motot, and the commentary on *Ma’arekhet ha-Elohut* by Reuven Zarfati,²⁹ whose author he does not know and which he calls “*Perush Zūlati*,” the commentary other than mine. In regard to the latter, Hayyat writes, “most of his words are not upright in my eyes,” for, among other reasons, “he thought to expound on it (i.e., *Ma’arekhet ha-Elohut*) with premises of philosophy, and this is not the

²⁵ Idel, “Encounters,” p. 201.

²⁶ The opinion is stated in “Encounters,” but is even more strongly emphasized in Idel’s *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 136–138.

²⁷ See, for example: Rachel Elijor, “Messianic Expectations,” p. 36.

²⁸ For more on this thinker and an analysis of the precise issue regarding his thought that bothered Hayyat, that is, in the words of Hayyat, that “he has one foot in and the other foot outside,” straddling philosophy and kabbalah, see: Sara O. Heller Wilensky, “Isaac Ibn Latif—Philosopher or Kabbalist?” See also eadem, “The *Guide* and the *Gate*.”

²⁹ For more on this interesting figure, see: Elqayam, *Topics in the Commentary of Rabbi Reuven Zarfati*.

way, nor is this the city.”³⁰ Notwithstanding the conventional use of this latter phrase as based on the Second Book of Kings, 6:19 in order to denote general impropriety, it is telling that Hayyat would refer to a euphemism mentioning “the city,” for as Moshe Idel has shown, all of the above philosophically driven kabbalistic authors enjoyed vast circulation in the area of Mantova. Indeed, Yohanan Alemanno, who sojourned in and was educated in Mantova, makes great use of the thinkers considered dubious by Hayyat in his own attempt to forge and propound a rational kabbalah, which he terms “the kabbalah that is understood by reason.”³¹ Hence, Hayyat’s proposition of discretion in regard to the aforementioned works, against which he advances the study of *Sefer Yetzira*, *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the *Zohar*, the books of Joseph Gikatilla and Shem Tov de Leon, the secrets of the Ramban, the books of Menahem Recanati, and finally *Ma’arekhet ha-Elohit* with Hayyat’s own commentary, can be seen as a not-so-subtle polemic against the likes of Alemanno and the rational form of kabbalah that was widespread in the province of Mantova. At the heart of this polemic stands Abulafia, against whose “false and fabricated imaginings from his heart,” kabbalistic interpretations of philosophy, and “fabricated combinations from his imaginative faculty” Hayyat wages the longest and harshest attack, without a doubt. To this purpose, he invokes the precedent castigation of Abulafia by Shlomo ben Aderet,³² painting a complex picture of opposites due to the fact that historically, the theosophical kabbalah in line with Aderet had won out in Spain, whereas the prophetic, speculatively more philosophically based kabbalah of Abulafia had taken root in Italy and held a great sway of influence, until and throughout Hayyat’s very own day.

Perhaps Alcastiel’s enjoinder to Hayyat to avoid philosophy had a profound effect upon the latter upon his arrival in Italy and his encounter with the rampant philosophical mysticism of that land. Perhaps, depending on when the questions and responsa were written, Hayyat’s encounter with philosophical kabbalah prompted him to speculative

³⁰ Introduction. “חשב לבארו עם הקדמות הפילוסופיא ולא זו הדרך ולא זו העיר.”

³¹ See: Idel, “The Study Program,” p. 309.

³² For more on the history of this castigation of Abulafia by Aderet and the polemic surrounding it, see Idel, “The Rashba and Abraham Abulafia: On the History of a Neglected Kabbalistic Polemic” [Hebrew], *Atara V’Haim: Studies in the Talmud and Medieval Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky*, edited by Daniel Boyarin, Shamma Friedman, Marc Hirshman, Menahem Schmelzer, Israel M. Ta-Shma, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000, pp. 235–251.

thinking. Or perhaps, unrelated to the philosophico-kabbalistic exchange with Alcastiel, which indeed receives no mention in *Minhat Yehudah*, Hayyat went through a conceptual change in awareness of his identity in his forced peregrinations starting in Spain and ending in Italy, and felt the need to assert his roots in the theosophical kabbalah of the Iberian peninsula. Whatever the case may be, Hayyat's thought does not remain as 'purist' in his *Minhat Yehudah* as it would seem at first glance, nor as strictly theosophical as he would like to propose it to be within his introduction to that work. Notwithstanding his particularistic division between "kabbalistic books that confuse the pure conviction"³³ by means of their philosophical premises and the more 'pristine' theosophical books, further scrutiny reveals strands within Hayyat's *Minhat Yehudah* that harken back to the very form of kabbalah that he sets out to criticize.

The first indication of Hayyat's more complex nature as a thinker lies in his agreement to comment upon *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, a work that indeed stems from the theosophical camp of Aderet, but which attempts to neutralize the mythical elements of theosophical kabbalah and which met with its widest popularity on Italian soil. As Efraim Gottlieb and Gershom Scholem have both shown, over a dozen commentaries were written on the book, and most of these were composed in Italy during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.³⁴ None of the commentaries that Scholem lists was written in Spain, and only one, that of Hayyat, was clearly composed by a Spanish thinker. According to Hayyat, he agreed to undertake the project of commenting on *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* due to his great esteem for the systematic nature of the book. In his own words, *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* "has ten times the reach over the other books of this wisdom (i.e., kabbalistic books), for they all speak of the holy *sefirot* but have closed the door, and it (i.e., the *Ma'arekhet*) has arisen to unfasten the lock."³⁵ In line with what would generally be perceived to be a more philosophical stance, for Hayyat, the exoteric, explanative nature of *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* makes it a great book, and his desire to further open up the wisdom of the kabbalah outlined therein

³³ *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, introduction by Hayyat. "ספרי קבלה המבלבלים הדעת הנק"א

³⁴ See Gottlieb, *Studies*, p. 576, and Scholem, "On the Problem of *Sefer Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*," especially pp. 181–184.

³⁵ *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, introduction. "יש לו עשר ידות על הספרים האחרים של זאת החכמה, כי כלם מדברים בספירות הקדושות אבל את הדלת סגרו והוא קם לפתוח המנעול."

compels him to comment upon it. Another reason for expounding upon *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* lies in Hayyat's desire to refute the existing commentary by Reuven Zarfati, but as Idel has observed, he silently incorporates significant passages from Zarfati's text into his own commentary, thereby also indirectly quoting the views of his main villain, Abulafia.³⁶ Moreover, his labeling of Zarfati's commentary with the term "*perush zulati*," whose oft employed acrostic in *Minhat Yehudah* is *paz*, pure gold, lends Zarfati's philosophico-kabbalistic exposition an air of respect, despite his possible subtle polemic in citing the *Ẓohar* on Psalm 19:11, which states that the words of Torah "are more precious than gold and than much pure gold (*mi-paz rav*)."³⁷ Hayyat, then, embodies a complex picture with stark criticism of philosophical kabbalah on the one hand, and a show of respect for, and even integration of ideas from that criticized form of kabbalah on the other.

One of the points in which Hayyat's dichotomy between criticism and acceptance comes to the fore in *Minhat Yehudah* lies in the very subject on which Alcastiel warns him to shy away from the enticements of philosophy, namely, the idea of the transmigration of souls. According to Moshe Idel, *sod ha-'ibbur*, or the secret of impregnation, a term that was classically associated by the kabbalistic school of Nahmanides with the theory of transmigration,³⁸ had been radically transformed by Abulafia, in accord with his intellectualist form of kabbalah.³⁹ Indeed, for Abulafia and his followers such as Alemanno, the supreme goal and highest human attainment lies in *devekut*, the conjunction of the human intellectual soul with its source in the divine, which leads to prophecy and a certain form of human immortality. Within this complex schema, the idea of peregrinations of human souls seems to become secondary at best, if not obsolete altogether. *'Ibbur*, as such, takes on a meaning in Abulafian thought that has nothing to do with transmigration. Rather, in Abulafian thought, *sod ha-'ibbur* denotes the flow of the divine intellectual efflux to the intellectualized human soul and the reception by the human intellectual and intellectualized soul of this efflux in the classical Aristotelian pattern of intellect-intelligible-intellection. In place

³⁶ Idel, "Religion, Thought and Attitudes," p. 132.

³⁷ *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, introduction, citing the *Ẓohar*, 3:149b. "הנחמדים מזהב ומפז רב וכו' ואלין אינון מלין דאורריתא."

³⁸ See Scholem, *kabbalah*, p. 345.

³⁹ For more on the idea of *sod ha-'ibbur* in Abulafia, see: Idel, *The Mystical Experience* [Hebrew], pp. 145–148.

of the 'impregnation' of a body by a separate and distinct soul in classical platonic and transmigrative terms, for Abulafia and his ilk *'ibbur* comes to convey the idea of the 'impregnation' of the passive human intellect by that of the active divine intellect, by which process the passive becomes active and, in a manner, the human becomes divine in a mystical situation of union.

Although Abulafia's interpretation of *sod ha-'ibbur* most certainly takes on this intellectualist, non-transmigratory flavor in his works such as *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah*, and *Imrei Shefer*, there is strong evidence to support the fact that he not only knew about the Nahmanidean connection of *'ibbur* to transmigration, but that he esteemed it greatly. In his epistle treatise *V'zot l'Yehuda*, written to Judah Solomon of Barcelona for the purposes of outlining the secrets of kabbalah for the latter, Abulafia explicitly treats the idea of *'ibbur* as a form of metempsychosis. There he writes:

The masters of kabbalah, who know the secret of levirate marriage from the matter of Judah and Tamar his daughter-in-law with Er and Onan and Shelah, and from the matter of Elimelech and Naomi and Mahalon and Kilyon with Boaz and Ruth, and the secret of "there is a son born to Naomi"⁴⁰ and the like, such as the matter "and God impregnated"⁴¹ Moses through the secret of Abel, they are the ones who know the secret of the ladder, more so than everyone.⁴²

The references to the secret of levirate marriage and all of its biblical examples, and to the secret of Moses and Abel, strongly betray a transmigrationist reading. While it may be argued that Abulafia is simply displaying the knowledge of a competing theory that he ultimately rejects, his statement that those who know this theory "are the ones who know the secret of the ladder more so than everyone," that is, that they are the ones who best know the secret of mystical ascent and descent, suggests otherwise. Abulafia seems to have valued the transmigrationist idea of *'ibbur* as laid down in Nahmanidean kabbalah, quite highly. This is corroborated by a later statement in the same epistle:

⁴⁰ Ruth 4:17.

⁴¹ Deuteronomy 3:26.

⁴² *V'zot l'Yehuda*, p. 24. "בעלי הקבלה, היודעים סוד היבום מענין יהודה ותמר כלתו עם ער ואונן ושילה, ומענין אלימלך ונעמי ומחלון וכליון ובוועז ורות וסוד יולד בן לנעמי והדומה לו, כענין ויתעבר במשה בסוד הבל הם היודעים סוד הסולם, יותר מכולם."

The holy Rav [Nahmanides] mentions the matter of the secret of impregnation (*sod ha-'ibbur*) in his commentary on Job, in the arguments of Elihu.⁴³ To settle the opinion of the wise man [Nahmanides]: In the matter of a righteous man for whom it is good, he is one who is completely [good], and a sentence of righteousness is recognizable to all, from the beginning of thought. And thus it is with a wicked person for whom it is bad; there is no difficulty of thought. But with the inversion of the order [there is a problem], for according to this, there is a need to renew reality from the inverse two or three times, as the Rav [i.e., Nahmanides] hinted also in his book *The Doctrine of Man* in its "*Sha'ar ha-Gemul*".⁴⁴

The connection of *sod ha-'ibbur* to the concept of theodicy as related to the book of Job has clear implications of metempsychosis. This is clearly expressed as Abulafia's intention here, by his assertion of the "need to renew reality" two or three times. Moreover, his reliance upon Nahmanides and his air of extreme respect for "the holy Rav" suggest not only a familiarity with the Nahmanidean connection of *'ibbur* to transmigration, but a reverence for this reading of the doctrine as well. This indicates a complexity in Abulafia's thought that goes beyond a merely intellectualized reading of *'ibbur* that purges its transmigratory implications.

Whatever the case may be for Abulafia's own complex thought concerning *'ibbur*, in later thought the intellectualist and transmigratory patterns converge. Indeed, in an interesting passage that is quite consonant with this philosophical idea of intellection, the author of *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* states that the soul is "a simple intellect that has no composition and does not suffer loss, and therefore it will conjoin and will transmigrate until it finds a place for God to be its mate."⁴⁵ In other words, the soul as an imperishable intellectual entity must be properly located in order for it to achieve perfection in its state of union with the divine. In order to affect this state, the soul may transmigrate and attach to various bodies. The author of *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* continues, in the vein of his predecessors, including Abulafia: "And I have already noted... that the expedient (of transmigration) applies only two

⁴³ Nahmanides' commentary on Job, chapters 32–36, in *The Writings of Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman*, pp. 101, 105, 109.

⁴⁴ *V'zot l'Yehuda*, p. 39. "הרב הקדוש מזכיר ענין סוד העבור בפירוש איוב בטענות, בענין צדיק וטוב לו הוא אשר גמור, ומשפט צדק ניכר לכל אליהו ליישב דעת החכם, בענין צדיק וטוב לו, ואין מחשבת הקושיא אלא בהיפוך הסדר, כי על בתחילת המחשבה, וכן רשע ורע לו, ואין מחשבת הקושיא אלא בהיפוך הסדר, כי על כן צריך לחדש מציאות מן ההפוך פעמים שלש, כמו שרמז הרב ג"כ בספרו תורת האדם בשער הגמול שלו."

⁴⁵ *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, p. 251. "הוא שכל פשוט שאין לו הרכבה ואינו נפסד, ולכן תתצטרף ותתגלגל עד אשר תמצא מקום ליי להיות לה בן זוג."

or three times, and it (i.e., the soul) will not return a fourth time.”⁴⁶ Hayyat comments upon this significant passage, stating, “Know that the secret of *gilgul* comes from the attribute of *hesed*, mercy, as is hinted (by the fact that) its number adds up to *gilgul*.”⁴⁷ According to the rules of *gematria*, Hebrew numerology, the words *hesed* and *gilgul* each add up to seventy-two,⁴⁸ thereby indicating a conceptual connection between them. This connection, for Hayyat, lies in the idea that *gilgul* comes from God’s merciful side, in that it gives the human more than one chance to achieve perfection.

Hayyat continues with even more complex and sophisticated word-play, and whether or not he is cognizant of his repudiation of Abulafia’s ideational transformation in works like *Hayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba* and his support of the transmigrationist idea in the latter’s *V’zot l’Yehuda*, he invokes the idea of *‘ibbur*. He writes concerning the concept of transmigration:

Above in emanation it is called *‘ibbur* (which is spelled with the letters) *‘ayin-bet resh-yod-vav*, for three times *‘ayin-bet* are *resh-yod-vav* letters,⁴⁹ and the (divine) name *‘ayin-bet* that comes from the three verses “And he went out,” etc.⁵⁰ is in mercy,⁵¹ and when you understand this you will understand the verse “*Uv’chen*, And so I saw the wicked buried and come;”⁵² *uv’chen* adds up to *resh-yod-vav*⁵³ for it is useful, and there is a hint here to this hidden secret, for from the side of *‘ibbur* comes *gilgul*, that is to say, from the side of the *‘ayin-bet* (divine) names to whose number *uv’chen* adds up⁵⁴ and who have *resh-yod-vav* letters.⁵⁵ And therefore *gilgul* is until three times, from the power of the three mentioned, which are in the letters *‘ayin-bet*.⁵⁶

⁴⁶ Ibid. “זכרתי... כי אין המדה רק פעמים ושלש ועל ארבעה לא ישיבנה.”

⁴⁷ Ibid. “דע כי סוד הגלגול בא ממדת החסד העולה לגלגול במספרו רמזו.”

⁴⁸ As will be shown, the number seventy-two itself has divine significance for Hayyat in relation to *gilgul*.

⁴⁹ $\text{רי"ו} = 3 \times \text{ע"ב} = 216$

⁵⁰ The three verses are Exodus 14:19–21, which are successive and which each contain a total of 72 letters.

⁵¹ $\text{רי"ו} = 216 = 72 \times 3$ As has been noted above, $\text{חסד} = 72$ [for the three verses] = 216

⁵² Ecclesiastes, 8:10. “ובכן ראיתי רשעים קברים ובאו.”

⁵³ That is to say, $\text{רי"ו} = 3 \times \text{בכ"ן} = 216$

⁵⁴ $\text{ע"ב} = 72 = \text{בכ"ן}$

⁵⁵ That is, the total of the three verses in Exodus together have 216 letters.

⁵⁶ *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohit*, p. 251. “למעלה באצילות נקרא עיבור ע"ב רי"ו, כי ג' פעמים. ע"ב הם רי"ו אותיות, ושם ע"ב היוצא מן שלשה פסוקים ויסע וכו' הוא בחסד, וכשתבין זה תבין ובכן ראיתי רשעים קבורים ובאו, ובכן עולה רי"ו כי הו' שמושית, ורמז בכאן הסוד הנסתר הזה, כי מצד עיבור בא גלגול, רוצה לומר מצד ע"ב שמות אשר ובכן עולה למספרם ובהם רי"ו אותיות, ולכן הגלגול עולה עד ג' פעמים מכח השלוש הנזכר אשר באותיות ע"ב.”

This rather complex passage based on the seventy-two letter name of God⁵⁷ ties together the ideas of *'ibbur*, divine mercy, or *hesed*, and the traditional ascription of the number three for the amount of times that one can possibly transmigrate.⁵⁸ Under the rubric of *'ibbur*, which takes place in the higher world of emanation and may refer to the efflux of God's power through the radiation and return of the soul, God has mercy upon sinners by allowing their souls three chances of repair and perfection. This idea of the efflux of the soul into creation and its influx back into the higher realms as connected to the number three is substantiated by an earlier passage in which Hayyat comments upon *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*'s assertion that the three upper *sefirot* constitute "the internal workings of the secret of transmigration of the souls."⁵⁹ There, Hayyat comments: "From the power of *gilgul* of these three points, which are like a *segol*, radiates the *gilgul* into lower bodies, for from there the souls came and to them (i.e., these three points) they will return."⁶⁰ Bodily *gilgul*, then, starts and ends in a theosophical process of *gilgul*, termed by Hayyat in the above passage as *'ibbur*. It is interesting to note that while Hayyat does not explicitly state the fact, *gevurah*, the theosophical counterfoil to *hesed*, numerically equals 216, the number of three times seventy-two that plays predominantly into the above passage. Coupled with the fact that the three verses brought from Exodus deal with redemption through separation, this may have implications for *hesed* which, after three failed times, turns to *gevurah*. This may be the explanation of his citation of the verse from Ecclesiastes, "And so I saw the wicked buried and come," whose burial and re-coming he relates not to the numerical value of *hesed*, but to that of three times *hesed*, or finally, of *gevurah*. As Hayyat later states, *gilgul* applies "until one thousand times with the righteous, and it is not so with the wicked, but rather is until three times alone."⁶¹ Mercy through the possibility of redemption, if not properly heeded after three times, thereby allowing for more mercy, turns to judgment through separation.

⁵⁷ For more on the history of the seventy-two letter name of God, see: Huss, "All You Need is LAV," especially pp. 612–615.

⁵⁸ The most oft cited verses in support of this argument of three are Job, 33:29–30, verses which Hayyat interestingly refrains from citing.

⁵⁹ *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, p. 76. "זהו פנימיות סוד גלגול הנפשות"

⁶⁰ Ibid. "מכח גלגול ג' נקודות הללו שהם כסגול, נתפשט הגלגול בגופים התחתונים, מפני כי משם באו הנשמות ואליהם ישובו."

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 252. "מתפשט עד אלף זמנן בצדיקים ולא כן ברשעים כי אם עד ג' לבד."

Ironically, Hayyat seems to be drawing upon Abulafia's prophetic-kabbalistic *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba* in his above theosophical, seventy-two letter divine-name-based characterization of *'ibbur* and *gilgul* which itself goes against Abulafia's non-transmigrationist *'ibbur* model of intellection as laid out in that work. Indeed, in his introduction to *Minhat Yehudah* in which he warns against the works of Abulafia, Hayyat admits to having read *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*,⁶² which he characterizes as "a commentary on the seventy-two letter name whose execution is entirely written in circles in order to alarm the readers."⁶³ No other source is mentioned by Hayyat for the theory of the seventy-two letter name of God, and while the *Zohar* and other sources that may have been available to Hayyat discuss the issue⁶⁴ and may have acted as background, his overall language seems to be much closer to that of Abulafia, and his theory seems to derive from a combination of the two trends of thought. Indeed, the *Zohar* speaks in a rather mythical language, stating that "at the time that the moon was completed from the All, she (i.e., the moon) inherited seventy-two holy names from three sides."⁶⁵ That is, when the lowest *sefirah* of *Malkhut* was completed through conjunction with the upper *sefirot*, it received seventy-two names from three sides. The *Zohar* goes on to explain that these three sides are actually the three *sefirot* of *Hesed*, *Gevurah*, and *Tif'eret*, which would in effect constitute 216 names and would accord with Hayyat's dialectic explication of the interplay between *Hesed* and *Gevurah* through the medium of the number 216. As such, this text may have provided background for Hayyat's overall theory. Nevertheless, he does not mention the *Zohar* in this context, and his own language is far from the mythical depiction in the Zoharic text.

In contradistinction, Abulafia's language is much more speculative in character, paralleling the speculative language of Hayyat. While

⁶² He mistakenly calls it *Sefer ha-Shem*, perhaps confusing it with the work of Eleazar of Worms of that name, which indeed acted as a major source for Abulafia's theories in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, and combinatory charts from which Hayyat himself, perhaps unwittingly, later copies into his own commentary. See: *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, p. 339.

⁶³ *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, introduction. "הוא פירוש לשם בן ע"ב עשאו כלו כתוב בעגולים. להבהיל את המעינים." Alemanno refers to *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba* by the name, *Sefer ha-Iggulim*, *The Book of Circles*. See references to this in Idel, "The Study Program," p. 311, footnote 68.

⁶⁴ See, for example, *Zohar*, 2:51b–52a, which contains the longest Zoharic discussion of this topic.

⁶⁵ *Zohar*, 2:51a. "בההיא שעתא אשתלים סיהרא מכלא, וירתא שבעין ותרין שמהן קדישין בתלת סטריין."

Abulafia's seventy-two letter name project in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba* rests on the encouragement of active contemplation in order to effect ecstatic change, as opposed to Hayyat's more purely explanative enterprise of cosmic processes in order to stir positive action and righteousness, both of these thinkers take the idea of God's efflux in or to the soul and the return of that soul to God as their ultimate point of departure. Indeed, according to Abulafia, the entire endeavor of contemplating the divine name is "to confer a divine intellectual efflux upon the soul in order to reward it and to punish it for all the actions of the body that is conducted by it."⁶⁶ This is affected by a very complicated circular combinatory method that involves the *gilgul*⁶⁷ of the 216 letters in the three verses in Exodus that comprise the seventy-two letter name times three. As for Hayyat, for Abulafia this number three in connection to *gilgul* relates to the three-pointed "*segol*, who's secret" he writes, "is *gal, gal, gal*."⁶⁸ The numerical value of the Hebrew word *segol* equals ninety-nine, which is equivalent to the numerical value of *gal*, 'revolution', times three. Hence, the three verses of seventy-two letters, making up 216 total letters, relate to the three pointed *segol*, which relates to three revolutions, or *gilgulim*.

While Abulafia's project is much different than that of Hayyat, the language of the two thinkers is very similar, including their descriptions of the derivation of the seventy-two letter divine name from the three verses in Exodus.⁶⁹ Both are linguistically much more similar to each other than either is to the same portrayal in the *Zohar*. This similarity of language, coupled with Hayyat's explicit mention of *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba* in connection to the theory of the seventy-two letter name of God, points to the possible influence of the latter upon the former. Hayyat may have been influenced in his argument by both the *Zohar* and by Abulafia, especially considering that in the above passage, he freely switches from a discussion of the seventy-two letter *name*, indicating a more Abulafian approach, to the seventy-two divine *names*, in accord with the Zoharic passage discussed.⁷⁰ Hayyat seems to be affecting a

⁶⁶ *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, p. 81. "לתת שפע שכלי אלהי על הנפש לגומלה ולהענישה. על כל מעשה הגוף המתנהג ממנה."

⁶⁷ This word, profusely employed by Abulafia in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, signifies the circular combinatory 'revolution' of letters, and not the *gilgul* of the soul into and out of bodies.

⁶⁸ *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, p. 145. "הנה סגול סודו ג"ל ג"ל ג"ל."

⁶⁹ See: *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, p. 58 and p. 68.

⁷⁰ See footnote 64 above.

complex conjunction in his own mode of thought, and indeed, he seems to be taking Abulafian theory as set forth in *Hayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba* and transforming it to fit with a more theosophical model that, like Abulafia’s earlier *V’zot l’Yehuda*, affirms *gilgul* to be the transmigration of souls. In a complex twist, Hayyat’s theosophical polemic against contemplative kabbalah itself not only relies upon theosophical models, it incorporates and hinges upon the very language and ideas contained within that form of kabbalah against which he polemicizes and, considering *V’zot l’Yehuda*, may very well inadvertently be affirming some of the complex ideas that Abulafia himself held to be true.

Similar to the revolutionary connection that Hayyat seems to be making between *gilgul* and Abulafia’s ‘revolutionary’ method of interpreting and utilizing the seventy-two letter divine name, in another place he links the idea of *gilgul* to *temurah*, a hermeneutic device of letter permutations that stood as a cornerstone for prophetic kabbalah. Indeed, Abulafia writes:

Temurah, that is, the exchange of one letter for another, and its substitution, and its replacement for another, like the letters ‘a[leph], h[et], h[c], ‘a[yin], and the similar letters, all have substitutes. And this is a glorious lore, to be done everywhere in an appropriate manner, without adding or diminishing.... and by means of these things the secrets of the Torah will be revealed, but not in any other ways.⁷¹

This interpretive method involves the manipulation of the letters of a single word, such as the *atbash* technique of replacing ‘alef, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with taf, the last, bet, the second letter, with shin, the second to last letter, et cetera. The most famous example of this, which was used as a precedential proof by later mystics, lies in the prophetic book of Jeremiah, in which reference is made to the unknown kingdom of “*Sheshakh*.”⁷² Under the rules of *atbash*, this mysterious kingdom of *Sheshakh* becomes the well-known biblical empire of *Bavel*, Babylon. As is evinced by the above passage, *temurah* held great sway for Abulafia and for prophetic kabbalah in general.

Temurah occupies an important role for Hayyat as well, and despite his former criticism of Abulafia for depending upon linguistically “fabricated combinations from his imaginative faculty” for the latter’s

⁷¹ *Sefer Get ha-Shemot*, ms. Oxford 1862, fol. 98a–b, translated by and quoted in Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 265–266.

⁷² See Jeremiah, 25:26, and 51:41.

own brand of kabbalah, Hayyat turns to *temurah* and to the theory of letter combinations in general in order to explain the workings of the universe. In his thought, the permutative technique of *temurah* itself becomes permuted to include within itself the theory of *gilgul*, and in a fairly complex passage that not only incorporates prophetic-kabbalistic language, but goes far beyond Hayyat's own restrictions and interprets kabbalistic ideas through philosophical means, he writes:

Temurah (or permutation) stands for the power of passing-away (or lack) and of coming-to-be (or being), for with each existent, the passing-away (or lack) precedes the coming-to-be (or being). And from the power of *temurah* "a generation goes and a generation comes."⁷³ For if it were not thus, then the things born from them⁷⁴ would exist forever. And in this manner, from the *temurah* the tree has the power to renew its fruit, in the same place and on the same branch from which fell the ripe fruit. And also sometimes, the fruit itself, which fell to the ground, returns to grow a root and a tree, and this is a hint at the souls that are transmigrated. And all of this is done through the power of the letters, in their weighing, and in their permutation, and in their combining. Just as from the connection of the four elements is made a new structure and temperament that was not within the potentiality of each one of the separate (elements) in itself, such is this idea with the combination of letters with each other; a new potentiality is created from them and a temperament that was not within each one standing alone is innovated (by their conjunction).⁷⁵

Despite his previously stated reticence to interpret kabbalistic matters in a philosophical manner, here Hayyat's language of each existent's dependence upon 'passing-away' and 'coming-to-be' as related to the conjunction and dissolution of the elements highly parallels the exposition of Aristotle in his "On Generation and Corruption". There, Aristotle asserts, "Coming-to-be and passing-away result from the consilience and the dissolution of the many kinds. That is why Empedocles too uses language to this effect, when he says 'There is

⁷³ Ecclesiastes, 1:4.

⁷⁴ The meaning here is unclear. Perhaps he means to say from the letters, which in this passage take on an ontologically divine status as the building blocks of creation.

⁷⁵ *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, pp. 26–27. "התמורה לכת ההעדר וההויה, כי בכל ההויות, כי לולי כן היו הדברים הנולדים ההעדר קודם להויה, ומכח התמורה דור הולך ודור בא, כי לולי כן היו הדברים הנולדים מהם קיימים לעולם, ובזה האופן מהתמורה יש כח לאילן לחדש פרי באותו מקום מהענף אשר נפל ממנו הפרי המבושל, וגם לפעמים הפרי עצמו אשר נפל לארץ חוזר לעשות שרש ואילן, וזה רמז לנפשות המגולגלות, וכל זה נעשה בכח האותיות בשקולן ובתמורתן ובצירופן, כמו שמחבור היסודות הארבעה נעשה בנין ומזג חדש שלא היה בכח כל אחד מהנפרדים לבדו, כך הענין הזה בצירוף האותיות זו עם זו נתחדש מהם כח והמזגה מחדשת שלא היתה בכל אחת מהם בהיותה לבדה."

no coming-to-be of anything, but only a mingling and a divorce of what has been mingled.’”⁷⁶ He continues, “It follows, as an obvious corollary, that a single matter must always be assumed as underlying the contraries in any change—whether change of place, or growth and diminution, or alteration; further, that the being of this matter and the being of alteration must stand and fall together.”⁷⁷ For Hayyat, the letters come to replace the elements as the building blocks of creation, turning the philosophically charged idea into a mystical formula based on the power of the Hebrew language. Nevertheless, the message remains the same: The building blocks eternally remain, while the passing-away and the coming-to-be of existents depend upon the dissolution and the combination of those building blocks, respectively. Existential lack and being remain two sides of the same coin, whose constant revolution depends upon *temurah*, the permutation of the divine elements of creation, which for Hayyat, are both represented by and have their ontological existence in the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

In an interesting turn from both prophetic-kabbalistic ideas of the hypostatically divine nature of the Hebrew letters and Aristotelian ideas of ontological existence as based on the combination and conjunction of the elements, Hayyat links the concept of passing-away and coming-to-be in *temurah* to the doctrine of *gilgul*. For him, *temurah* precedes and takes expression in this doctrine. It is not the verse in Ecclesiastes which states that “a generation goes and a generation comes” that takes precedence in proving the veracity of *gilgul*, as it typically does for other kabbalistic thinkers, but it is the ontically divine device of *temurah* that takes precedence for Hayyat in allowing for the transmigrationist efficacy of the Ecclesiastical statement.

Hayyat explains this idea of *gilgul* as a specific doctrine of passing-away and coming-to-be that is rooted in the divine expedient of *temurah* by referring to the Bahiric image of the tree that is All.⁷⁸ While he does not explicitly cite the *Bahir* in the above passage, his phraseology of the tree that produces fruit, which is a hint at the production of souls, unmistakably mirrors characteristic language found in the twelfth-century Provencal text.⁷⁹ That he takes this imagery from the

⁷⁶ Aristotle, “On Generation and Corruption,” *The Complete Works*, p. 513.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ For more on the tree as an important symbol of ‘power’ in kabbalistic literature, see: Garb, *Manifestations of Power*, pp. 282–283.

⁷⁹ See, for example: Abrams, *The Book Bahir*, p. 170, ¶ 85.

Bahir is not such a far-fledged assumption, considering the fact that in his introduction, it stands as one of his recommended books of kabbalistic study. Moreover, as Daniel Abrams has shown, Hayyat was highly familiar with the text, and cites it at least eighteen times throughout *Minhat Yehudah*.⁸⁰ Thus, it is reasonable to assume that he was relying on the *Bahir* in his above description, and that five-hundred years before the publication of the ground-breaking researches of Elliot Wolfson,⁸¹ Hayyat already surmised that the tree does not symbolize the ten potencies that comprise the divine pleroma of theosophical kabbalah as thought by later kabbalists and researchers alike,⁸² but “is the ontic source of all being, or more specifically of human souls.”⁸³ In Hayyat’s characterization, the fruits that fall from the tree can re-grow into new trees, signifying the souls that fall from their ontic source in God and through the merciful device of *gilgul* are given the chance to re-grow into new, possibly fruit-bearing entities. All of this is affected through *temurah*, which indicates that for Hayyat, the Hebrew letters have an ontological status that is at least on par with the original tree. Moreover, in his thought, the linguistic methods that became central to his prophetic-kabbalistic rivals actually hold divine import for the workings of the universe, and are reflected, in the Aristotelian manner of passing-away and coming-to-be, in the doctrine of *gilgul*, as substantiated by the Bahiric symbol of the tree that is All. In this unique thinker who is thought to be classically “theosophical” and set against both prophetic kabbalah and philosophical interpretations of kabbalah, non-theosophical Bahiric elements, linguistic kabbalah, and Aristotle all ironically positively meet around the idea of *gilgul neshamot*.

In a later passage in *Minhat Yehudah*, Hayyat returns to the image of the tree, to which he adds the image of a candle, in order to explain the complex, philosophically tinged question of resurrection in connection to the doctrine of *gilgul*. This question, addressed by Abarbanel as well,⁸⁴ has to do with the multiple bodies into which one soul transmigrates and for which this single soul acts as an individual form at various points in time. “There is here a great and strong question concerning these bodies,” writes Hayyat. “What will be for them at the point of resurrection?”

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

⁸¹ See Wolfson, “The Tree That is All,” pp. 63–88.

⁸² Indeed, Hayyat makes absolutely no mention of the *sefirot* in the above passage.

⁸³ Wolfson, “The Tree That is All,” p. 65.

⁸⁴ See above, pp. 111, 114.

For the simple thought is that the soul will only come into one of them.”⁸⁵ According to Hayyat, this cannot be, for “just as the Holy One, blessed is He, executes extra mercy with the righteous in regard to the matter of *gilgul* that extends (for them) until the thousandth generation, something that is not the case for the wicked, so it is fitting that they should also receive mercy in that each one’s holy body, which was not made unclean, should enjoy the benefit of resurrection. (This should be the case) for the first, and the second, and the third, and even until the thousandth (body).”⁸⁶ If God has mercy on the souls of the righteous, as displayed already by the entire device of *gilgul*, its connection to the side of *hesed*, and its openness far beyond three times for the righteous, then it only follows that He should have mercy on their bodies as well. In order to explain, Hayyat turns to the images of the tree and the candle, explaining that during the time of resurrection, “branches will spread out from the last body to the others, like the lighting of a candle from another candle, which (in its lighting) does not diminish at all.”⁸⁷ Here, Hayyat seems to be drawing directly from Alcastiel’s responsa,⁸⁸ which state that at the time of the final resurrection, “branches will emanate from it (i.e., from the soul) like the image of a candle to a candle, and they will spread out to the bodies...it will be like a tree, and branches will sprawl from it.”⁸⁹ Interestingly, Hayyat rejects other assertions of Alcastiel, such as the transmigration of the souls of

⁸⁵ *Ma’arekhet ha-Elohit*, p. 253. “יש כאן שאלה גדולה וחזקה על הגופים האלה מה תהא מהם בתחיית המתים, כי פשיטא שהנשמה לא תבא אלא באחד מהם.”

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* “כמו שהקב"ה עושה חסד יתרה עם הצדיקים בענין הגלגול שתתפשט עד אלף דור מה שאין כן ברשעים, כך ראוי שיקבלו חסד גם בזה שגופם הקדוש אשר לא נתטנף יתהנה מתחיית המתים גם הראשון גם השני גם השלישי; ואפילו עד אלף.”

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* “כי ענפים יתפשטו מהגוף האחרון אל האחרים כמדליק נר מנר מבלי שיחסר.” Compare this to the *Sifre* on Numbers 11:17, which discusses Moses’ empowering of the seventy elders with prophecy, and which may have been the source of this metaphor for Hayyat and Alcastiel: “To what can Moses be compared at that moment?—to a candle of the menorah from which are lit many candles without diminishing any of its light. Similarly, Moses’ wisdom was not diminished” (Quoted in: Verman, “Reincarnation and Theodicy,” p. 409). Moshe Idel points out that the candle image as a symbol for an emanation that does not diminish its source is also found in the *Dialogue with Trypho* of the first century Church apologist Justin Martyr, preserving an ancient Jewish motif that made its way into kabbalistic literature. See: Idel, “The Secret of Impregnation as Metempsychosis in kabbalah,” p. 25.

⁸⁸ This lends credence to Scholem’s earlier dating of the exchange between Hayyat and Alcastiel.

⁸⁹ “יתאצלו ממנה ענפים כדמות נר מנר ויתפשטו על הגופות...תהיה כמו אילן וישתרנו ממנה ענפים.”

non-Jews,⁹⁰ but here accepts Alcastiel's metaphors of the tree and the candle full-heartedly.

Hayyat's acceptance of Alcastiel's tree metaphor may have to do with his earlier usage of the Bahiric tree imagery of the fallen fruit of the souls that then grows into distinct entities, which fits well with the idea of the 'branching' of the soul at the end of times. His acceptance of the candle metaphor and the ultimate rejection of the possibility of *gilgul* into non-Jews may have to do with a distinctly Jewish interpretation that he gives to the idea of the candle in relation to the soul, which may be acting as a subtle polemic against a previous tree metaphor proposed by Alcastiel. For the latter, the "seven commandments that were commanded to the sons of Noah (i.e., the non-Jews)⁹¹ are the branches of the tree of life,"⁹² and play a role in the stages and processes of *gilgul* in that they lead back to the roots of the tree of life in Judaism. Outside branches that lead away from the roots are reflected in the individual forms that a soul may take in its transmigrations. Alcastiel writes:

Sometimes (a soul) deviates from straightness according to its earlier actions, and it remains for it to clean a little from itself. And it will go (i.e. transmigrate) into a bastard, or a sullied one,⁹³ or a regular working citizen, or a complete gentile, according to its being drawn after the levels of the external tree. And there are those who will correct themselves, and the branches of that tree are removed completely, or mostly, from themselves, and they will correct themselves in the latter (manifestations). And there are those that will add offense to their sins, and will destroy themselves for eternity.⁹⁴

The further one branches away from the straight and narrow path of the tree of life, which is the Torah, the greater are his chances for transmigrating into a marginalized, or even non-Jewish form of existence.

⁹⁰ To this he adds the absurdity, in his opinion, of the assertion of transmigration into and out of animals. See *Minhat Yehudah*, p. 253.

⁹¹ For more on the seven Noahide laws and their connection to the idea of 'righteous gentiles' (which Alcastiel later discusses, as will be shown), see footnote 81 in chapter 1, above.

⁹² "On the Knowledge of the kabbalah," p. 181. **שבע מצות בני נח... הם ענפי עץ החיים.**

⁹³ Literally, *halal*, a term used for a child who is born from the union of a priest, a *Cohen*, and a woman who is forbidden to him. See Leviticus 21:7, and Kiddushin, 4:6.

⁹⁴ "On the Knowledge of the kabbalah," p. 194. **לפעמים יוצא מן היושר לפי מעשיו הראשונים ונשאר לנקות ממנו קצת ויבא בממזר או בחלל או בנתין או בגוי גמור לפי המשכו אחר מדרגות האילן החיצוני. ויש מי שיתקן ובטל ממנו ענפי האילן ההוא בהחלט או על הרוב ויתקן באחרונה. ויש מי שיוסיף על חטאתו פשע להשמידו עדי עד.**

If he continues to branch away from the tree of life through further offense and sin within that marginalized form of existence, then he will acquire total and eternal destruction for himself. Through refinement, however, one can return to the 'internal' tree of life, beginning with the seven Noahide laws, which are the branches. At this point, he merits "a body that is more fittingly close to the 'holy', but he still comes (i.e., transmigrates) into a gentile, and is one of 'the righteous among the gentiles.'"⁹⁵ If he purifies himself still further, then he will merit another transmigration, and "will become Jewish by way of *gilgul*,"⁹⁶ thereby returning to holiness and to his root in the tree of life. Within this schema, the marginalized and the non-Jews play a very important, albeit unsavory role in the process of repair and the opportunity to achieve greater holiness as afforded by the expedient of *gilgul*.

Hayyat rejects this notion completely, stating that "it is not enough (that there are those who state that souls transmigrate) into animals, but (some) even (say) into someone from one of the other nations, and the matter is difficult."⁹⁷ As proof against this notion, he quotes Exodus 21: 7–8, which states:

If a man sell his daughter to be a maidservant, she shall not go out as the menservants do. If she is wicked in the eyes of her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall not have the right to sell her to a strange nation, since he broke faith with her.⁹⁸

According to Hayyat's reading of this passage, the "daughter" represents the soul, and the "master" represents God. If the soul is wicked in the eyes of God, then it is allowed to be redeemed by means of the three *gilgulim* which God affords to it. These three *gilgulim* are related to the three provisions that a man must grant to his wife according to Jewish law,⁹⁹ and if this does not work to redeem the soul it shall not be sold to a strange nation, meaning that it shall not transmigrate into a non-Jewish body.

⁹⁵ Ibid. "ראוי שיתגלגל פעם אחרת במציאות גוף יותר ראוי קרוב אל הקדש אבל עדן הוא בא בגיזת והוא מחסידי אומות העולם."

⁹⁶ Ibid. "יזדקק פעם אחרת לבא בקהל אחר שיתגייר על דרך גלגול."

⁹⁷ *Minhat Yehudah*, p. 253. "לא די בחיות אלא אפי' באחד משאר האומות וקשה הדבר." "וכי-ימכר איש את-בתו לאמה לא תצא כצאת העבדים: אם-רעה בעיני אדניה אשר-לא יעדה והפדה לעם נכרי לא-ימשל למכרה בבגדו-בה."

⁹⁹ שואר כסות ועונה, literally, food, clothing and sexual intercourse. This is derived from Exodus, 21:10, and later came to be a basic principle of Jewish law.

In connection to Hayyat's particularistically Jewish conception of *gilgul*, which goes against Alcastiel's more inclusive tree metaphor, Hayyat relates to the candle metaphor used by both him and Alcastiel in conjunction with the tree metaphor in order to explain the phenomenon of resurrection in relation to *gilgul*. There, he posits an exclusively Jewish image of the candle in relation to the soul and its migrations. In connection to the righteous, he writes:

The soul is called a candle (*ner*), for in its being complete in the 248 positive commandments, it adheres to the *du-partzufin* and is made an enlightening candle (*ner me'ir*). For the 248 commandments with the Holy One, blessed is He and His *Shekhinah* amount to the sum of *ner*, candle. And according to this, the soul that lacks a commandment is faulty and is not a complete, lit candle before the great blazing torch (i.e., the *Shekhinah*). . . . and for this purpose it enters into *gilgul* until it will be complete with all of the positive commandments. And since it does not enter into *gilgul* from the side of sins and offenses but in order to complete itself further than what it was at the beginning, it is suitable that this measure will extend for them (i.e., for the righteous) until the thousandth generation.¹⁰⁰

For Hayyat, the measure of *gilgul* has two purposes, to allow for the correction by sinners of the 365 negative commandments, and to allow for the correction by the righteous of the 248 positive commandments. In both cases, it has an objective aimed at specifically Jewish souls, and only with the completion of the latter does that soul truly merit the distinction of 'candle.' This he shows numerically, for with the completion of the 248 positive commandments, the soul enters into conjunction with the complete and conjoined masculine and feminine aspects of God, which are two potencies. These two divine potencies plus the 248 positive commandments equal 250, which is the numerical value of *ner*, candle. In order to reach this level of conjunction with the divine through the performance of all of the positive commandments, the righteous, who have already overcome the negative commandments, are afforded up to a thousand opportunities. Within this image of the candle inheres a possible subtle polemic against Alcastiel's allowance of transmigration into gentiles in his own tree metaphor of the workings of *gilgul*. Hayyat fights metaphor with metaphor, and his final acceptance of Alcastiel's

¹⁰⁰ *Minhat Yehudah*, p. 252. "הגשמה נקראת נר, כי בהיותה שלימה ברמ"ח מצות עשה מתדבקת עם דו פרצופין ונעשית נר מאיר, שרמ"ח מצות עם קב"ה ושכינתיה עולים לחשבון נר. ולפי זה הגשמה שהיא חסרה מאי זו מצוה היא בעלת מום איננה נר דולקת שלם לפני האבוקה הגדולה... ולזה באה בגלגול עד שתהיה שלימה מכל מצות עשה, ומאחר שלא בא בגלגול מצד חטאים ופשעים כי אם להשתלם יותר ממה שהיה בתחלה ראוי שהמדה הזאת תתפשט בהם עד אלף דור."

tree and candle metaphors in order to explain the final resurrection of multiple bodies to one soul in the face of *gilgul* may actually be no acceptance at all, but a rhetorical device in the furtherance of his own, particularistically Jewish conception of *gilgul*.

In the conclusion to the introduction to *Minhat Yehudah*, in line with the metaphor of the candle of the soul, Hayyat writes: "From the Lord I will ask help, saying that You will light my candle; the Lord my God will illuminate my darkness."¹⁰¹ In the final analysis, the light from the texts of Hayyat themselves show that he was a rather complex, multi-faceted thinker who is not prone to such clear-cut categorization as a paradigmatic representative of Spanish kabbalah, as has previously been surmised. Indeed, under the surface, he proves to be a far cry from his standard scholarly characterization as a typically Spanish mystic who "professed an openly anti-philosophical orientation, unsparing in his hard negative judgments about those kabbalists who had tried to reconcile Aristotelian thought with mystical truths."¹⁰² Already in his questions to Alcastiel, he displays philosophical leanings, and while he sets out in his *Minhat Yehudah* to attack the prophetic and the philosophically interpreted kabbalah that he encountered upon his arrival in Italy, he ends up incorporating elements of both into his own thought. While at times he transforms those elements to make them fit with a more theosophical model, at other times he is more dependent upon them, and even utilizes them whole-heartedly. He ends up completely differing with Alcastiel, one of the greatest Spanish kabbalists of his time, and even possibly attacks his system of thought forthrightly. All of this becomes apparent and brought to light, so-to-speak, through the analysis of his various and varied thoughts on *gilgul*. Rather than a strict representative of Spanish kabbalah, Hayyat seems to be a unique thinker unto himself, and seems, rather, to reflect a more panoramic view of transmigration that was perhaps shaped by his own migrations and the various forms of thought with which he came into contact. This panorama of Hayyat's thought is far from undiscerningly all-inclusive, but rather involves incorporation and dissent, the transformation of certain ideas and the rejection of others, exposition and polemic, all of which, perhaps, are varying sides of the same coin of the *temurah* of Hayyat's own thought on *gilgul neshamot*.

¹⁰¹ "מי' אשאל העזר ואומר כי אתה תאיר נרי יי אלקי גייה חשכי." The last part of this sentence is taken from Psalm 18:29.

¹⁰² Busi, *Mantova e la Qabbalah*, p. 53.

CHAPTER FIVE

ELIA HAYYIM BEN BINYAMIN OF GENAZZANO, *PRISCA THEOLOGIA*, AND THE TWO ANCIENT PATHS TO METEMPSYCHOSIS

Understand and know that the matters of kabbalah accord with the intellect and with the simple meanings of the Scriptures.¹

The thought of Rabbi Elia Hayyim ben Binyamin of Genazzano concerning the question of the transmigration of souls provides an interesting glimpse into the ratio-mystical kabbalah of the Italian Renaissance and the question of the place of philosophy and other forms of “alien” knowledge in relation to the ‘received’ secret traditions of the Jews. Even though Genazzano himself explicitly declares his intent against those who “filled their bellies with Greek words and turned the words of the living God into vanities,”² his thought betrays a sense of familiarity with and respect for Greek, as well as other ‘foreign’ forms of wisdom. Similar to his contemporary Yohanan Alemanno,³ Genazzano sets up a hierarchy, reflected in his musings on transmigration, in which mystical thought reigns supreme; nevertheless, it interestingly never displaces nor contradicts the workings of the intellect as found in rational speculation. Indeed, for Genazzano, rational speculation plays an important role in gaining an understanding of the universe. Its role is not as the handmaiden of mysticism per se, but as a more complex parallel path that simply does not lead as far in its journey into the Truth as does the path of kabbalistic secrets that are known to the select few.

Genazzano treats the question of the place of the intellect with respect to the supra-rational received traditions of the Jews in a rather interesting passage within his account of a three day debate that

¹ Genazzano, *La lettera preziosa* (iggetet hamudot), p. 265. “תבין ותדע שדברי הקבלה מסכימים עם השכל ועם פשטי הכתובים.”

² *La lettera preziosa*, p. 129. “הדורות שקדמונו מלאו כרסם מדברי היונים ויהפכו דברי תורה להבל וריק.”

³ For Alemanno’s hierarchical system of knowledge see: Moshe Idel, “The Study Plan of Rabbi Yohanan Alemanno.”

purportedly took place sometime between the years 1472 and 1489⁴ between himself and a Franciscan friar of the Minorite order, named Francesco di Acquapendente.⁵ Within this account, he writes:

Woe to us to believe a belief that does not agree very much with the intellect, and that which fails the intellect is not fit to be called Torah. For the Torah will not come to cancel the intellect. And thus you will see from the roots of our religion and its roots, which are the commandments hanging in the heart as the existence of The Holy One, Blessed is He, and his being one and pre-existent and incorporeal, and renewing existence *ex nihilo*, and sustaining it and providing over it, and giving reward according to the actions of man, and knowing all the mysteries. For these matters agree with the Truth, and the intellect will not betray them, even if there exist in the Torah a few practical commandments that are outside of the realm of the intellect⁶ to clarify, they have secrets that agree with the Truth, which are laid aside for those who fear God and consider His name.⁷

This passage reveals some very interesting and important facets of Genazzano's thought, as it touches upon his perception of the ontological 'Truth' of the divine Torah commandments as properly understood by the Jewish tradition. Moreover, it deals with the role that both philosophy and mysticism play in understanding that ontologically divine Truth, a line of thought to which Genazzano will later return in his explicit ruminations on *gilgul neshamot*.

⁴ For the dating of the debate, see Yehuda Rosenthal, "Israel and the Nations" [Hebrew], p. 158.

⁵ For a full critical edition of this debate and a lucid introduction, see Rosenthal, "Israel and the Nations," pp. 156–177. The text of the debate itself runs from pp. 160–177.

⁶ These types of commandments are discussed in BT *Yoma*, 67b, are called by Sa'adia Gaon שמעיות and by Maimonides חוקים. For more on this, see Rosenthal, p. 165, note 30. Interestingly, Rosenthal mentions *halizat yevamah*, a commandment fundamentally tied to the doctrine of *gilgul*, as one of the significant examples of these notably non-rational commandments.

⁷ Genazzano, in: Rosenthal, "Israel and the Nations," pp. 164–165. חלילה לנו להאמין באמונה שאינה מסכמת עם השכל מאד ומה שהשכל יכזיבהו אין ראוי להקרא תורה כי לא תבוא התורה לבטל השכל וכן תראה משרשי דתנו ועקריה שהם המצות התלויות בלב כגון מציאות השי"ת והיותו אחד וקדמון ובלתי גוף וחדש המציאות מאין ומקיימו ומשגיח עליו וגומל גמול לפי מעשיו של אדם ויודע כל תעלומות כי העניינים הללו מסכימים עם האמת והשכל לא יכזיבם. ואף כי יש בתורה קצת מצות מעשיות בלעדי שכליות לבאורם יש להם סודות מסכימים אל האמת הונחו ליראי אל ולחושבי שמו. This last statement, שמו אל ולחושבי שמו, derives from Malachi 3:16, which states: אז נדברו יראי ה' איש אל-רעהו ויקשב ה' וישמע ויכתב ספר זכרון לפניו ליראי ה' ולחשבי שמו. הי ולחשבי שמו.

The passage quoted above most definitely shows Genazzano's high regard for the commandments, not only, in his opinion, as intertwined with divine wisdom, but as its supreme backdrop. For Genazzano, the commandments hang in the heart like the existence of God Himself, and deep in their core they contain all knowledge, both philosophical and mystical. The first of these forms of knowledge remains valid throughout, and Genazzano's deep praise of the intellect and his use of philosophical language, such as the question of the 'pre-existence' of the universe, the 'incorporeality' of God, and 'creatio *ex nihilo*', betray a thinker versed in philosophical thought. Indeed, Fabrizio Lelli has surmised that as an adolescent, Genazzano probably frequented the yeshiva of Binyamin da Montalcino in Tuscany, and there most probably engaged in the study of philosophy.⁸ This study and appreciation of philosophy shows itself in Genazzano's account of his debate. Nevertheless, within this passage Genazzano displays a hierarchy in which knowledge of the 'mysteries' for the select few stands at the height of understanding and comes to further the project of intellectual speculation. In an assertion of that which is beyond, though is not contradictory to rational analysis, Genazzano exhibits an awareness of 'commandments that are outside of the realm of the intellect.' Though seemingly paradoxical or irrational, these commandments contain truths for those elite few who 'fear God and consider His name.' Given his language of 'those who fear God and consider His name' who have an understanding of God's 'mysteries,' Genazzano seems to be clearly referring to the Jewish mystical tradition here.⁹ According to Moshe David Cassuto, Genazzano's teacher Binyamin da Montalcino engaged in kabbalistic studies alongside his philosophical studies;¹⁰ such a dualistic study of speculative lore would indicate an appreciation of both forms of thought, and it is not unreasonable to assume that Binyamin may

⁸ Lelli, "Introduzione," in *La lettera preziosa*, p. 9.

⁹ While the claim may be made that he is referring to philosophical esotericism and the philosophical elite as expounded by the likes of Maimonides, the terms **יראי שמו אל וחושבי שמו** have a strong tradition in writings like the works of Hasidei Ashkenaz and the ecstatic kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia. Given the context, Genazzano seems to be aware of these traditions and employing them in his own Kabbalistic manner. Interestingly Joseph Albo, with whom Genazzano enters into the debate concerning the place of philosophy in regard to the mystical idea of transmigration as shall be discussed below, also employs the term **חושבי שמו** in his *Sefer ha-Ikharim* (part 4, beginning of chapter 29), but he seems to simply be referring to 'true believers.'

¹⁰ Cassuto, *The Jews in Florence During the Renaissance*, p. 193.

have passed on both this dual appreciation and these studies themselves to his student Genazzano. Whatever Genazzano's source may have been, the above passage from his account of his debate with the Franciscan friar propounds the idea of an elite group of 'God fearers who consider His name' that has access to secrets which peculiarly hinge on the intellect and, without canceling it out, take it further than its natural boundaries.

According to Alexander Altmann, even though Genazzano discusses the 'secrets of the commandments' within his debate with the Franciscan friar, there is no reason to believe that he had any type of familiarity with kabbalistic lore at the time of the disputation.¹¹ This doubt hinges on the fact that within his account, Genazzano fails to explain the secret matters that he mentions to the friar. In Altmann's opinion, within the debate, Genazzano "seemingly employs formulas that were of the permanent assets of the Jewish culture of the period, and there is no reason to deduce from this that he seriously engaged in kabbalah."¹² Rather than employing kabbalah, which was beyond the boundaries of Genazzano's knowledge at the time, Genazzano attempts to show an accord between the intellect and Judaism, and in classical religio-intellectual fashion, asserts that the areas in Judaism that are outside of the realm of ratiocination do not contradict the intellect, but simply lie beyond its boundaries. This ignorance of kabbalistic knowledge is supported by Genazzano's declaration to David in his epistle, written twenty years after the disputation, that "the things in this epistle did not fall by chance, but came after ten years of studying the doctrine of the kabbalah."¹³ Even though Genazzano explicitly declares his kabbalistic impetus to be the reception of Moshe da Rieti's *Mikdash Me'at*,¹⁴ which fell into his hands at the time that he was a student at David's father's yeshiva and therefore well before the debate, according to Altmann,

¹¹ For Altmann's discussion, see his "Beyond the Border of Philosophy," pp. 64–65 and p. 66.

¹² Ibid., p. 64. "לכאורה הוא משתמש בצירופים שהיו מנכסי צאן ברזל של התרבות היהודית באותה התקופה, ואין להסיק מכאן שעסק בקבלה ברצינות."

¹³ Greenup, p. 68, cited in Altmann, p. 66, fn. 31. "כי לא נפלו בזאת האגרת הדברים במקרה אלא אחר העיון עשר שנים בתורת הקבלה."

¹⁴ *La lettera preziosa*, pp. 130–131, and p. 177. For more on *Mikdash Me'at*, see: *Prooftexts*, 23, 1 (2003), which is dedicated to this treatise and includes the full text and its translation by Raymond P. Scheindlin, pp. 25–63.

Genazzano must have postponed its full, detailed study until a period of about ten years prior to the composition of the epistle.

While Altmann offers an extremely important overall analysis of Genazzano's relationship to philosophy and mysticism, his proofs for the late dating of Genazzano's foray into kabbalistic thought seem to be tenuous. His failure to explain kabbalistic matters within his debate with the Franciscan friar has an important precedent, namely, the famous Barcelona disputation of 1263. Does Nahmanides' similar silence in regard to kabbalah within his account of his own debate with the Christian convert Pablo Christiani point to the fact that in 1263 Nahmanides had little knowledge in matters of kabbalah? Such an assertion would be preposterous. Rather, the reticence to explicate could be due to Nahmanides' conservative approach to preserving 'the secret' for the select few,¹⁵ coupled with the fact that in his eyes, his 'heretical' interlocutor of 1263 most certainly would not be among the esoteric elite and therefore would not be privy to such revelations. Following the lead of Nahmanides, Genazzano expresses his own conservative reservations concerning the revelation of secrets. In his *Iggeret Hamudot*, he expressly states concerning the writing of kabbalistic insights:

I stood trembling for many days, limping between two opinions, whether to advance these matters in a book with extended explications or whether not to do so. For on the one hand, I very much feared in my soul, lest, God forbid, I cross the boundary and reveal matters that the Ancient of Days covered, matters that constitute the secret of the world.¹⁶

Genazzano's hesitations involve the expanded media of the book, lest the secret traditions become readily available to those who are not worthy of receiving the secret. If this is the case in regard to a letter personally addressed to a loyal friend and student, it only stands to reason that Genazzano would have had even more of a disinclination to reveal the secret traditions of the Jews to a Catholic friar that was bent on polemic against the entire Jewish tradition. His mention of 'the

¹⁵ For more on the Ramban's approach to esoteric elitism, especially in contrast to his more 'exoteric' contemporaries Azriel and Ya'akov ben Sheshet, see Moshe Idel, "Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman," pp. 550–559. See also: Moshe Halbertal, *By Way of Truth*, pp. 310–311. There, Halbertal wittily refers to the Ramban's esoteric elitism as "the aristocracy of the secret" (האריסטוקרטיה של הסוד).

¹⁶ *La lettera preziosa*, pp. 128–129. "ואני עמדתי מרעיד ימים רבים פוסח על שני הסעפים אם אעלה על ספר הדברים הללו בביאור רחב ואם לאו. כי מצד אחד יראתי מאד על נפשי פו ח"ו אפרוץ גדר לגלות דברים שביסן עתיק יומין דברים שהם כבשונו של עולם."

secrets of the commandments' within the debate may very well reflect a zeitgeist, but there is no reason to doubt that at the time, he had some knowledge of these secrets. As far as the dating of his venture into kabbalistic thought, the "ten years of studying the doctrine of the kabbalah" prior to the composition of the *Iggeret Hamudot* could have taken place at any point prior to its final arrangement, and did not necessarily immediately precede its *terminus ante quem*. This is especially the case if we accept the idea that the epistle went through a process of redactions¹⁷ and most probably was composed over a period of several years.

Whatever the case may be for Genazzano's kabbalistic knowledge at the time of his original assertion of an agreement between the intellect and Torah and of certain commandments that do not contradict the intellect but lie beyond its realm for a select few to understand, there is no doubt that his original opinions on these matters remained a part of his convictions, even within his later, explicitly kabbalistic *Iggeret Hamudot*.¹⁸ This work was most probably completed sometime between 1490 and 1492,¹⁹ and was written for the express purpose of instructing David, the son of Genazzano's teacher Binyamin da Montalcino, in matters of kabbalah. As Altmann himself states concerning the persistence of Genazzano's feeling of a need for accord between supra-rational and rational thought within this later kabbalistic epistle, "It is possible to find proof for this in the fact that he attached a copy of the debate to the manuscript that contains the *Iggeret Hamudot*."²⁰ Moreover, within the epistle itself, Genazzano blatantly instructs his student David, "Understand and know that the matters of kabbalah accord with the intellect and with the simple meaning of the written Word."²¹ kabbalah always accords with reason but conversely, the processes and results of reasoning do not always accord with kabbalah, making kabbalah a superior form of knowledge that can keep reason in check, and not the other way around. It is through this understanding

¹⁷ See Lelli, "Introduzione," 53–54. Professor Lelli also pointed out to me Genazzano's peculiar usage of the phrase "Elia said" (אמר אליה) in his refutation of other thinkers, which runs throughout the epistle (e.g., pp. 141, 147, 151), indicating the possible self-quotation of earlier notebooks or strata.

¹⁸ For the full text of the epistle, see Lelli and also Greenup.

¹⁹ For the dating of the *Iggeret*, see Alexander Altmann, "Beyond the Border," pp. 63–64.

²⁰ Altmann, p. 65.

²¹ *La lettera preziosa*, p. 265. תבין ותדע שדברי הקבלה מסכימים עם השכל ועם פשטי הכתובים.

of understanding itself that Genazzano can propose a possible untainted understanding, through the medium of kabbalah, of those commandments previously mentioned by him in his debate that are ‘outside the realm of the intellect.’

Indeed, within the *Iggeret Hamudot*, written some twenty years after his original assertion of the existence of supra-rational commandments in his debate with Francesco di Acquapendente, Genazzano openly, though briefly treats one of the ‘mysterious’ commandments that are ‘outside the realm of the intellect,’ namely Levirate marriage.²² Whether conscious of the connection or not, in this epistle Genazzano writes as one of those whom he had earlier deemed ‘those who fear God and consider His name.’ In the guise of kabbalistic master to receptive student rather than defensive respondent to polemical interlocutor as in the debate, Genazzano explains the supra-intellectual commandment of Levirate marriage through the kabbalistic doctrine of *gilgul*. Interestingly Genazzano’s treatment of this subject comes under the rubric of an attack on Joseph Albo,²³ a late 14th and early 15th century Spanish Jewish apologist to Christianity and philosophy who himself utilizes philosophical thought.

Albo’s own exposition on the idea of *gilgul* comes in the twenty-ninth chapter of the fourth part of his seminal *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, in which he discusses the third of his established three fundamental *ikkarim*, ‘principles’ of Judaism, namely, the idea of divine reward and punishment.²⁴ Within this section, Albo discusses the nature of the human soul. There, he mentions those “who believe that the soul of man has an advantage over the animals in that it has an intellective power by which the divine spirit attaches itself to man and presides over him according to the benefit of his intellect.”²⁵ This view is mistaken according to Albo, in that “since this benefit is nothing but a disposition alone, it will be

²² Rosenthal expressly lists *Halizat Yevemah* as one of these types of supra-rational commandments that were mentioned by Genazzano in his debate with Acquapendente. See Rosenthal, p. 165, note 30. The peculiar commandment of *yibbum*, directly connected to *halitzah*, also fits within this category.

²³ For more on Albo, and especially his apologetic *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, see: *I dogmi di Yosef Albo. Il trattato sui dogmi ebraici (Sefer Ha-Iqqarim) di Yosef Albo: il codice miniato dell'Accademia dei Concordi di Rovigo*, a cura di P. Luigi Bagatin, Giulio Tamani, Michela Andreatta, Treviso: Antilia, 2003. For Genazzano’s attitude against Albo, see Lelli, “Introduzione: Contra Yosef Albo,” *La lettera preziosa*, pp. 69–77.

²⁴ The other two *ikkarim* to Judaism, according to Albo, are the belief in the existence of God and the belief in the veracity of divine revelation.

²⁵ יש מהאנשים שיאמינו שנפש אדם יש לה יתרון על הבעלי חיים בשיש בה כח שכלי על ידו ידבק הרוח האלהי באדם להשיג בו כפי יתרון שכלו.

said that it (i.e., the soul) always needs the body, and when the union between the soul and the body parts, the soul will decay.”²⁶ This cannot be the case, as it violates the dictates of reward and punishment for human souls. Conversely, Albo asks, “If the intellective power that is in man is hylic matter that will decay by its nature, except from the side of its attained intellection, how will the intellection stand on its own, or how will its connection with the active intellect be drawn?” He goes on to state, “All of this is very far from that which can be intellectualized.”²⁷ The question of the nature of the passive, or material intellect as a disposition or as a hylic substance, alluded to here by Albo, hearkens back to two early commentators on Aristotle, Alexander and Themistius, and remained an important point of controversy for philosophical psychology throughout Albo’s day and beyond.²⁸ Apart from these two positions, which Albo finds untenable, he establishes a third position, namely, the substantial separateness of the human soul from the body as a “spiritual substance that stands on its own.”²⁹ Albo determines that this is the correct view that is fitting to the Torah, inasmuch as it leads to the intellection of the need to serve God, and not to intellection for the sake of intellection itself.³⁰ The attainment of such intellection, he claims, coupled with the purity of the soul from prior sin, is an attainment of a degree of the world-to-come. The farther one is from sin in the pristine state of the clean newborn soul, yet the closer one is through proper intellection to serving God, the closer he is in attaining reward in the world-to-come.

In a notable aside to his discourse on the nature of the human soul as a spiritual substance that stands on its own and only properly intellectualizes inasmuch as that intellectualization leads the human entity to serve God, Albo writes:

There are those who have judged on this that as the spiritual substance (which is the soul) will enter into the human body at the beginning of its creation, thus it is possible that the soul that already served in a human

²⁶ אבל לפי שאין זה היתרון אלא הכנה בלבד יאמר שהיא צריכה תמיד אל הגוף. וכשיפרד זה הדבוק אשר בין הנפש והגוף תעדר הנפש.

²⁷ אם הכח השכלי שבאדם הוא כח היולאני אשר מטבעו שיפסד זולתי מצד ההשכלה איך בעמוד ההשכלה בעצמה או איך יצויר דבקותה בשכל הפועל שכל זה רחוק מאד משיושכל.

²⁸ See note 54 in chapter 1, above.

²⁹ עצם רוחני עומד בעצמו

³⁰ הדעת הנכון והנאות לתורה הוא שהנפש עצם רוחני מוכן אל ההשכלה לעבוד הש"י ולא אל ההשכלה לבד

body will return to dwell again in a body. But this is not correct. The upper Wisdom determined to make the spiritual substance which does not have free will in its nature to dwell in a human body in order to make it have free will in a body, since this is a great merit to it without a doubt. This is the case so much so that according to this matter, the angels erred with man as our Rabbis, may their memory be for a blessing, have said in *Bereshit Rabba*: when the Holy One, blessed is He, created man, the ministering angels asked to bow down to him, etc.³¹ And this is due to his possession of free will more than them, as they do not have free will. In any case, the soul that already served in a human body and had free will, why would it return to a body? And in what way would the seminal seed be prepared to receive the soul that already served in a body more than to receive a soul that has not served in a body and has not yet had free will? For further than this from the truth is that which they say that human souls transmigrate into the bodies of animals, and God knows.³²

According to Albo, while the idea of transmigration derives from the correct, Torah fitting understanding of the nature of the soul, in itself the doctrine falls short of Torah truth. This is due to the question of free will, which, according to Albo, applies only to the human entity in its composite state of soul within body. As an entity standing on its own, the human soul does not possess free will, and thus is made by God to enter the human body in order to give it the merit of that free will. Once granted free will through the living human experience, the human soul becomes responsible for the proper service of God, which should become apparent to it through the process of intellection and can be followed or not followed according to the medium of free will, and for sins accrued and the choice through free will not to avert oneself from them. The souls of young children, which have more recently entered into a composite state with the body, are farther away from sin. Thus, they can attain the reward of the world-to-come through smaller merits that come to them through their intellective processes,

³¹ *Bereshit Rabba*, 8:10.

³² *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, 4:29: "ידנו מזה שכמו שהעצם הרוחני יכנס בגוף האנושי בתחלת יצירתו כן אפשר שהנפש שכבר שמשה בגוף האנושי תחזור עוד לשכון בגוף אבל אין זה נכון גזרה החכמה העליונה להשכין העצם הרוחני שאין בטבעו להיות בעל בחירה בגוף האנושי כדי לשומו בעל בחירה בגוף לפי שזה מעלה גדולה אליו בלי ספק עד שבדבר הזה טעו המלאכים באדם כמו שארז"ל בב"ר כשברא הקב"ה את האדם בקשו מה"ש להשתחות אליו וכו' וזה להיותו בעל בחירה יותר מהם שאינם בעל בחירה. מכל מקום הנפש שכבר שמשה בגוף האנושי והיתה בעלת בחירה למה תחזור עוד אל הגוף ובמה תוכן הטפה הזרעית לקבל הנפש שכבר שמשה בגוף יותר מלקבל הנפש שלא שמשה בגוף, ולא היתה בעלת בחירה כי היותר רחוק מזה שיאמרו שנפשות האנשים מתגלגלות בגופות הבעלי חיים והשם יודע."

such as learning to say ‘amen’ to a blessing.³³ Proper service to God remains central to Albo’s entire project of human free will, intellection, and reward and punishment.

Within Albo’s theory of reward and punishment, *gilgul* has no place; indeed, its assertion would only contradict that which reasonably ties the schema together. According to Albo, there is no reason why a soul that already had free will would return to another body to have it again. He does not explicitly explain why this is the case, but states that in terms of nature, the seminal seed would have more of a propensity to receive a soul that has not yet had free will than one which has. This interesting assertion indicates that in its reception of and conjunction with the soul that does not have free will, the innate seed becomes germinated, in a manner of speaking, and turns into a composite entity of soul and matter that does have free will. Moreover, the free will that through intellection leads to the service or disservice of God by man and subsequently individuates his soul grows along with the seed that carries it. A soul that has already had free will would violate this process and would not fit its purpose, making it an absurd proposition. This seems to be supported by Albo’s earlier proposition that younger souls are farther away from both sin and merit, but as they get older potentially grow exponentially in both merit through proper intellection, and sin through neglecting the way in which this proper intellection points. In such a design of growth through free will and intellection that leads to reward and punishment in the world to come, a soul that is not balanced at zero and has already exercised free will has no place. Such would not fit into the divine purpose of conception, or into the natural order of conception according to Albo. In any case, according to Albo’s thought, such a soul would already have had its chance through free will and intellection, and would now be fit to receive its reward or punishment, making the question of its reincarnation futile. The only more preposterous assertion concerning this matter, according to Albo, is the idea that human souls transmigrate into the bodies of animals.

In his *Iggeret Hamudot*, Genazzano gives an interesting and complexly nuanced criticism of Albo’s approach to *gilgul*, which shows esteem for Albo’s general theory and even asserts the correctness of Albo’s

³³ According to Albo, children who die who have not yet reached even this stage of intellection are saved by the merits of *tzaddikim*.

philosophical psychology, to a certain point. Albo's idea of the human soul as neither a disposition nor hylic matter but as "a spiritual substance that stands on its own" is correct, according to Genazzano, and, he states, Albo "interpreted nicely"³⁴ regarding this topic. Indeed, Genazzano affirms regarding Albo:

Everything that this wise man said in this chapter is pleasant and accepted, except for this place in which he erred a famous error in his statement that from this (i.e., the nature of the soul as a spiritual substance) the wise kabbalists derived the idea of *gilgul*. Because the matter is not that this opinion was created anew from their reasoning, but that it is a received tradition.³⁵

Genazzano not only refers to Albo reverentially as 'this wise man', thereby showing a sense of overall respect for Albo's thought and knowledge, he explicitly asserts the general pleasantness and correctness of Albo's theory of the soul and this theory's place in his thoughts concerning reward and punishment. According to Genazzano, the fundamentally divine and thus fundamentally ultimate truth of *gilgul* would never contradict or cancel proper intellection, and thus, it is only natural that the intellectual conception of the soul as a separate spiritual substance remains correct and suitable. For him, the fact that it accords with the Torah truth of *gilgul* would give it support as a proper intellectual idea, and not the other way around. Albo's major error, according to Genazzano, comes in his placement of reason above and a priori to received tradition. Though he does not comment upon Albo's final rejection of *gilgul*, which is based on his theory of free will as related to sin and merit and subsequently reward and punishment, Genazzano's line of thought carried to its conclusion would reject this as false and as improper intellection that should be reconsidered and revised. This is due to the fact that Albo's theory does not accord with the ultimate, divine truth of the veracity of *gilgul* as laid out in the Torah and properly interpreted by the Rabbis of the Talmud.³⁶ According to an earlier statement of Genazzano concerning the idea of the righteous

³⁴ *La lettera preziosa*, p. 151. יפה פירש

³⁵ Ibid., p. 151–152. כל מה שאמר זה החכם בזה הפרק הם דברים נאים ומתקבלים. זולתי בזה המקום שטעה טעות מפורסם באומרו שמכאן יצא לחכמי הקבלה דעת הגלגול. כי אין כן הדבר שחדשו זה הדעת מסברתם אבל היא קבלה.

³⁶ Genazzano regards the *Midrash Ruth*, as all of Zoharic literature, to be of Midrashic extraction, and not of the extraction of thirteenth century Spain.

who suffer and the wicked who take reward,³⁷ “The individual details of punishment and reward are according to individual actions, and the human being does not know their value.”³⁸ Ideas of reward and punishment often lie beyond, though not contradictory to the ken of human intellection. Nevertheless, their validity may be confirmed without error through the concealed tradition handed down to Moses by God. Within this sphere lies the kabbalistic idea of *gilgul*, whose validity derives not from personal intellection, but from its reception as a divine truth, revealed directly by God, the ultimate source of Truth, to his faithful prophets.

Notwithstanding the precedence of divine reception over intellection, the latter does play a significant, albeit attenuated role for Genazzano in the complex tradition of reception itself. Indeed, careful scrutiny of Genazzano’s epistle reveals a very telling, dual trajectory of transmission according to Genazzano, of the received tradition of *gilgul*. In continuation of the above passage declaring *gilgul* to be a received tradition, he writes that for the kabbalists, the doctrine:

Was placed in their hands from Abraham and Moses our Rabbi, peace be upon him. And it is an idea of the Torah, and an idea of our Rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing. And the proof is in the commandment of levirate marriage, which they started to observe from the time of the forefathers. And the entire book of Ruth is built on this secret. And he who peruses the *Midrash Ruth* will know and will understand that this idea is a received tradition.³⁹

Two significant lines of dissemination of the divine doctrine of *gilgul* seem to be at play here, creating a complex picture of received knowledge and its subsequent dispatch. The first line accords with the *prisca philosophia* tradition and involves the transmission of the idea from the workings of God’s universe to the intimate understanding of Abraham, to the early forefathers and finally, to the wise men of the nations. The second path of transmission falls more in line with the

³⁷ Incidentally, the doctrine of *gilgul* is often used in kabbalistic literature to explain the theodical question of **לֹא רָשָׁע וְטוֹב לֹא צָדִיק וְרָע לֹא רָשָׁע**, a point which Genazzano may have been aware but to which he makes no explicit reference here.

³⁸ Rosenthal, p. 172. **פֶּרֶטִי הָעוֹנֵשׁ וְהַגְמוּלָה לֹא יָדַע אֲנוֹשׁ עֲרֵכָם.**

³⁹ *La lettera preziosa*, p. 152. **“הִיא קְבִלָה בְּיָדָם מֵאַבְרָהָם וּמֵרַעְיָה וְהוּא דַּעַת הַתּוֹרָה. וְהִיא קְבִלָה בְּיָדָם מֵאַבְרָהָם וּמֵרַעְיָה וְהוּא דַּעַת הַתּוֹרָה. וְהִיא קְבִלָה בְּיָדָם מֵאַבְרָהָם וּמֵרַעְיָה וְהוּא דַּעַת הַתּוֹרָה.”**

prisca theosophia tradition⁴⁰ and entails the more particular revelation by God to Moses through the commandment of levirate marriage and the faithful understanding of this commandment by the Talmudic rabbis⁴¹ in the *Midrash Ruth*. Both of these paths of transmission uphold the legitimacy of the doctrine of *gilgul*, but the former unattenuated by the latter runs the risk of grave error.

In regard to the first, *prisca philosophia* line of transmission, Genazzano writes:

I found in an ancient book attributed to an ancient wise man named Zoroaster the following declaration, that the transmigration of souls was received by the men of India from the men of Persia, and by the men of Persia from the Egyptians, and by the Egyptians from the Chaldeans. And the Chaldeans received it from Abraham, who they expelled from their land due to their jealousy of him, because he would say about the soul that it is the source of movement and the sustainer of matter, and that there are many souls, etc.⁴²

Moshe Idel notes that Genazzano was one of the first Jewish thinkers to explicitly relate Zoroaster to kabbalah.⁴³ This seems quite peculiar, given his particularistic approach and his sense of the need for secrecy in dealing with matters of kabbalah. Nevertheless, further analysis reveals a polemic that places the Jewish kabbalah at the apex of knowledge, including that derived philosophically, and that subtly points to a distortion of that philosophically received knowledge if not reinforced by the ways of the Torah.

Genazzano's reproof of general theories of transmigration and assertion of kabbalistic supremacy starts from what Idel has termed the 'unilinear' theory of *prisca theologia*.⁴⁴ Zoroaster, the Indians, the

⁴⁰ I make the distinction between *prisca theosophia*, based on direct divine command, and *prisca philosophia*, based on Abraham's ruminations and subsequent transmission to philosophers the likes of Pythagoras and Zoroaster, for the sake of clarity in terms of Genazzano's dual project.

⁴¹ At least as far as Genazzano is concerned. See footnote 36, above.

⁴² *La lettera preziosa*, p. 152. "מצאתי ספר אחד קדום מיוחס לחכם אחד שמו זורואשט ואומר בזה הלשון כי גלגול הנשמות קבלוהו אנשי הודו מאנשי פרס ואנשי פרס מן המצרים והמצרים מן הכשדים והכשדים קבלוהו מאברהם שגרשו אותו מארצם בעבור קנאתם אותו שהיה אומר מהנפש שהיא מקור התנועה ומכלכלת החומר ושיש נשמות רבות וכו'."

⁴³ See his *La Cabbalà in Italia*, pp. 211–213.

⁴⁴ See his "Prisca Theologia in Marsilio Ficino," especially p. 141 and pp. 152–153 for specific references to Genazzano. See also, idem, "Differing Conceptions of kabbalah," p. 159.

Persians, the Egyptians, and the Chaldeans all support ideas of the valid doctrine of transmigration, but all of these ideas harken back to the patriarch Abraham.⁴⁵ This view, intended to refute the philosophical explanation of Albo of an infiltration of the notion of transmigration into Judaism from pagan sources, assumes that one single, particularly Jewish concept of transmigration underlies the various religious and philosophical accounts concerning this issue. Influenced by the *prisca theologia* tradition of his day, Genazzano sought to consolidate the doctrine of transmigration under a specifically Jewish matrix and to elevate the notion of kabbalistic authenticity in regard to other systems of thought while simultaneously denying the importance of individual features in regard to variant theological and philosophical views on transmigration. Later in the epistle, Genazzano goes so far as to state that the pagan philosophers were ‘thieves’ of the ancient knowledge expounded by Abraham,⁴⁶ which they culled from his supreme, pre-revelatory wisdom in their arguments with him before banishing him from their land.⁴⁷ Within this last assertion lies an extremely subtle, complex polemic against the non-Jewish philosophers who uphold the idea of *gilgul*. While their overall assertion of the veracity of the doctrine is correct and lends support to its ancient nature, their knowledge of it derives from the pre-revelatory ruminations of Abraham and thus remains unattenuated by the ultimate command of God. Abraham’s own assertions remain correct in that, as a biblical patriarch and direct prophet, he remains within the confines of that which is acceptable; those who stole his ideas and brought them outside the biblical context, however, are prone to error.

Genazzano’s portrayal of the gentile thinker Numenius of Apamea provides a curious counterbalance to his feelings concerning the aforementioned ‘thieves’ and distorters of ancient kabbalistic wisdom, and interestingly brings Pythagorean thought into the picture in a very positive manner. In continuation to the above passage citing a book attributed Zoroaster, which relates the transmission of transmigration from Abraham to the thieving gentiles, Genazzano writes:

⁴⁵ This may be based on the *Zohar*, 1:223a in which, on the basis of Genesis 25:5–6, Abraham is claimed to have been the source of wisdom for the Oriental nations.

⁴⁶ *La lettera preziosa*, p. 195. For more on the idea of the theft of wisdom in Jewish thought, see: Norman Roth, “The ‘Theft of Philosophy’ by the Greeks from the Jews,” *Classical Folia*, 32, 1978, pp. 53–67.

⁴⁷ *La lettera preziosa*, p. 237.

I have also found that these ideas were held by Numenius the Pythagorean and by Guadalundus. And Numenius, because of his great love for the Torah, claimed that Moses' soul had transmigrated into his own body. And he also said that he would put Moses' Torah under his head when he would lie down to sleep, and his questions would be answered in dreams.⁴⁸

Within this peculiar passage, Genazzano portrays the second century pagan philosopher Numenius of Apamea not only as an extreme admirer of Torah, but as the possible reincarnation of Moses himself. Most probably based on the famous dictum attributed to Numenius himself that Plato is none other than Moses speaking Greek,⁴⁹ Genazzano's novel and fascinating interpretation affords the Pythagorean philosopher the highest possible regard by linking him, at least in his own opinion, to the highest possible authority figure, the supreme prophet Moses. Even though he is a gentile, unlike those who stole the idea of transmigration and subsequently banished God's prophet Abraham, Numenius' immense regard for Torah lends his thought an unparalleled sense of integrity that supersedes even Abraham and connects directly to Moses.

The identity of the thinker 'Guadlandus' mentioned by Genazzano remains shrouded in mystery. Based on the seventeenth century critique of Genazzano by Arie da Modena in his *Ari Nohem*, Moshe Idel has conjectured that 'Guadlandus' is none other than the recurrently metamorphosized paladin Orlando of Matteo Maria Boiardo's long poem *Orlando Innamorato*.⁵⁰ More recently, Fabrizio Lelli has posited the identity to be none other than 'Adelandus the Arab', held by Pico della Mirandola in his *Conclusiones* to have maintained that "all Indian, Persian, Egyptian, and Chaldean wise men believed in the transmigration of souls."⁵¹ This interpretation assumes that Genazzano read Pico's *Conclusiones*, and would explain the source of the aforementioned reference to Indian, Persian, Egyptian and Chaldean thinkers in Genazzano's

⁴⁸ *La lettera preziosa*, p. 153. "ועוד מצאתי שבדברים הללו סברו נומיניאוס הפיתגוראי ונוודלנדוס. והיה סובר נומיניאוס שהיה בגופו גלגול נפש משה מרוב אהבתו לתורתו ואומר ג"כ שם שהיה משים תורת משה תחת ראשו בשכבו והיו משיבים בחלום על שאלותיו."

⁴⁹ Cf. Clément d'Alexandrie, *Strom.*, I, c. XXII and Eusèbe, *Praep., evang.*, XIII, 12. For more on Numenius and Moses in general, see: John G. Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism*, pp. 63–69.

⁵⁰ Idel, "Differing Conceptions," p. 161.

⁵¹ Farmer, p. 305. For Lelli's contention, see: *La lettera preziosa*, "Introduzione," p. 76, and idem, "*Prisca Philosophia and Docto Religio*," p. 58.

epistle. Nevertheless, it ignores Genazzano's explicit reference to "an ancient book attributed to an ancient wise man named Zoroaster," and leaves the identity of that ancient book unresolved. While Pico does derive conclusions from the sayings of Zoroaster, which he judges to be synonymous with the so-called "Chaldean Oracles,"⁵² the above quote does not fall within this category and no connection is made by him between Zoroaster and Adelandus the Arab's recounting of the Indian, Persian, Egyptian and Chaldean connection to transmigration. While Genazzano may have read Pico and been influenced by him, if this were his sole source, he most probably would not have mentioned a book of Zoroaster as his source for his knowledge of the 'thieving' nations' ideas on *gilgul*. Moreover, given Pico's font for this knowledge in Adelandus, Genazzano most probably would have grouped 'Guadlandus' with the nations of thieves and distorters, and not with the Torah loving Numenius.

Despite the discrepancies, Pico may very well have been one of the sources informing Genazzano's interpretation, especially considering Pico's wide range of influence and considering his self-purported use of an Aramaic text of the Chaldean Oracles and his quotation from it in his *Oratio*,⁵³ which would have piqued Genazzano's curiosity. If this is the case, then Genazzano's polemic against the non-Jewish thieves of ancient Jewish wisdom, starting with the Chaldeans, can be seen as a subtle attack on the likes of Pico himself, who not only held the Chaldean Oracles in high esteem and considered them to be authored by Zoroaster, but employed kabbalistic lore for non-Jewish, Christological purposes. Another source for Genazzano may be none other than Numenius himself, through the fragments of his writings preserved mainly in the text of Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica*, which was translated into Latin in 1448 by the Cretan humanist George of Trebizond⁵⁴ and which enjoyed wide circulation in the Italian Renaissance milieu.⁵⁵ In fragment one of *On the Good*, for example,

⁵² For more on the history of the Oracles, see: Karl H. Dannenfeldt, "The Pseudo-Zoroastrian Oracles in the Renaissance," *Studies in the Renaissance*, volume 4 (1957), pp. 7–30.

⁵³ For more on this, see: Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, pp. 241–244.

⁵⁴ Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, p. 181, fn. 32. For more on George of Trebizond and his activity in general, see Hankins, pp. 165–192, and John Monfasani, *George of Trebizond: A Biography and a Study of His Rhetoric and Logic*, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition, 1, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976.

⁵⁵ According to John Monfasani, Trebizond's translation enjoyed a wide diffusion

preserved in the *Praeparatio Evangelica*, Numenius tells of the Brahmans, the Persian Magi, the Egyptians and the Jews who, in his opinion, are in accord with Plato and possess a wisdom that is even higher than that of the Greeks.⁵⁶ Genazzano could have possibly taken this as his starting point and, given his Jewish point of view and his regard for a Chaldean Zoroaster, substituted the Chaldeans for the Jews in his own account. Further evidence for the possible influence of the *Praeparatio Evangelica* on Genazzano can be seen in Eusebius' insistence, reinforced in Trebizond's Latin translation, that the Greek philosophers had stolen their ideas from the Hebrew prophets. According to his portrayal, Plato had learned from Moses while he was in Egypt, and subsequently misrepresented the wisdom obtained from the Hebrews as his own.⁵⁷ Numenius had keenly recognized this thievery according to the fifth century Theodoret, following in the direct footsteps of Eusebius,⁵⁸ and therefore declared Plato to be none other than an Attic Moses. This assertion of thievery may have acted as a catalyst for Genazzano's own idea of the pagan theft of Hebraic wisdom, which nevertheless exonerates the pagan Numenius due to his astute affirmation of the source of truth in Moses' Torah.

Whatever his sources may have been, whether straight patristic doxography such as that of Eusebius through the Latin translation of Trebizond or whether general humanist literature such as that of Pico, Genazzano's mentions of Zoroaster and Numenius along with the Indians, Persians, Egyptians and Chaldeans betrays a familiarity with non-Jewish *prisca theologia* literature. This familiarity not only contributed to Genazzano's thought, it acted as the base for his own *prisca philosophia* theory of the line of transmission of *gilgul* from the biblical patriarch Abraham to the nations. Not only did the ancient peoples who took the idea out of its biblical context distort the originally pristine theory and get it a bit wrong, those who follow suit, possibly including the Church Fathers and possibly also including the humanists of Genazzano's own

almost immediately after he made the translation for Pope Nicholas V in Rome in 1448. Of this translation, at least 47 manuscripts still survive. See: Monfasani, *Collectanea Trapezuntiana: Texts, Documents, and Bibliographies of George of Trebizond*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 25, Binghamton: The Renaissance Society of America, Renaissance Texts Series, 8, 1984, pp. 721–726.

⁵⁶ See Numenius, *Fragments*, p. 42.

⁵⁷ See Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, p. 234.

⁵⁸ See Theodoret's *Graecarum Affectionum Curatio*, 2.114f (quoted in Gager, p. 66), in which he explicitly refers the reader to the *Praeparatio Evangelica*.

day, are prone to the same error. Only by recognizing the supreme authority of the Torah and the true Torah roots of the doctrine, as did Numenius, can such error be avoided.

Genazzano's second purported line of transmission for the idea of *gilgul* eludes error altogether in that it falls in direct line with the Bible and avoids any foreign, even philosophical influences that may distort the doctrine. Stemming from Moses, the ultimate divine lawgiver, this line of *prisca theologia* directly links the concept of *gilgul* to the decree of levirate marriage,⁵⁹ unambiguously commanded by God himself. In fact, as evidence for the Torah truth of the doctrine of *gilgul*, Genazzano mentions the commandment of *yibbum*, levirate marriage, as his only major proof. This, he says, was observed already "from the time of the forefathers."⁶⁰ He continues, "And the entire book of Ruth is built on this secret, and he who looks at *Midrash Ruth* will know and will understand that this idea is an accepted, 'received' tradition."⁶¹ This is the extent of Genazzano's veiled kabbalistic suggestion to his student David. The secret of *gilgul*, and by extension, of the nature and destiny of the human soul, lies in the commandment of Levirate marriage as laid down in the deuteronomic laws handed to Moses by God and correctly understood through *Midrash Ruth*'s interpretation of its purported observance in the book of Ruth. Beyond this, Genazzano does not expand, but leaves this kabbalistic instruction to his student as a veritable 'chapter heading'. Oral tradition turns to written tradition, as he writes to his student to look up the written down oral Midrashic tradition⁶² preserved in the *Zohar Hadash*, which properly interprets the book of Ruth, which itself recounts the observance of the ultimate oral tradition from God, which was then written down by Moses in its ultimate book form, namely, the Torah. From God himself to Moses, to the *Midrash Ruth*, to Genazzano, and finally, to Genazzano's student David in the form of the *Iggeret Hamudot*, Genazzano's own place in the line of transmission falls within the infallible, true *prisca theologia* tradition.

⁵⁹ Deuteronomy 25:5–7. For more on the connection of *yibbum* to *gilgul* in Kabbalistic thought, and the halachic controversy surrounding the issue, see my discussion in chapter 2 above, pp. 87–92. Also see Abarbanel's treatment of it in his commentary to Deuteronomy 25:5, and my discussion of that in chapter 3 above, pp. 103–105.

⁶⁰ P. 152. והראיה ממצות היבום שהתחילו לקיים מזמן האבות.

⁶¹ Ibid. וכל ספר רות נבנה על זה הסוד ומי שמעיין במדרש רות ידע ויבין שזה הדעת מקובל הוא.

⁶² Again, as far as Genazzano is concerned. See note 36 above.

Genazzano most probably received all of this written oral tradition that traces its line back to God's orality, filtered through the written interpretations and citations of Menahem Recanati. As Fabrizio Lelli has astutely noted, for the Italian kabbalists, the *Zohar* and the *Commentary on the Pentateuch* by Recanati were not easily distinguished. This has to do with Recanati's position as the first kabbalist in Italy to adapt the mysticism of the *Zohar* to the speculative models that prevailed in Italy, making that thought more digestible for the Italian public.⁶³ It also has to do with the scant diffusion of Zoharic literature in Italy and the profusion of Recanati's commentary.⁶⁴ Genazzano blatantly attests to his student David concerning Recanati:

I am faithfully announcing to you that there is none among the later kabbalists that is greater than our Rabbi, Rav Menahem, and this is because a large part of the *Zohar* made its way into his hands, and he came according to what it was saying, and he did not create anything from his own opinion without revealing that it is from his own reasoning and not from the received tradition. And many times we will find that he brings the intentions of kabbalists, and when there is no support to be found for them from the words of our Rabbis, he will notify you and will say "if it is a received tradition, we will accept it."⁶⁵

According to Genazzano, Recanati's greatness lies in his purity of thought and his clarity in separating pure received tradition from both his own intellectual reasoning and the unsupported intentions of other kabbalists. Recanati engages in speculation that can be highly informative, and he also brings the intentions of others that can serve to fill out the picture of true wisdom; but he understands the hierarchy, with Torah as interpreted by the Rabbis at the top and the need for personal reason and speculation to fit that model. This is opposed to Albo, who according to Genazzano, 'correctly' writes that the "wisdom

⁶³ Lelli, "Introduzione," p. 43.

⁶⁴ As Lelli notes, Genazzano himself laments the difficulty of finding a complete manuscript of the *Zohar*, and his many citations of it seem to be mostly drawn from Recanati's commentary. (p. 43).

⁶⁵ P. 134. והנני אני מודיעך נאמנה שאין בכל המקובלים האחרונים למעלה מהר"ר. מנחם וזה היה מפני שבא לידו חלק גדול מספר הזוהר ועל פיו בא ולא חדש מדעתו דבר שלא יגלה לך כי מסברתו היה ולא דרך הקבלה. ופעמים רבות תמצאנו שמביא כונות המקובלים וכשלא ימצא להם סמך מדברי רבותי' יעירך ויאמר אם קבלה נקבל. For Crescas' and subsequently Abarbanel's similar use of this final phrase to denote a possible received tradition that might be questionable upon reasonable grounds, but that would go beyond those reasonable grounds should it indeed be a received tradition, see my discussion in "Circularity, the Soul-Vehicle and the Renaissance Rebirth of Reincarnation," pp. 86 and 88.

of kabbalah” is called thus, “because it is impossible to use except by way of kabbalah.”⁶⁶ Genazzano wittily turns this statement on Albo and writes, “The words of this wise man are beautiful; if only he would have remembered the saying that says, ‘Great are the things that come out of the mouth of those who do them.’”⁶⁷ Recanati’s writings do follow suit by letting the tradition speak for itself, with his intellectual interpretations acting as possible clarifications. This makes Recanati into a great wise man and authority according to Genazzano, much greater than Albo in that he understands the true hierarchy of Truth.

Genazzano would have certainly had access to the “Truth claims” of the *Midrash Ruth* through Recanati’s commentary, in which the Midrash is extensively cited. Given Genazzano’s high esteem for Recanati and his view of Recanati as a reliable transmitter of received tradition with validly qualified interpretations of clarification, it is reasonable to assume that he would have read the *Midrash Ruth* through Recanati’s commentary, even if he may have had a copy of the original that he may have also consulted. Moreover, even if Recanati were his only source, Genazzano would have had no problem referring to the *Midrash Ruth* on *gilgul* without referring to Recanati and would have meant no disrespect to the latter since, in his opinion, Recanati is a giant due to his role as a reliable source of transmission. In classic *prisca theologia* form, tradition takes precedence over innovation and Recanati, while medieval, becomes a proper authority for ancient wisdom.

As Altmann has perceptively observed, Genazzano cites the *Zohar* as a proof-text twenty times throughout the epistle, six times explicitly relating the citations to the biblical commentary of Recanati, and the other fourteen times, while not mentioning Recanati explicitly, bringing Zoharic passages that indeed appear in the writings of Recanati.⁶⁸ Though he does not mention Recanati in connection to his suggestion of the *Midrash Ruth* as the key to understanding *gilgul*, Recanati broadly cites the Midrash in his *Perush l’Ta’amei ha-Mitzvot* in an attempt to explain the commandment of levirate marriage.⁶⁹ Although there is no clear

⁶⁶ *Ikkarim*, 2:28. נקרא אותה חכמה קבלה לפי שאי אפשר להשתמש ממנה אלא דרך קבלה.

⁶⁷ P. 148. This last statement is from Tosefta Yevamot, 8:7. See footnote 94 in Lelli. יפה דברי זה החכם אם היה זוכר מאמר האומר נאים הדברים היוצאים מפי עושה.

⁶⁸ Altmann, p. 87.

⁶⁹ See his: *Sefer Ta’amei ha-Mitzvot*, pp. 72–74. For a detailed discussion of this, see: Idel, *Rabbi Menahem Recanati*, vol. 2, chapter 19, especially part 3. Idel notes there that “the secret of levirate marriage is the longest [treated] in the *Perush l’Ta’amei ha-Mitzvot*.”

evidence that Genazzano had access to the *Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot*, Recanati repeats the extensive citation of the *Midrash Ruth* in his commentary on the biblical pericope *Vayeshhev*, which recounts the peculiar story of Judah and Tamar. Given Recanati's earlier citations of the *Midrash Ruth* to explain the commandment of levirate marriage and his usage of the same citations to expound upon the pre-levitical story of Judah and Tamar, it is clear that through the Midrash, he is tying the story that appears in the book of Genesis to the commandment that appears in the book of Leviticus along with all of its purported mystical overtones. Genazzano keenly picks up on this historicity that places a direct Torah understanding of *gilgul* not only in the biblical command of levirate marriage, but even earlier, in the awareness of the biblical forefathers.⁷⁰ Genazzano's awareness of this can be attested to by his statement cited earlier concerning the antique nature of *gilgul*, for which, according to him "the proof is in the commandment of levirate marriage, which they started to observe from the time of the forefathers."

Regarding the pre-levitical maintenance of the commandment of Levirate marriage, Recanati cites a very important passage from the *Midrash Ruth* that expounds upon the statement in the book of Ruth that *halitzah*, the ritual of unbinding the shoe of the designated redeemer as a form of redemption, "is a principle for Israel."⁷¹ "For Israel, and not for the other nations" according to the *Midrash Ruth*, "as this commandment was not given to them."⁷² According to this passage, levirate marriage and its alternative in the commandment of *halitzah* do not apply to the non-Jewish nations, and as such, neither does the expedient of *gilgul*. Recanati recognizes a problem with this, in consideration of the forefathers who came before the official giving of the law in Israel, and expands on the dictum from *Midrash Ruth*:

It is necessary to consider Adam and Abel and Job,⁷³ who were among the righteous of the nations, or to divide between before the giving of Torah and afterwards. And concerning this great commandment, the

⁷⁰ He probably arrives at this understanding from the content of the passages quoted from *Midrash Ruth* and not from Recanati's original usage of the passages in explaining levirate marriage and later usage in explaining the story of Judah and Tamar, as he probably did not have access to Recanati's *Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot*.

⁷¹ Ruth, 4:7. "חזאת התעודה בישראל."

⁷² See Recanati's commentary on the Torah, volume 1, p. 302. "בישראל ולא בשאר האומות שלא נתן להם מצוה זאת." For a discussion of this very topic in the debate in Candia, see chapter 1 above, pp. 67–69 and chapter 2, pp. 76–77.

⁷³ According to kabbalistic literature, all of these three figures are considered to be inextricably tied to the doctrine of *gilgul*.

ancient wise men who existed before the giving of Torah knew that there is a great benefit in the act of levirate marriage.⁷⁴

Pre-Torah and post-Torah measures differ, with the authority of Moses taking precedence over that of even those such as Abraham, Genazzano's hero of the *prisca philosophia* tradition. Nevertheless, the ancient pre-Torah wise men and righteous of the nations held to an upright and correct path, as theirs was ultimately the path of the Torah itself.⁷⁵ The ancient authority of *prisca theologia* in the forefathers actually hearkens forward instead of backward, and lends support to the later, greater authority of Moses and his Torah. For Recanati as a faithful transmitter of tradition and for Genazzano following after him, it is the Torah that acts as the pinnacle of truth for ideas such as *gilgul*, with those who uphold its commandments, whether prior to or posterior to its revelation, as the true guardians of that truth.

For Genazzano, two valid lines of transmission stand open for the reception of the truth claim of the doctrine of *gilgul*. The first is philosophically bent, stemming from the ruminations of the patriarch Abraham and leading into the philosophies of the nations of the world, while the second is based on the reception of the direct command of God himself and manifests itself in its true form in kabbalistic books such as the *Midrash Ruth*, Recanati's writings, and Genazzano's own *Iggeret Hamudot*. While both are valid and both hearken back to the Bible, from which they gain their authority, the first is prone to error and distortion while the second remains pure. Philosophy and kabbalah stand side-by-side as valid means of truth, but the former unfounded on the latter, or at least unacknowledging of its ontological priority, is paramount to theft. Herein lies a polemic, not only against philosophers such as Albo who hold their discipline to be at the supreme root of knowledge, but against the non-Jewish nations of the world, ancient and contemporary alike, who uphold *prisca theologia* traditions that are based on and reach back toward the truth, but fail to achieve it and ultimately warp it due to their failure to recognize its foundation in the Torah of Moses.

⁷⁴ Commentary on the Torah, *parashat Vayeshev*, p. 302. "צריך להתבונן על אדם והבל ואיוב שהיו מחסידי אומות העולם או נחלק בין קודם מתן תורה לאחריו כן. ועל המצוה הגדולה הזאת היו החכמים הקדמונים קודם מתן תורה יודעים כי יש תועלת גדולה ביבוס."

⁷⁵ This idea already exists in *Vayikra Rabba* 2:10, and *Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu* 6, which state that "Abraham kept the entire Torah" (אברהם קיים את התורה כולה). This may have been the basis for Recanati's, and subsequently Genazzano's affirmation.

CHAPTER SIX

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN *GILGUL*: YOHANAN ALEMANNO

The reality of all the parts of reality is drawn from their (i.e., the parts') connection and their unity. For the essence of a thing is its unity and connection, not its separation.¹

Yohanan Alemanno occupies a central position in the history of Renaissance developments of notions of harmony and accord as conflated in the subjects of man and his soul. This sense of overall unity and connection is reflected in his life's activities as well as in his writings. Indeed, Alemanno was active in both Christian and Jewish circles in Mantova, Padova and Florence, bringing together these rival sister religions in a veritably unprecedented point of communication from which he both exerted influence and adapted general Renaissance trends to his own patterns of thought. As one of the Jewish teachers of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola,² Alemanno helped to shape the "Prince of Concordia's" philosophy of concordance through his own syncretic tendencies to combine various forms of diverse thought, such as philosophical rationalism, Jewish mysticism, and Hermetic magic. Conversely, his tendency to emphasize ideas such as the unity of truth and the centrality of man in that cosmic picture of unity may reflect the influence of trends from the Florentine Academy and from the general Renaissance milieu upon his own modes of thought. Whatever the case may be, Alemanno held to a unique theory of unity that unified within itself diverse sources and ideas and that culminated in the nodal point of man as the dynamic and fluid intermediary.

As one who claimed that "all kinds of wisdom are worthy of study,

¹ Yohanan Alemanno, *The Song of Solomon's Ascents*, p. 593. "כל חלקי המציאות
מציאותם נמשך להקשרם והתאחדם. כי מהות הדבר הוא התאחדו והקשרו לא
הפרדו."

² The literature on Alemanno's connection to Pico abounds. For the most poignant survey, see: Fabrizio Lelli, "Un collaboratore ebreo di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Yohanan Alemanno."

because they all support each other and are mutually connected,”³ Alemanno employed diverse sources in his picture of man and his soul, such as Pseudo-Empedocles’ *Book of Five Substances*⁴ and ibn al-Sid al-Batalyawsi’s *Book of Imaginary Circles*.⁵ Incidentally, for this latter source, man is “the intermediary” and “the borderline between the world of the intellect and the world of the senses,”⁶ uniting within his being the two basic opposing natures of existence, an idea that would have a profound influence upon Alemanno’s own anthropology of unity. For the purpose of discussing the nature and position of the human soul, Alemanno’s syncretism went beyond the mere grafting of diverse disciplines and involved internal conciliations as well. In his *Hay ha-‘Olamim*, for example, the distinct philosophical characters of Gersonides, ibn Tufayl, Averroes, Judah ha-Levi and Maimonides all come together for Alemanno in order to elucidate the role of the Active Intellect in the shaping and destiny of the soul.⁷ Such is also the case for another important theme treated by Alemanno regarding the fate, destiny and position of the human soul, namely, the kabbalistic concept of *gilgul neshamot*. As is readily apparent in his treatment of *gilgul*, Alemanno strikingly studied and attempted to connect some of the polyvalent trends from variegated centers within the specific ‘field’ of kabbalah itself. An unprecedentedly prolific copyist and transmitter of source materials from diverse centers and schools of thought, Alemanno extraordinarily brought together texts on the subject of *gilgul* from Ashkenazic, Spanish and Byzantine forms of kabbalah. This concept of the soul’s transmigration, which takes its form in the conflation of

³ *Einei ha-Edah*, Jewish Theological Seminary ms. 888, fol. 6b, quoted in Arthur M. Lesley, “The Place of the *Dialoghi d’amore* in Contemporaneous Jewish Thought,” p. 178.

⁴ According to Klaus Hermann, a version of this work appears in Paris ms. 849 within a philosophical treatise on the soul included by Alemanno on fols. 25a–39b. See: Hermann, “The Reception of Hekhalot Literature in Yohanan Alemanno’s Autograph MS Paris 849,” p. 67. This philosophical treatise, which discusses the theory of temperaments and divides the soul into seven parts, seems to have affinities with Alemanno’s psychological masterwork *Hay ha-‘Olamim*. Though it is beyond the present study, the tract of psychological philosophy in Paris 849 deserves detailed further analysis.

⁵ For more on this book’s influence on Alemanno, see: Kaufmann, *Jahresbericht*, pp. 56–60; Idel, “The Anthropology of Yohanan Alemanno,” and idem, *Ascensions on High*, pp. 181–187. See also: idem, “Sources for the Circle Metaphor,” pp. 158–160.

⁶ Kaufman, Hebrew part, p. 27, quoted in Idel, “The Anthropology of Yohanan Alemanno,” p. 202.

⁷ See the appendix to Fabrizio Lelli’s “*Prisca Philosophia* and *Docto Religio*,” pp. 69–87, which is an annotated translation of chapter 43 of *Hay ha-‘Olamim*.

kabbalistic sources, stands as a part of Alemanno's project of unity in the human soul. Moreover, as a part of the whole eclectic project that draws its essence from unity, Alemanno's theory of *gilgul* reflects his overall cosmic theory of unity and conflation.

In his dealings with *gilgul* and its cosmic, unitive workings, Alemanno has recourse to three main fourteenth century sources, Isaac of Accho's masterwork *Me'irat Einayim*,⁸ Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi's commentary on *Sefer Yetzira*,⁹ and finally, the Byzantine classic, *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*.¹⁰ Each of these three seminal texts holds a very distinct, rather complex relation to the concept of transmigration, and each develops the concept in manifold, cosmic proportions. For *Me'irat Einayim*, *gilgul* relates to the cosmic convergence of the divine forces of judgment and mercy, for Joseph ben Shalom it relates to a conjoined cosmic process, termed by him *din b'nei halof*, of constant change and transformation from the lowliest inanimate object to the realm of the separate intellects, and for *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, the idea is connected to the cosmic process of *shmittot*, the cyclical creation and destruction of worlds. Each of these theories is quite intricate, and while the explication of each of these three texts in relation to transmigration remains a desideratum that lies well beyond the scope of the present book, their individual contextualization within the writings of Alemanno is necessary for the clarification of the latter's complex usage of these complex texts in the shaping of his own complex thought on *gilgul*.

Me'irat Einayim occupies a central position as a source text for Alemanno's ideas on *gilgul*, and in his untitled manuscript Paris 849, he copies a large section from the work, dealing with everything from Korah and Moses as the souls of Cain and Abel, to the question of levirate marriage, to the theodical question of why "bad things happen to good people" and conversely, why good things happen to bad people.¹¹ The section of *Me'irat Einayim* copied by Alemanno directly and explicitly opens up into the doctrine of *gilgul* without hesitation, with the statement that:

⁸ For more on this work, see: Eitan P. Fishbane, *Contemplative Practice and the Transmission of kabbalah*. For a critical edition, see: Amos Goldreich, *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*.

⁹ For more on this source, see: Scholem, "The True Author of the Commentary on *Sefer Yetzira* Attributed to the Rabad;" and idem, "Chapters From the History of kabbalah Literature."

¹⁰ For more on *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, see: Oron, *Ha-Peli'ah and Ha-Kanah*.

¹¹ Paris ms. 849, fols. 133a–135b. The section copied by Alemanno can be found, almost verbatim, in *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*, Goldreich edition, pp. 29–37.

the received (or the kabbalistic) secret concerning Abel is the secret of *gilgul* as hinted at in Ecclesiastes, ‘a generation goes and a generation comes’;¹² and it says in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, ‘a generation that has already come.’¹³ And if a person sins from the beginning of the coming of his soul into his body, he will be cut off and the soul will be transmigrated and will not return to its place until it is pardoned and cleaned of all sin and guilt.¹⁴

The text goes on to explain the connection between Abel (הבל), Seth (שֵׁת) and Moses (מֹשֶׁה) as three diverse people containing the same, transmigrated soul, hinted at by the acrostic of Moses’ name.¹⁵ According to Isaac of Acco, the letters ‘mem’ ‘shin’ ‘heh’ (משה) of the Hebrew name Moses stand for Moses, Seth and Hevel (Hebrew of Abel) respectively, while the ‘taf’ of the name ‘Seth’ stands for ‘Torah’, and the letters ‘bet-lamed’ of Hevel, which numerically add up to thirty-two, stand for the thirty-two paths of wisdom as laid down in *Sefer Yētzira*.¹⁶ Through word-play, Isaac of Acco attempts to show a hint of the connection between Abel Seth and Moses, not only in the name of Moses, but through the containment of ‘wisdom’ in the name of Abel and ‘Torah’ in the name of Seth, which both point to Moses, the ultimate prophet of wisdom and Torah. In similar fashion, Isaac turns to the Deuteronomic verse in which Moses says, “*Va-yit’abber Hashem bi le’m’anchem*,”¹⁷ which is traditionally and contextually read as, “And the Lord was angry with me for your sakes.” Isaac reads this as “and God impregnated within me for your sakes.” From an acrostic within this verse, Isaac extrapolates the name *Hevel*, the Hebrew for Abel, thereby indicating that the impregnation of Moses, related to the idea of *gilgul*, is of Abel.¹⁸ Thus, according to Isaac, Moses is cryptically saying in this verse that he is the reincarnation of Abel, impregnated with the latter’s soul for the sake of the people. As an upright shepherd

¹² Ecclesiastes, 1:4.

¹³ Abrams, *The Book Bahir*, p. 171, ¶86.

¹⁴ Paris ms. 849, fol. 133a. “הסוד המקובל בענין הבל הוא סוד הגלגול הרמז בקהלת ואם יחטא האיש אשר מתחלתו דור הולך ודור בא ואומר בספר הבהיר דור שכבר בא. ואם יחטא האיש אשר מתחלתו באה הנשמה בגופו יכרת האיש ההוא והנשמה היא מגולגלת ולא תשוב למקמה עד היותה מכופרת ומנוקה מכל חטא ואשם.”

¹⁵ This same discussion appears in the proceedings of the debate in Candia, probably as taken from *Me’irat Einayim*. For a discussion of its usage there, see chapter 2, footnote 22, above.

¹⁶ *Sefer Yētzira*, Mishna 1. For this explication in *Me’irat Einayim*, see Paris 849, fol. 133b, Goldreich, p. 30.

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 3:26.

¹⁸ Paris 849, fol. 134a, Goldreich, pp. 31–32.

involved in sacrifice that is pleasant to the Lord, Abel's soul takes on a new form in Moses, who is the ultimate upright shepherd of the Lord's people Israel.

Isaac continues in the vein of *gilgul* and Abel, basing himself upon Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet and stating that the idea of *gilgul* "is necessary for man on account of two things, either because he did not complete himself during his time (of life), or because he sinned."¹⁹ According to Isaac, the soul of Abel, Seth and Moses carries both of these purposes. Abel sinned by staring improperly and lasciviously at the *Shekhinah* during her revelation to him at the time of her coming down to accept his sacrifice. Seth came as the product of a levirate act in order to redeem Abel's good but barren soul, and in order to act as a bridge to carry on the generations; nevertheless, he himself did not reach a state of completion. Finally, Moses reached completion as the greatest prophet, and arrived at a point of amends and repentance for the sin of Abel. This is witnessed to by the verse that states that at God's first revelation to Moses in the form of the burning bush, "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."²⁰ With Moses, this inherently good but originally sinning soul that improperly gazed upon the *Shekhinah* comes full circle, and what Abel did excessively, Moses spurns instinctively. Abel's soul finally becomes 'pardoned and cleaned of all sin and guilt' through the repair and repentance of Moses, and can finally return to its place in God.

In contradistinction to the soul of Abel, Seth and Moses stands the soul of Cain, which acts as the root for the souls of the wicked and which is eventually transmigrated into Moses' rival, Korah. This is hinted at by the name "**Korah ben Yizhar**" (קרח בן יצהר), the 'kuf' of Korah, the 'nun' of ben, and the 'yod' of Yizhar comprising the letters of Cain's name (קין). According to the account in *Me'irat Einayim*, it is not by chance that because of Korah's and his associates' rebellion against Moses, "the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah's people and their possessions."²¹ This is in response to the actions of Cain, of whom God says, "Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground! Therefore, you shall

¹⁹ Paris 849, fol. 133b, Goldreich, p. 30. ענין זה צריך לאדם מפני שני דברים מפני שלא השלים זמנו, או מפני שחטא.

²⁰ Exodus, 3:6. Quoted in *Me'irat Einayim*, Paris 849 fol. 134a, Goldreich, p. 31. ויסתר משה פניו כי ראה מהביט אל האלהים.

²¹ Numbers 16:32.

be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand."²² Korah as the transmigrated soul of Cain receives punishment at the hands of Moses as the soul of Abel, "measure for measure,"²³ in a full-circle development in which the earth that opened its mouth to receive the blood of Abel finally opens its mouth to swallow Korah into she'ol, the nether regions of restitution.

For Isaac of Acco, the story of Cain and Abel moves to the realm of *du-partzufin*, the dual nature of God in judgment and mercy, death and clemency, evil and righteousness, femininity and masculinity, separation and unity.²⁴ This move from the human to the divine sphere takes place through the traditional medium that combines and connects the two, namely, sacrifice.²⁵ According to *Me'irat Einayim*, Cain's sacrifice, which had an unpleasing odor to God, was flax. This is hinted at by the word 'sacrifice' (קרבן), which when spelled out in its entirety, 'kuf' 'resh' 'bet' 'nun', has final letters that, when combined in order, 'peh' 'shin' 'taf' 'nun', form the Hebrew word for 'flax' (פשתן). As a plant, this sacrifice of flax indicates a 'cutting of the plants,'²⁶ a kabbalistic distinction that signifies heresy through an active separation, rather than union, in the realm of the *sefirot*. By contrast, Abel's sacrifice was from the flock, and brought about a sense of unity in the upper world. According to *Me'irat Einayim*, Cain's sacrifice which represents extreme judgment, came from the power of the antagonistic angel Samael, while Abel's sacrifice, representing mercy, came from the power of the protagonistic angel Michael.²⁷ The purposeful combining of these two powers in the human realm is dangerous, as evinced by the murder of Abel and the subsequent castigation of Cain; thus, the wearing of *shatnez*, which is the hybrid combination of flax, symbolizing Cain's sacrifice and the power of Samael, and wool, symbolizing Abel's sacrifice and the power of Michael, is forbidden.²⁸ Only the vestments of the High Priest contained such a hybrid combination, as he was the earthly

²² Genesis 4:10–11.

²³ Paris 849, fol. 134a. "מדה כנגד מדה"

²⁴ This topic also appears in the debate in Candia, though in a very different, polemical context. See, pp. 60–62.

²⁵ For explicit reference in *Me'irat Einayim* to the combining of the powers of *du-partzufin* through sacrifice, see Goldreich, pp. 30–31.

²⁶ קיצוץ בנטיעות

²⁷ Paris 849, fol. 135b.

²⁸ For the prohibition, see Leviticus, 19:19, and Deuteronomy, 22:11.

representative of Michael who drew his power directly from the angel of mercy and, “through his good intention in the act of sacrifice”²⁹ in the Temple, could create a situation of harmony and unity and turn the attribute of judgment into that of pure mercy. Indeed, in a later place in *Me’irat Einayim* that is not copied by Alemanno, Isaac of Acco continues this thought and writes:

The incense sacrifice should be understood as ‘a binding’... The smoke of the incense offering, along with the intention of the priest, would bind together and unify the Two Faces (*du-partzufin*)... Know that the intention of the incense offering was directed toward *Atarah*, so that She would ascend to, and become unified with *Tiferet*.³⁰

As Eitan Fishbane notes, this passage is predicated upon the constant kabbalistic “dialectic between separation and unity—a process which is dependent upon the devotional action of the human being (represented paradigmatically by the priest) in ritual.”³¹ For Isaac, this dialectic as represented in the human sphere in the role of the priest has cosmic precedence in the struggle between Samael and Michael, and biblical precedence in the sacrifices of and struggle between Cain and Abel.

Similar to the power of the High Priest, the dual purpose of *gilgul* in the cycle of death and life, judgment and mercy, punishment for sin and the opportunity for completion, makes *gilgul* a unifying device in the human realm that reflects the ideal of unity in the divine realm. This connection between the priesthood and *gilgul* is indicated by Pinchas, the progenitor of the priestly class, who himself is the conjoined transmigration of the souls of Nadav and Abihu and who won for himself and his descendants the priestly pact because he “took impassioned action for his God and made expiation for the Israelites.”³² According to *Me’irat Einayim*, this ‘action’ and ‘expiation’ is a hint at the unification of the *sefirot* of *yesod* and *malkhut*, which Nadav and Abihu before Pinchas distorted and perverted, and which he came to correct.³³ As the unity of the two souls of Nadav and Abihu creating unity in the

²⁹ Paris 849, fol. 135b. כח בידו היה הקרבנות במעשה הטובה כונתו היתה בידו כח. “כי על ידי כונתו הטובה במעשה הקרבנות היה בידו כח להפך מדת הדין לרחמים והיה הכל רחמים.”

³⁰ Goldreich, p. 127, translated by Eitan Fishbane, *Contemplative Practice*, pp. 146–147. “וקטרת מלשון קשירה... ועשן הקטרת עם כונת הכהן היה קשור ומיוחד דו פרצופין... דע כי כונת הקטרת אל העטרה שתתעלה ותתיחד אל התפארת.”

³¹ Fishbane, p. 147.

³² Numbers, 25:13.

³³ Paris 849, fol. 135b.

upper world, Pinchas secured for himself the priesthood. By doing so, he united the idea of unity in the cult of the Temple sacrifice to the separate powers inherent in the sacrifices of Cain and Abel and to unity in the expedient of *gilgul*. He affected this through the circular examples of sin and repair in both the stories of Cain and Abel in Korah and Moses, and Nadav and Abihu in his own character.

Thus, the story of Cain and Abel as transmigrated into Korah and Moses turns into a question of *du-partzufin* and the unity of opposites, including the dialectic unity of unity and separation itself.³⁴ This occurs through the priestly practice of sacrifice as based on the sacrifices of Cain and Abel and through the medium of *gilgul* as a twofold expedient exemplified in both Cain and Abel and in the priestly forbearer Pinchas. Significantly, this dialectical passage of ‘unity’ from *Me’irat Einayim* is copied by Alemanno in his untitled Paris manuscript at the end of the fifth of seven “roots” that he lays down in assertion of the ultimate unity and singularity of God. The fifth is by far the longest of the seven roots explicated by Alemanno, expanding ten folio pages and supported not only by *Me’irat Einayim*, which is the longest proof-text copied by him in this context, but by passages from the *Zohar*, Plato, Isaac Albalag and Empedocles, among others as well.³⁵ This root deals with questions of separation and unity in the *sefirotic* world and through the power of God known as *Ein-Sof*. In the words of Alemanno:

The fifth root is in connection to the *sefirot* and their unity through the power of *Ein-Sof*, which connects them through the spreading out of its power and its unification in all of them, like the spreading out of one single power in a living being that connects all of the limbs into one single entity... And anyone who cuts and divides one of the *sefirot* from that connection, either in his thought or in his actions, he is as a sinner and injurer of the *Ein-Sof*, which is the force that connects all of them.³⁶

This question of separation in the *sefirot* and unity in them through the *Ein-Sof* has resonance in Alemanno’s assertion in *Heshek Shlomo* that “things that are not suitable to be said about the Creator, may He be

³⁴ For more on unity and multiplicity as a dialectical phenomenon in Jewish mysticism in general, starting in *Sefer Yetzira* and *Midrash Temurah* but pervading the annals of Jewish mysticism, see: Yehuda Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetzira*, pp. 31–63.

³⁵ The “root” expands from fols. 126a–135b.

³⁶ Paris 849, fol. 126a. **ה'ש'ר'ש' החמשי' בהקשר הספירות והאחדם בכח הא"ס** “הקושר אותם בהתפשט כחו ואחדותו בכלם כהתפשטות כח אחד בחי הקושר כל איבריו באחד... וכל הקוצץ ומפריד במחשבתו או במעשיו אחת הספירות מאותו ההקשר הוא כאלו חוטא ופוגם בא"ס שהוא הקושר את כל.”

blessed, such as stature, right and left, mercy and judgment and the like...are said about the *sefirot*. And every word of praise is said about Him, may He be blessed, who is within them (i.e., the *sefirot*) and is outside of them, for there is nothing that can confine Him.”³⁷ Based on an assertion by Menahem Recanati in the introduction to his *Ta’amei ha-Mitzvot* and, according to Moshe Idel, set against the avowal by the Spanish kabbalist Isaac Mor Hayyim of the *sefirot* as essences of God, this statement in *Heshek Shlomo* sets up a distinction between the *sefirot* as definable and distinguishable tools, and the true essence of God which is within them but which cannot be defined or distinguished. By contrast, the fifth root in Paris 849 seeks to emphasize unity in the world of the *sefirot* through the essence of God that is within them, an essence that here he terms “the power of *Ein-Sof*.” It is highly significant that Alemanno compares this power to the “single power in a living being that connects all of the limbs into one single entity,” namely, the soul,³⁸ and that as a final proof-text for this root concerning unity, he brings the passage from *Me’irat Einayim* that examines the concept of the unity of *du-partzufin* through the very medium of transmigration of souls. For Alemanno, the question goes beyond mere transmigration and, given the context of the copied passage, moves from unity in the realm of the *sefirot* through the *Ein-Sof* that acts as their soul to unity in the human realm, as reflecting the upper realm, through the medium of the transmigration of souls.

Cosmic unity through transmigration and transformation subsists in the thought of another important work copied by Alemanno, namely, sections from the introduction to the commentary on *Sefer Yetzira* by Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi. These sections are contained within Alemanno’s handwritten notebooks, or *Likkutim*,³⁹ in which he compiled extracts from assorted philosophical and kabbalistic works along with

³⁷ Berlin 832, fols. 83a–84b, quoted in Idel, “Between the Conception of Essence,” pp. 92–93. “דברי שאין ראוי לאומרים בבורא ית’ כגון שעור קומה ימין ושמאל רחמי’” “הכל נאמר על הספירות וכל דבר שבח נאמר עליו ית’ שהוא בתוכן ודין וכיוצא באלו...הכל נאמר על הספירות וכל דבר שבח נאמר עליו ית’ שהוא בתוכן וחוצה להן כי אין דבר שיגביליהו.”

³⁸ For an analysis of the metaphor of the *Ein-Sof* as the soul in Renaissance thought, see: Idel, “Between the Conception,” pp. 102–111. While Idel does not quote the above passage from Paris 849, it would certainly strengthen his theory there that “Rabbi Yohanan Alemanno used the metaphor of the soul and its powers in order to describe the connection between *Ein-Sof* and the *sefirot*” (p. 111). For more on the idea of “power” in Alemanno’s thought in general, here specifically connected to the *Ein-Sof* and the soul, see: Garb, *Manifestations of Power*, pp. 176–179.

³⁹ Oxford Bodleian Neubauer 2234, fols. 97b–100b.

bibliographic notes and some of his own writings, between the years 1478 to 1504.⁴⁰ Together with his compilations and writings in Paris ms. 849, this vast collection of texts in Alemanno's *Likkutim* served as the backdrop for much of his own thought, and as such, offers important insight into that very thought. Alemanno's inclusion of segments from Ashkenazi's commentary is indeed telling since, as Gershom Scholem has noted, a "philosophization of the kabbalah"⁴¹ is clearly detectable in the work, despite Ashkenazi's ultimate criticism of philosophy. The *Zohar* and the mythical language of that school has no presence in Ashkenazi's work,⁴² and while he brings ninety-four philosophical premises in his commentary that he then refutes,⁴³ his own thinking is very speculative in manner and his explicatory language is highly philosophical. All of this points to the importance of Ashkenazi's commentary in the development of the chain of philosophical kabbalah, of which Alemanno's thought is a later link.

The section of Alemanno's *Likkutim* containing extracts from Ashkenazi's commentary indeed runs rife with philosophical description, opening with the question of the influence of the *causa causarum* upon the thirty-two paths of wisdom with which *Sefer Yetzira* begins and by which, according to *Sefer Yetzira*, God began to create. Ashkenazi ties the idea of 'wisdom' contained in the description of these thirty-two paths to the Aristotelian idea of intellection. He writes of three original intellectual apprehensions contained in the intellect that first intellectualizes itself, second intellectualizes its cause, which in the case of God is itself, and third intellectualizes the margin that lies between itself and its cause, which in the case of God is closed due to the fact that He and His cause are one. Notwithstanding the oneness and simplicity of God due to His self-contained nature, the three apprehensions of the process of intellection subsist by virtue of the nature of intellection, even if these three are ultimately identical as contained in the selfsame, simple entity of God. From the three original intellectual apprehensions, Ashkenazi eventually arrives at the number thirty-two. He does this by claiming that "each of these (three) apprehensions also apprehended itself and

⁴⁰ These dates are according to Herrmann, "The Reception of Hekhalot Literature," p. 24.

⁴¹ Scholem, "Chapters From the History of kabbalah Literature," p. 286.

⁴² Ibid., p. 295.

⁴³ Pp. 44b–53a, referenced in *ibid.*, p. 297.

its cause and the margin between itself and its cause,”⁴⁴ bringing the number to nine. This plus the root of all effects equals ten, “and each one has a beginning, and end and a middle, making thirty. This plus the power of the cause and the power of the effect makes thirty-two.”⁴⁵ Thus, through the Aristotelian process of intellection, from the one God derive the thirty-two paths of wisdom, by means of which that one God, the *causa causarum*, creates and relates to the universe. Despite his later polemic against the Aristotelian philosophers,⁴⁶ here Ashkenazi sets up a very Aristotelian reading of the thirty-two paths of wisdom contained in *Sefer Yetzira*, laying a precedent for later philosophical renderings of the kabbalah, such as those of Alemanno.

In the passage copied by Alemanno, Ashkenazi goes on to explain the names and the essences of the thirty-two paths in greater detail. The twenty-fourth among these relates to Ashkenazi’s own distinct cosmic idea of *gilgul*, and he terms it the “imaginative intellect,” explaining:

The twenty-fourth is the ‘imaginative intellect,’ for it gives image and form to all of the likenesses that were created in their own likenesses according to their characters, in relation to *din kol b’nei halof*, the law of all the elements of differentiation, or change. [This is the case] for all types of inanimate object, and plant, and animal, and intelligent being, in the sea and on dry land, and for all of the host of the heavens, and for all of the existents.⁴⁷

Herein lies an important theory developed and propounded by Ashkenazi, based on Proverbs 31:8 and known as *din b’nei halof*. According to Gershom Scholem, this theory is connected to “a universal theory of transmigration” and holds that all existents, from the basest inanimate object to the highest of the host of heavens, are in a constant state of motion and change.⁴⁸ Based on the interpretation of *halof* as “change,” Scholem’s reading of Ashkenazi’s theory is only partially

⁴⁴ Oxford 2234, fol. 97b. עצמם ועלתם (!) השיגו ג"כ השיגו (!) עצמם ועלתם. וההפרש שבנים לבין עלתם.

⁴⁵ Ibid. וכל אחד יש בו ראש וסוף ואמצע, הרי שלשים. וכח העלה וכח ועלול, הרי ל"ב.

⁴⁶ See Scholem, “The True Author,” pp. 122–123, and especially note 21, p. 123. See also: Georges Vajda, “Un chapitre de l’histoire du conflit entre la Kabbale et la philosophie. La polémique anti-intellectualiste de Joseph b. Shalom Ashkenazi de Catalogne,” *Archives d’histoire*, 1956, pp. 144–145.

⁴⁷ Oxford 98a. כ"ד שכל דמיוני כי ה' נותן דמות וצורה לכל הדמיונים אשר נבראו ב"ד שכל דמיונים לפי צביונים בדין כל בני חלוף לכל מיני דומם וצומח וחי ומשכיל בים וביבשה וכל צבא השמיים ולכל הנמצאים.

⁴⁸ Scholem, “Gilgul: The Transmigration of Souls,” p. 227.

correct. *Halof* also signifies “differentiation,” and Ashkenazi’s theory of *din b’nei halof* seems to be based not only on the idea of “change,” but upon the idea of “differentiation” between existents as well. As maintained by Ashkenazi, “each and every species of the upper and lower existents needs a known border, including persons. This is because every person is *differentiated* (*muhlaf*) by his border.”⁴⁹ Simultaneously, however, every existent does undergo “change,” and integrally tied to this is the constant process of birth and death. According to Ashkenazi, “each and every day six hundred thousand are born and six hundred thousand die.”⁵⁰ He continues: “That which is death for one thing is life for another thing, like one would say that a plant sustains worms and that the flesh of an animal returns as a plant; and thus it is with all things alternating between coming-into-existence and passing-away.”⁵¹ Thus, the idea expounded here by Ashkenazi involves individual differentiation and cosmic interconnectedness, and the dialectical relationship between the two through the ongoing processes of self-sustenance and constant change. In *din b’nei halof*, Ashkenazi sets up a complex theory of constancy in individual differentiation as connected to change via integration, through the dialectic process of all that which is indicated by the very word *halof* itself.

The cosmic theory of *din b’nei halof* as based on differentiation and change in the processes of coming-into-existence and passing-away, respectively, contains within itself a very cosmic idea of *gilgul* that is reflected in the very earthly idea of personal worldly survival, but that has deep roots in the divine realm of cosmic dynamism. In another place in his commentary to *Sefer Yetzira*, Ashkenazi writes:

It is known that every eaten thing transmigrates according to its eating, such as the food that is suitable for the sustenance of an animal and is eaten by it; it will become an animal, and from it will be manure that is suitable for insects, and from the manure insects. And that which is suitable as human food for the human will return to be human, and that which is suitable for waste will be excrement. Thus it is with wild animals and with birds and with domestic animals and with fish and with unclean creatures and with all creeping things that creep upon the land. And from this you have learned that every inanimate object,

⁴⁹ Oxford 98b. “כל מין ומין מהנמצאות עליונים ותחתונים צריכים אל גבול ידוע ואפי' האישים כי כל איש מוחלף בגבול.”

⁵⁰ Ibid. 99a. “בכל יום ויום נולדים שש' רבוא ומתים שש' רבוא.”

⁵¹ Ibid. 99a. “מה שהו' מות לזה הו' חיים לזה כאלו תאמר שהצמח ירם תולעים. ונבשר מהחי ישוב צמח וככה כל התחלפויות ההיום הנפסדים.”

plant, animal and speaking creature, all undergo *din b'nei halof* in ascent and in descent...and according to this it is possible that a pure bird can come from an insect. How? If an insect is eaten by a bird and from it is born an egg. That egg will return to be another pure bird or will be eaten by a human, thus being divided into two parts. One of them is that the egg will turn into a human and will be swallowed into the 248 limbs and into all of the 365 sinews. In this case the insect returns to the form of man.⁵²

Here, the idea of *gilgul* is predicated upon the food chain and is reflected not in the spiritual sphere of the soul, but in the physical domain of the body. *Gilgul* through *din b'nei halof* involves the constant change of the form of existents in concrete existence by means of action, in which case insects can take on the form of humans within the continuous cycle of subsistence and change.

Although the virtual 'conservation of energy' model of *gilgul* espoused in the above passage focuses upon the earthly domain and heavily relates to processes in the observable universe, according to Ashkenazi, it has its roots deeply grounded within the upper realms. In the section copied by Alemanno, he explains:

Just as the sun and the moon produce light and darkness and from their cause is all coming-into-existence and passing-away, so there is light that is sown for the righteous⁵³ and darkness for the wicked, who transmigrate and pass through the *gilgul* of the four letter name of God in *Adonai*. And when you take each and every existent and introduce each existent of the soul to its border, which is from the power of the *gilgul* that is above this earth, the degree of its border is completed by 180 degrees.⁵⁴

⁵² Ashkenazi, Commentary on *Sefer Yetzira*, p. 8: 2–3, quoted in Idel, "The Reasons for the Unclean Birds," p. 17. "ידוע הוא שכל נאכל מתגלגל לפי אכלו, כמו המאכל. והראוי ממנו לשרצים יהיה ממנו פרש ומן הפרש שרץ הראוי לאדם במאכל האדם יחזור לאדם ומה שראוי הפסד יהיה לפרש וכן בחיה ובעוף ובבהמה ובהם ובשרצים ובכל רמש אשר תרמוש האדמה. ומכאן אתה למד שכל דומם צומח וחי ומדבר כולם עוברין בדיון בני חלוף לעלייה ולירידה... ולפיכך אפשר שיתהווה מן השרץ עוף טהור כיצד אם יאכל השרץ העוף יולד ממנה ביצה ואותה הביצה תחזור להיות עוד עוף טהור או שיאכל לאדם, אז יחלק לשני חלקים האחד מהם הוא שתהפך הביצה ההיא לאדם ותבלע ברמ"ח איברים ובכל שס"ה גידים הנה חזר להיות השרץ לצורת אדם."

⁵³ Psalm 97:11.

⁵⁴ Oxford 2234, fol. 99b. "כמו שהשמש והירח יצא (!) אור וחושך ומסבתם כל הויה והפסד, כן יש אור וזרע לצדיק וחשך לרשעים שהם עוברים ומתגלגלים בגלגול שם י.ה.וה באדני וכאשר תקח כל הויה והויה ותנהיג כל הויה של נפש אל גבולו שהוא מכח הגלגול אשר ממעל לארץ הזאת נשלם גבול מעלתו בק"פ מעלות."

The sun represents the *sefirah* of *Tif'eret* and the moon represents *Malkhut*, with the four letter name of God and *Adonai* following suit. These two *sefirot* in conjunction create a situation of transmigration of souls from the upper realm into this world in a process of *gilgul* that is “above this earth.” This whole dual process of the sun and the moon, light and darkness, coming-into-existence and passing-away, righteousness and wickedness, the four letter name and *Adonai*, and finally, that which is above this earth and this earth itself, all depends on the introduction of the existent divine soul to its border, which ultimately differentiates it and allows it to come into this world. By turning 180 degrees from its starting point in the circle of the cosmos that begins in God, the soul transmigrates in the upper *gilgul* from the divine realm to the earthly realm, tying the two together and, just as in the dialectic process of *din b'nei halof* of which it is a part, allowing for differentiation and individuation and at the same time connection and unity.

Not only did Ashkenazi's unique theory of unity hold direct sway over Alemanno, it influenced the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century Byzantine *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*,⁵⁵ which in turn played an important independent role in the development of Alemanno's own thought. Indeed, in a passage from *Sefer ha-Peli'ah* copied by Alemanno, the anonymous Byzantine author writes, in the cosmically conjoined fashion of Ashkenazi that posits the connection of existence from the ultimate source of life to the lowliest inanimate object:

He said to him, “My master, from where is life drawn forth?” He replied, “From the Source of life, which is the life of every living thing, and He is the eternally living. And from Him comes the life of the *sefirot* and all of their kind. And from Him is the life of the firmaments, and the heavens and the earth are *du-partsufim*, and since the earth sustains that which is below it, it is also called ‘the land of the living,’ that is to say, the land of the source of life. And from the source of life is the life of the inanimate object and the plant and the animal and the speaking entity and the angel and the waters of life, and all through which the soul of the spirit of life courses.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ A detailed analysis of Ashkenazi's influence on *Sefer ha-Peli'ah* is a desideratum. For the time-being, see Oron, *Ha-Peli'ah and Ha-Kanah*, chapter 8, “The Doctrine of *Gilgul* in *Sefer ha-Peli'ah* and in *Sefer ha-Kanah*, pp. 301–309, in which she mentions, at least three times, the *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*'s copying from Ashkenazi's commentary on *Sefer Yetsira* in its own formulation of the idea of *gilgul*.

⁵⁶ *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, p. 232. “א"ל אדונינו מאין החיים נמשכים, א"ל ממקור החיים והוא. חיי כל חי והוא חי העולמים וממנו חיי הספירות וכל מיניהם וממנו חיי הרקיעים והשמים והארץ הם הד"ו פרצופים, ובעבור שהארץ מפרנסת שלמטה הימנה נקראת גם היא

According to this passage, the source of all life gives life to the *sefirot*, which in turn give life to all of existence. The ‘firmaments’ coming from the One source represent the *sefirot* and are *du-partsufim*, dual in nature, with the female sefirotic entity of *Malkhut* represented by ‘the land of the living,’ which gives life to all forms of concrete existence. Interestingly and importantly, Alemanno greatly attenuates the mythological *sefirotic* structure of the above passage, writing in his version, “The idea of life is the life of the upper and lower living entities, and the firmaments and the inanimate object and the plant and the animal and the speaking entity and the angel and the waters of life, and all through which the soul of the spirit of life courses.”⁵⁷ Though he mentions the ultimate life force that acts as the source of life for the upper and lower living entities, he completely omits all mention of the *sefirot* and the dual nature of life as it exits from the One and enters into the world of plurality, as mediated through the dual nature of the *du-partsufim* in the realm of the *sefirot*. This omission seems to be purposeful since, for Alemanno, the *sefirot* are vessels for God’s creation⁵⁸ and thus, in this context, stand on par with other living entities. The only real distinction for him is between the source of life itself and those beings, both upper and lower, through which the spirit of life courses.

Despite Alemanno’s attenuation of the mythological *du-partsufim* nature of God in the realm of the *sefirot*, an idea of duality that is drawn from *Sefer ha-Peli’ah* does play an important role in the formulation of Alemanno’s thought. As Moshe Idel perspicaciously notes, “Alemanno adopted from *Sefer ha-Peli’ah* a vision of history as the continuous confrontation between good and evil which struggle through history.”⁵⁹ As the first person outside of the Byzantine sphere to explicitly adopt this vision and to quote from this source, according to Idel, Alemanno presented a dramatically different version of kabbalah than that found in the works of both his Italian and his Spanish contemporaries. This is exemplified in the continuation of the passage from *Sefer ha-Peli’ah* quoted above and copied by Alemanno. There, the author of *Sefer ha-Peli’ah* discusses the seven double letters *beqed kefert* which, according

ארץ החיים ר"ל ארץ של מקור החיים, וממקור החיים חיי הדומם והצומח והחי והמדבר והמלאך ומים חיים וכל אשר נשמת רוח חיים באפיו.

⁵⁷ Paris 849, fol. 73a. “ענין החיים הוא חיי לחי עליונים ותחתונים ורקיעים ודומם וצומח וחי ומדבר ומלאך ומים חיים, וכל אשר נשמת רוח חיים באפיו.”

⁵⁸ Idel, “Between the Conception of Essence and the Conception of Vessels,” pp. 106–107.

⁵⁹ Idel, *La Cabbalà in Italia*, p. 357: “Alemanno adottò dal *Sefer ha-Peli’ah* una visione della storia intesa come lotta incessante e continua tra bene e male.”

to *Sefer Yetsira*, constitute the building blocks of creation, along with the three mother letters and the twelve simple letters of the Hebrew alphabet.⁶⁰ According to *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, the seven double letters, which each take on both a hard and a soft sound while nevertheless remaining the selfsame letters, relate to and reveal the hard divine attribute of judgment and the soft divine attribute of mercy as reflected in the dual nature of God himself as the confluence of *du-partsufim*. In order to exhibit this in historical terms of time, *Sefer ha-Peli'ah* relates to the famous passage of *coincidentia oppositorum* in Ecclesiastes, which itself begins with a statement of time itself, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven."⁶¹ He breaks down the fourteen subsequent sets of opposites listed there into seven categories, reflecting the seven double letters. The sixth of these seven categories, which he terms "seed," contains the first two sets of opposites listed by Ecclesiastes, namely birth in contrast to death and planting in contrast to uprooting. Concerning these, *Sefer ha-Peli'ah* writes:

"A time to be born"⁶² is from the side of *Netzach*, as *Hesed* gives birth to an efflux to *Netzach*, and *Netzach* [gives birth to] the transmigration of souls, since through it they descend. "And a time to die"⁶³ is from the side of *Hod*, which receives the edicts of *Pahad* for death, that is to say, to send its great fire upon *Atarah*, and then compassion departs and this is "a time to die." "A time to plant"⁶⁴ the souls is that which is said, that "man is a tree of the field,"⁶⁵ that is to say, 'man' is *Tif'eret*, 'tree' is *Yesod*, 'field' is *Atarah*; and the souls are planted in *Atarah* by means of *Netzach*, and *Atarah* plants them in the physical bodies, and this is "a time to plant." "And a time to uproot that which is planted"⁶⁶ [signifies an uprooting] from the land of the living, that is to say, that which is planted in the body of man, which is the soul. And it is uprooted from 'the land of the living', which is *Atarah*. And when that soul is dirty with sins and guilt, it is not left to rest in peace, and the uprooting is from the side of *Pahad* by means of *Hod*.

⁶⁰ *Sefer Yetsira*, 1:9. For a detailed and erudite discussion of the double letters, and especially the peculiar inclusion of the *resh*, see: Yehuda Liebes, "The Seven Doubles *Begeed Kefert*," pp. 237–247. See also idem, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsira*, pp. 18–20.

⁶¹ Ecclesiastes 3:1.

⁶² Ecclesiastes 3:2.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Deuteronomy 20:19.

⁶⁶ Ecclesiastes 3:2.

The mythologoumena of the sefirotic structure deeply pervades this passage on life and death, with the idea of transmigration acting as a point of axis. Life in birth comes from the right side of the sefirotic structure, or the side of mercy, whereas death derives from the left side, or the side of judgment. On the right, *Netzach* receives its power from *Hesed* through the medium of the great mediator *Tif'eret*, and then through *Yesod* filters this power into the final *sefirah* of *Atarah*, which then plants the power of life, i.e., the soul, in the physical human body. By contrast, death derives from the left, with *Pahad* giving the directive to *Hod* through the medium of *Tif'eret*, and then through the medium of *Yesod*, sends its fire to the receptive *Atarah*, which then uproots life from the physical realm on account of the sins and guilt of the soul within that realm. Here, the idea of transmigration follows a vertical pattern in which the life-force of the soul begins in the sphere of the *sefirot* and descends into the world from the side of mercy; it ends in the same sphere of the *sefirot* through death from the side of judgment.

Despite the blatantly mythological character of the above passage as an explanation of intra-divine struggles, Alemanno manages to attenuate the sefirotic myth while at the same time maintaining a dualistic picture, once again through the process of omission. In his version of the above passage concerning the sixth of the seven categories into which *Sefer ha-Peli'ah* divides the pairs of opposites contained in Ecclesiastes, Alemanno writes:

The seed is “a time to be born” from the side of mercy, which is the transmigration of souls. And “a time to die” is from the side of desolation. “A time to plant” (refers to the planting of) souls, “for man is a tree of the field.” And “a time to uproot that which is planted” from ‘the land of the living’ is from the side of desolation.⁶⁷

Though mercy and desolation are mentioned here as opposites relating to birth and death respectively, Alemanno avoids all explicit mention of the *sefirot* and their interrelations. For him, the mythical structure as laid out in *Sefer ha-Peli'ah* does not hold. Rather, *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*'s importance for Alemanno lies in its time-bound, historical characterization of the struggle of opposites that lies beyond the timeless unity within God, which ultimately leads back to that timeless unity through the unity of

⁶⁷ Paris 849, fol. 73b. “הזרע הוא עת ללדת מצד החסד שהוא גלגול הנפשות ועת. למות מצד השממה. ועת לטעת הנפשות כי האדם עץ השדה. ועת לעקור נטוע מארץ החיים מצד השממה.”

opposites in the full circulation out of time, of life into death. In the above passage, this is characterized by the opposites, which are actually fundamentally conjoined, of life from mercy through the medium of the vertical cosmic transmigration, and of death from desolation, which is a reversal of that process of vertical transmigration.

Alemanno's own theory of separation in the time-bound space of history through the struggle between good and evil, and unity in the divine space beyond history, with the spaces of separation and unity themselves being two separate spaces that are unified through the medium of *gilgul*, comes to the fore in *'Einei ha-'Edah*, his commentary on the first five chapters of the book of Genesis. There, Alemanno unifies the theories of *gilgul* found in his separate precedential kabbalistic sources into one integrated whole, blurring the distinctions by not even mentioning his sources as found in his compendia. Tellingly, he expounds the theory in a section of *'Einei ha-'Edah* that he terms "The Agreement of the Hidden with the Revealed,"⁶⁸ a title which itself indicates the unity of two separate spheres of metaphysical ontology.

Alemanno begins his analysis with a theory of *shmittot* parallel to that expositied in *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*. According to *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, history revolves around seven cosmic cycles, or *shmittot*, which are related to the seven lower *sefirot*. We are presently in the *shmittah* related to the *sefirah* of *Gevurah*, extreme judgment coming from the left, meaning that we are in a cosmic period of division, struggle and iniquity.⁶⁹ This historical situation of rupture creates the need for *gilgul* as a device of rectification, and once we pass on into a *shmittah* of greater harmony, in the thought of *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, *gilgul* becomes obsolete. In similar fashion, Alemanno explains that "prophecy came to teach the children of Israel how the beginning of this *shmittah* which we are in was from the strength of the powers of *Gevurah*, which brings the powers of impurity to the world, and the sinner is entrapped by it."⁷⁰ In Alemanno's overall thought, prophecy entails the magical process of drawing down the forces of purity from the divine realm in order to affect change within the world, and involves the need for purity on the side of the receiver. In his *Likkutim* he writes:

⁶⁸ Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 118b. "הסכמת הנסתר עם הנגלה"

⁶⁹ See: Oron, *Ha-Peli'ah and Ha-Kanah*, pp. 294–297.

⁷⁰ Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 118b. "בבא הנבואה להורות את בני ישראל איכה היתה
זאת השמיטה אשר אנחנו בה ראשיתה היתה בגבורות כחות הגבורה המביאה כחות
הטומאה בארץ והחוטא ילכד בה."

After the external cleansing of the body, and an inner change and spiritual purification from all taint, one becomes as clear and as pure as the heavens. Once one has divested oneself of all material thoughts, let him read only the Torah and the divine names written therein, and there shall be revealed [to him] awesome secrets and such divine visions as may be emanated upon pure clear souls who are prepared to receive them. As the verse said: "Prepare yourselves for three days and wash your clothing."⁷¹ For there are three preparations: of the exterior, of the interior, and of the imagination... When he immerses himself in these things, then such a great influx will come to him that he will cause the spirit of God to descend upon him and hover above him and flutter about him all the day.⁷²

Through a process of cleansing, the "spirit of God" can descend through the medium of the Torah. Significantly, this mode of prophecy is connected by Alemanno to the theophany at Sinai, and correlated with the prior mention of the reading of the Torah as one of the necessary steps for such revelation, seems to be the sole inheritance of the pure within the pure nation of Israel alone. In light of this understanding of revelation, the prophecy mentioned in *'Einei ha-'Edah* that "came to teach the children of Israel" about the "powers of *Gevurah*" in the current *shmittah* that bring powers of impurity into the world⁷³ can be understood as a subtle polemic against the impure nations and those within Israel who are enticed by that presently dominant impurity. The sinner is naturally lured by his evil inclination, and only those who are enraptured by the "spirit of God," which is a remnant from the preceding *shmittah* of total *Hesed* and *Rahamim*, that is, mercy and grace, can escape from the forces of impurity and iniquity through a complete fulfillment of the commandments of the holy Torah. Conversely, due to the Torah's holy nature, one who forcefully and willfully learns it and observes its commandments will give birth to the "spirit of God" within his soul and will be cleansed from the original "filth of the serpent"⁷⁴

⁷¹ Exodus 19:15.

⁷² Oxford 2234, fol. 164a, quoted in Idel, *kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 170, and idem, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 147–148.

⁷³ For more on the idea of "power" in Alemanno's thought as the talismanic drawing down of the divine efflux, as opposed to the powers of impurity that pervade the world, see: Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power*, pp. 176–179.

⁷⁴ David Biale importantly notes that the Midrash at the base of this idea, followed here closely by Alemanno, blames the serpent rather than Eve for sexual contamination. This paves the way for an easier possible repentance and purification for Eve. See: Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America*, New York: Basic Books, p. 45.

by “the waters of life, the waters of *Rahamim* and *Hesed*, divine grace and mercy.”⁷⁵ Though we are in a cosmic period dominated by judgment and profanity, according to Alemanno, a remnant of mercy and holiness nevertheless remains in the vestiges of the Torah community of Israel.

Alemanno’s historical concept of sin and redemption as based on the classical kabbalistic theory of the struggle between the forces of purity and impurity has far reaching implications for his own ideas of unity and of Israel’s place in relation to the nations of the world. Concerning this type of theory, Gershom Scholem notes, “It is the function of good in the world, whose tools are the Torah and its commandments, to bridge the abyss of separation that was formed by man’s sin and to restore all existence to its original harmony and unity.” He continues, “The final goal, in other words, is the reunification of the divine and the human wills.”⁷⁶ The world is in a state of disunity and disarray, and with the Torah and its commandments as the nexus point between God and creation, the sole right of restoration and reunification goes to Israel. While this idea seems to parallel the Christian doctrine of ‘original sin’, especially considering the usage of the terms ‘mercy’ and ‘grace’, and while Scholem lends the possibility of Christian influence upon the general kabbalistic doctrine of rupture and repair,⁷⁷ Alemanno, basing himself on prior sources, takes the idea a step further. In Alemanno’s theory, our era is marked by the pollution with which the serpent inseminated Eve, an idea reflected, among other sources, in Babylonian Talmud *Yevamot* 103b, *Avodah Zarah* 22b, and in Abraham Abulafia’s *Hayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba*.⁷⁸ According to this theory, the filth of the serpent, which affected the mother of all living creatures, was removed exclusively from Israel when they stood at Sinai, and according to Alemanno, this has ontological significance since “there is a great difference between the souls of the sons of Israel and the souls of the rest of the nations.”⁷⁹ Unlike the Christian notion of original sin and salvation through Christ, for Alemanno, the matter

⁷⁵ Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 118b.

⁷⁶ Gershom Scholem, *kabbalah*, p. 154.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ For references, see: Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, p. 41 and p. 65. This idea is also developed by Michael Balbo. For his parallel take on the idea, see chapter 2, footnotes 39, 46 and 54, above, and the discussions surrounding those footnotes.

⁷⁹ Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 122a. כִּמְהָ הַבְּדֵל גְּדוֹל יֵשׁ בֵּין נַפְשוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
“נַפְשוֹת אֲשֶׁר בְּאֻמוֹת.”

takes on an ontic character; the souls of Israel fundamentally differ from those of the rest of the nations, and only from that starting point does Torah take on its role as the tool for unity and rectification. Only the small nation of Israel, which is from the side of mercy to begin with, has the power of purification through the device of its divine Torah, while the majority populace made up of the other nations derives from the side of judgment and as such, is condemned to a state of fundamental impurity.

Alemanno ties this ontically ethnocentric theory of purity and impurity to the biblical story of Cain, Abel and Seth, bringing it to conclusion in the concept of *gilgul*. Quoting Jonathan ben Uzziel,⁸⁰ he states that Adam “knew that [Eve] was impregnated from the angel Samael and gave birth to Cain,” and quoting the *Midrash Ruth*, he writes that “when the serpent came unto Eve, he threw filth on her, and Cain is from that side, from which the serpent came out.”⁸¹ Cain was born into the world from the serpent, who is associated with the condemning angel on the left, Samael. By contrast, Cain’s brother Abel was born under the power of the advocating angel Michael, associated with the right side of mercy. Though the two brothers were from the same source in the conjugal relations of their parents, “their spirit was separate” according to Alemanno, and they were like “good wine and bad wine that does not mix.” Coming into the world of separation from the two variant powers of God, the two sons of the father and mother of all of humanity harbored two diametrically opposed sets of characteristics that did not match or commingle, according to Alemanno, “until Seth came and all of the unrestrained spirits of the world were attributed to him, and in him the world was completed.”⁸² Cain and Abel represent opposites, with Seth as the fundamental mediating link that unifies the two, allowing for completion and the continuance of existence.

This genealogy connects to Alemanno’s two earlier assertions, that we are in the *shmittah* of *Gevurah* with the precedent *shmittah* of *Hesed* passed, and that the souls of the nations are base and impure while the souls of Israel are the remnants of *Hesed* in the present *shmittah*,

⁸⁰ From: *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance*, edited by Ernest Clarke with Walter E. Aufrecht, John Hurd, and F. Spitzer, Hoboken: Ktav, 1984, p. 5.

⁸¹ Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 118b. “ידע שנתעברה מסמאל המלאך והולידה קין,” and “כאשר בא הנחש על חוה הטיל זוהמה בה וקין מההוא צד שהנחש יצא משם.”

⁸² *Ibid.*, 119a. “עד שבא שת ונתיחסו אליו כל אותם הרוחות הזכאים בעולם ובו נשלם העולם.”

with the Torah at their disposal as a means of rectification. In connecting these elements, Alemanno seems to be setting up a tacit three-tiered biblical interpretation of representation. The lowly Cain from the power of Samael represents *Gevurah* and the power of the non-Jewish nations of the world. Abel, who is from the power of Michael and who has passed out of the world in death, represents *Hesed*, which itself is already past on the cosmic timeline of *shmittot*. Finally, Seth, who is later shown by Alemanno to be fundamentally connected to the soul of Abel by way of *gilgul* and who comes to rectify the world through mediation by unifying the powers-that-be and collating them within himself, represents Israel, who stands as a mediating force by being in the world of *Gevurah* with a direct connection to the past world of *Hesed* by means of the Torah and the commandments. This last point of Seth as Israel is supported by Alemanno's connection of his claim for an ontologically different status for the souls of Israel with the biblical verse that states that "Adam again knew his wife, and she bore a son and called his name Seth;"⁸³ it also may hold within itself a subtle inference to the future *shmittah* of *Tif'eret*. Not only is Israel a mediator like Seth by being in the present world with a connection to the past world; also like Seth, who embodies within himself the future generations, Israel as a mediator embodies the future world of *Tif'eret*, the ultimate divine mediator and unifier.

Alemanno's above characterization relies not only on *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, but on *Me'irat Einayim* as well. As has been shown, a passage from *Me'irat Einayim* that was well known to Alemanno deals with the connection between Samael and Cain and between Michael and Abel,⁸⁴ and while Alemanno does not mention *Me'irat Einayim* by name in his discussion in *Einei ha-Edah*, it is reasonable to assume that Isaac of Acco's book acted as one of his sources. Such is the case for his idea of *gilgul* as well, which acts as the nexus point around which his historical theory of the struggle between judgment and mercy and their unification through Israel and its Torah revolves. In order to explain Abel's untimely, and seemingly unwarranted death, Alemanno has recourse to a theory expounded by *Me'irat Einayim*. If Abel came from the side of purity and mercy, and if his sacrifice was readily accepted, then why was he

⁸³ Genesis 4:25. For Alemanno's usage, see: Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol.122a.

⁸⁴ See footnote 27 above.

murdered? As Alemanno himself explains the enigma, quoting a rabbinic dictum, “there is no death without sin.”⁸⁵ Abel’s sin, he continues, was that “he peeped,” that is, he looked upon God in an improper manner at the time that his sacrifice was being accepted.⁸⁶ Moreover, Alemanno seems to indicate that Abel’s birth was somehow connected to the contamination caused by the serpent, without offering elucidation or support for this idea. Perhaps he means to say that due to the sin of Eve, who was enticed by the serpent and was made impure herself before Abel’s birth, Abel was born impure in bodily form, despite the purity of his soul. This would follow Daniel Boyarin’s interpretation of the Midrash on which Alemanno bases himself, that “for the time between the snake’s seduction of Eve and the redemption through the giving of Torah, there was an impurity that was transmitted to all of her descendants, male and female.”⁸⁷ Whatever the case may be, an important qualification exists in Alemanno’s portrayal, namely, that Seth, who was prior to the giving of Torah, was clean from the impurity of the serpent. Alemanno continues concerning the fate of Abel’s soul after his death and his relation to the pure Seth:

And his mother was impregnated from the soul of Abel whom she loved, in her return to becoming a righteous woman.⁸⁸ And she gave birth to Seth from another seed that was clean and unsoiled from the filth of the serpent. And this was in place of Abel. For Adam saw that Abel died from his [i.e., Adam’s] sin and from Abel’s own sin. For the children die from their sins and from the sins of their parents, as it is said concerning Aaron, ‘And I destroyed his fruit from above,’⁸⁹ [indicating] that Nadav and Abihu died from their sins and from the sin of their parents. And afterward Adam repented and was answered and he returned to his early opinion and the fear of God, as it is said, ‘And Adam knew,’⁹⁰ [namely,

⁸⁵ *Vayyikra Rabbah*, 37:1, *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, 5:2, quoted by Alemanno in Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 120b. “אין מיתה בלא חטא”

⁸⁶ For a discussion of the same theory in *Me’irat Einayim*, see above, p. 189. Interestingly, Alemanno contradicts himself, as he earlier states that Adam sinned in that “he looked upon *Malkhut* giving livelihood to the world and managing everything and was attracted to her alone and cut the shoots.” According to Alemanno, Abel learned from his father’s sin and therefore he himself did not sin. See: Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 119a.

⁸⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993, p. 82.

⁸⁸ The language here in the Hebrew is unclear.

⁸⁹ Amos 2:9. This is actually said about the Amorite, and not about Aaron.

⁹⁰ Genesis 4:25.

that he 'knew'] his first, good, and innocent knowledge, and he gave birth to Seth.⁹¹

In an interesting twist, Alemanno contends that Seth was born from love and righteousness from the side of his mother in conjunction with repentance and the fear of God from the side of his father. Here, the female side takes on an air of *hesed* through righteousness while the male side takes on an air of *pahad* through the fear of God. Nevertheless, both are divinely directed, and through an integration of love⁹² in the female side and repentance through an understanding of divine judgment for sin in the male side, the two can conjoin in a pristine, pre-exilic manner and can give birth to a child that is unsullied by the contamination of the serpent. This child, who is Seth, not only reinstates Abel's soul in the position of history by containing it within himself, he furthers that soul's historical condition through an ironic reversion of his parents to a veritably pre-historic, edenic time of integration and harmony. This makes him a creature of harmony that can integrate and bring unity in this world beyond Eden.

Alemanno furthers this idea of completion, stating:

Seth did not activate the intention of Abel, who was a shepherd who received good benevolences; and with them [Abel] shepherded the flock of man in order to draw the power of benevolence and purity to the majority of the people. [This was] for the splendor of the King of the world, [and was] in order to eradicate the spirit of impurity that Cain drew from the world.⁹³

⁹¹ Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 123a. ונתעברה אמו מנפש הבל אשר אהבתהו בתשובה חסידה היא ואישה (?) והולידה את שת מזרע אחר נקי ובר מזוהמת הנחש והיה זה תחת הבל כי ראה אדם שבעונו ובעון הבל מת כי הבנים מתים בעונם ובעון אבותם כמו שאמרו באהרן ואשמיד פריז ממעל שמתו נדב ואביהו בעונם ועון אבותם. ואח"כ עשה אדם תשובה והתענה ושב לקדמותו בדעת ויראת ה' כאמרו וידע אדם ידיעתו הראשונה הטובה והתמימה והוליד שת.

⁹² Love plays an important role in another context of unity for Alemanno, namely, the unity, or *devekut* of the human soul with God through the love of God by the soul, characterized in that context as well by the female, the character Shulamit of the Song of Songs. Hence, for Alemanno, love both instilled in and emanating from the traditionally 'judgmental' feminine leads to a possible state of unity and harmony. For more on Alemanno's prolific use of the idea of 'divine Love' in connection to *devekut*, see Cassuto, *The Jews of Florence*, pp. 240–243.

⁹³ Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 123a. "שת לא הוציא לפעל כונת הבל אשר היה רועה. צאן מקבל חסדים טובים ורועה בהם צאן אדם להמשיך כח החסד והטהרה ברוב עם להדרת מלך מלכו של עולם ולהעביר את רוח הטומאה אשר המשיך קין מן הארץ."

Though Seth was of greater purity than Abel, he did not complete Abel's divine task. As such, the soul of Abel and Seth, which was the selfsame soul, was returned yet a third time, in accord with the kabbalistic reading of Job that God causes transmigration "twice or three times with a man."⁹⁴ Seth's fault lay in the fact that he did not carry out the divine shepherding job designated for Abel. The third time, however, the transmigration of this soul was into Moses, the greatest of God's benevolent shepherds. Alemanno writes, "And the soul of Abel was in Seth, and from Seth in Moses, who was a shepherd at the beginning of his days and returned to be a shepherd of the flock of his people."⁹⁵ Here Alemanno may be tracing the life of Moses, in which he was a shepherd under his father-in-law Jethro and returned to Egypt to be a shepherd for his people Israel, but a parallel, more complex reading ensues as well. At the beginning of his days, namely, as Abel, the soul of Abel-Seth-Moses was a shepherd, with an almost necessary pause as Seth and a return to being the shepherd of the people of Israel in the form of Moses. Through Moses the circle was completed, and again, by a return to the beginning, harmony and unity in the progression of history could be achieved. This time, it was through the Torah of Moses and the fulfillment of the commandments by the people of Israel, in place of the sacrifice from the flock of Abel.

In order to support this argument, Alemanno once again has recourse to *Me'irat Einayim*. Not only does he mention Moses' statement in Deuteronomy connected to *'ibbur*, which is interpreted by *Me'irat Einayim* as a full admission by Moses of his impregnation by God with the soul of Abel,⁹⁶ he refers to the mention made there of the acrostics of Moses' name and of Korah's, the latter whom he holds to be the transmigration of Cain.⁹⁷ He also expounds upon the idea from *Me'irat Einayim* of rectification for prior sins of the soul in subsequent incarnations,⁹⁸ an idea that fits well with Alemanno's theory of history. "Before Moses began his work as a shepherd of his flock," writes Alemanno, "he eradicated the sin that Abel sinned in peeping, when he peeped and died. For when it came time for him [i.e., Moses] to

⁹⁴ Job 33:29. This verse is mentioned in connection to the *gilgul* of Abel in Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fols. 122b and 123a.

⁹⁵ Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 123a. והיתה נפש הבל בשת ומשת במשה אשר היה
רועה בראשיתו ושב רועה בצאן עמו.

⁹⁶ Deuteronomy 3:26. See above, p. 188.

⁹⁷ See above, pp. 188–190.

⁹⁸ For the discussion there, known to Alemanno, see above, p. 189.

peep at the angel in the bush, ‘Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God,’⁹⁹ lest a disaster happen to him by peeping.”¹⁰⁰ By learning from his own ‘personal’ history and recognizing and eradicating the sin, Moses could then move forward and fulfill that which Abel did not have a chance to fulfill. In continuation of this vein of thought, Alemanno notes that Moses’ arch-nemesis Korah was the transmigration of the soul of Cain, and in order to rectify the situation of the original murder of Abel, was given divine retribution on behalf of Moses’ supremacy.¹⁰¹ “And he was swallowed into the earth,” writes Alemanno, “just as it swallowed the blood of Abel.”¹⁰² History once again regresses for the purposes of rectification, this time, not as related to Adam and Eve’s sin as explicated by Alemanno in the passage discussed above concerning the birth of Seth, and not in relation to Abel’s sin of ‘peeping’ as rectified by Moses, but in relation to the base murderer from the side of the left, Cain. In any case, reversion allows for progression, and all of the original characters were finally held accountable and responsible by means of transmigration. This then allowed for the coming into the world of the Torah and the accountability and responsibility involved for Israel in the taking on of the commandments.

For Alemanno, we live in a world of separation marked by the ultimate separation of unity and separation itself. This takes on form through the struggle between judgment and mercy, *Gevurah* and *Hesed*, Samael and Michael, left and right, Cain and Abel, present and past, and the nations of the world and Israel. Unity itself takes on its possible form, which remains ever possible in our world, through the unity of judgment and mercy in *Gevurah* and *Hesed*, as marked by Samael as the minister of Cain on the left and Michael as the minister of Abel on the right, and as reflected in the present *shmittah* that is dominated by the nations, and the past *shmittah* whose remnants are Israel. This unity comes through *Tif’eret*, which is the future, mediating *shmittah*, and which is reflected in the personage of Seth as perfected by Moses, and in the device of Moses’ Torah as perfected and fulfilled through the upkeep of its commandments by the people of Israel. All of this

⁹⁹ Exodus 3:6.

¹⁰⁰ Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 123a. “ובטרם החל משה מלאכתו מרעית צאנו העביר חטאו אשר חטא הבל בהצצה אשר הציץ ומת כי ירא מהביט אל האלהים פן יקראנו אסון בהצצה.”

¹⁰¹ For the discussion in *Me’irat Einayim*, see above, p. 189.

¹⁰² Jerusalem ms. 8° 598, fol. 123a. “ונבלע בארץ כאשר הבלע דמי הבל.”

unity can then dialectically unify with separation through a turn from the present to the past in a manner that allows for progression into the future. This is made possible by means of *gilgul*, the ultimate unifier that brings the divine realm into contact with the earthly realm through the human soul, and that brings that soul into contact with various forms of matter and various points in time. It is through this device that Abel as the embodiment of mercy was able to endure in Seth, who became the progenitor for humanity, and then in Moses, who looked full-circle back upon Abel and, by so doing, was able to bring the Torah into the world as the guiding principle for ultimate divine unity through the actions of the divine people of Israel.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA AND THE ALLEGORICAL VERIDICALITY OF TRANSMIGRATION

All Indian, Persian, Egyptian, and Chaldean wise-men believed in the transmigration of souls.¹

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola displays a strong syncretic tendency in his description of man's place within the cosmos.² This can be witnessed to by the famous opening of his *Oratio*, in which he paraphrases Abdul the Saracen as saying that man is the most worthy entity of wonder on the world's stage, and in which he quotes Hermes Trismegistus from the *Asclepius*, in which Hermes states, "A great wonder, Asclepius, is man!"³ It can also be understood from a perusal of his famous nine hundred theses, which rely heavily upon the most diverse sources, among which are Hermes, Zoroaster and the Chaldeans, Orpheus and Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, Plotinus and Iamblicus, Avicenna and Averroes, Aquinas and Scotus, and Maimonides and the kabbalists. In this method of writing through borrowing, Pico is not entirely original. Indeed, like many of his contemporaries, Pico mainly weaves his works from other works, patching together quotations and ideas drawn from others. Such an observation of Pico's method should not trivialize his overall project though, since, as Anthony Grafton has astutely noted concerning the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries:

Many scholars turned their whole libraries into elaborate mechanisms for the retrieval of bits of text. Reading, in normal humanist practice, meant writing: one examined texts pen in hand, marked or copied salient passages, compiled them into notebooks organized by categories, and finally recombined them in one's own work. Complex systems of anno-

¹ Pico, *Theses*, p. 305: "Transcorporationem animarum crediderunt omnes sapientes Indorum, Persarum, Aegyptiorum, et Chalaeorum."

² For an astute rendering of Pico's position on man in the cosmos, see: Anna De Pace, *La scepsi*, chapter iv, "La concezione pichiana dell'uomo."

³ Pico, *On the Dignity of Man*, p. 3 (Hereafter, *Dignity*): "Magnam, o Asclepi, miraculum est homo." Latin citation from: Pico, *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, p. 2. Here, Pico is directly quoting the *Asclepius*, 1.6.

tation could identify the significant passages in books. Splendid reading machines made it possible to consult several books at once while making notes on a particular subject. The library melted imperceptibly into each new book that its owner produced.⁴

This propensity exhibits itself perhaps more in the writings of Pico than in other thinkers of his time due to his avoidance of aligning himself with one specific school of thought in his conviction that truth may be found in the teachings of many schools and variegated thinkers.⁵ For Pico, parts of the teachings of the Indian, Persian, Egyptian and Chaldean wise men, who assert something as radical as the veracity of transmigration, hold no less truth than some of the teachings of Plato, Aristotle, the kabbalah, or even the Christian wise men. Through this context, an analysis of ideas on transmigration and on the human entity borrowed, selected, and combined from Pico's predecessors can shed light on his understanding of both the doctrine of transmigration itself, and the philosophy of man that was so central to his entire project.

Throughout his works, Pico interestingly makes no reference to the kabbalistic notion of metempsychosis, though he most certainly had access to it, both through Hebrew texts that were made available to him and through his Jewish teachers. For example, *Sefer ha-Bahir*, which discusses the doctrine, was translated in full for Pico by the former Jewish convert to Christianity, Flavius Mithridates,⁶ and several of the works of Menahem Recanati, which acted as cornerstones of Italian Renaissance kabbalistic conceptions of metempsychosis, were readily accessible to Pico in both Hebrew and in Latin translation.⁷ Other than these seminal sources, Pico had a Latin copy of Abraham Abulafia's *V'zot l'Yehuda*, which was translated for him in 1486 by Mithridates and was described by the latter as "Summa brevis cabale que intitulator rabi Ieude," that is, "A brief summary of kabbalah, entitled 'To Rabbi

⁴ Anthony Grafton, "A Note from Inside the Teapot," pp. 321–322.

⁵ For more on this, see: Kristeller, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and His Sources."

⁶ See: Mithridates, *The Book Bahir*. For more on the figure of Mithridates, see: Angela Scandaliato, "Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada e il suo background culturale : un caso siciliano esemplare di interculturalità tra ebraismo cristianesimo e islam," *L'interculturalità dell'ebraismo*, a cura di Mauro Perani, Ravenna: Longo, 2004, pp. 269–285; Wirszubski, *Flavius Mithridates sermo*, pp. 11–12 and pp. 48–65; and idem, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, pp. 69–118.

⁷ For the list of works by Recanati available to Pico, see: Wirszubski, p. 289, and Giuliano Tamani, "I libri ebraici di Pico della Mirandola," p. 503.

Judah'.⁸ Within this "brief summary of kabbalah," Abulafia discusses, and even shows support for the kabbalistic idea of metempsychosis.⁹ He writes:

You should know that whatever I began with in this epistle concerning the necessary division of the first things that are contained in it into four, my intention was to indicate to you the opinion and knowledge of the kabbalists concerning the mystery of the secret of impregnation. That (i.e., the mystery of the secret), according to them, is that souls are transmigrated until the completion of judgment, as is indicated in the book *Sefer ha-Bahir* in the example of the moldy bread.¹⁰

This epistle, here stated to have been commenced with the explicit purpose of elucidating the kabbalistic idea of transmigration, was initially written in the thirteenth century to a certain Rabbi Judah Solomon of Barcelona and was intended as a rejoinder to the personal censure of Abulafia and his prophetic kabbalah by the important theosophical kabbalist, Rabbi Shlomo ibn Aderet. In its fifteenth century Latin form, the epistle interestingly turns from an internal Jewish kabbalistic debate between one of the leading Spanish Jewish traditionalists and between the father of prophetic kabbalah, into a means of instruction in matters of kabbalah in general, from a learned fifteenth century apostate to Christianity to the "father" of Christian kabbalah, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.

In its original thirteenth century Jewish context, mention of "the opinion of the kabbalists concerning the matter of the secret of impregnation"¹¹ in connection with the idea of transmigration clearly

⁸ This translation of Mithridates exists in Vatican Ebr. 190, fols. 120b–132b, soon to be published with commentary, critical notes and an English translation by Brian Copenhaver through the Harvard I Tatti Renaissance Library.

⁹ See footnotes 42 and 44 in chapter 4, above, and the discussions surrounding those footnotes. In the Latin version in Vatican Ebr. 190, the passages quoted in the above footnotes appear on fols. 121a–b and 131b, respectively.

¹⁰ This is based on Mithridates' Latin translation of the epistle for Pico in Vatican Ebr. 190, fols. 131a–b. There, the text reads: "Verum tamen scias quod quicquid incepti in hac epistola de divisione necessaria in quatuor prioribus rebus que in ea, sunt intentio mea fuit ad indicandum tibi mentem et scientiam Cabalistarum in mysterio secreti pregnationis. Que est, apud eos, quod animae transmigrantur ad complementum iudicii, ut indicatum est in libro *Sepher abahir* in exemplo panis putrefacti." For the parable of the moldy bread, see Mithridates' version of the *Bahir*, which was also carried out for Pico, Mithridates, *The Book Bahir*, pp. 357–358.

¹¹ This is based on the Hebrew version in ms. JTS 1887, fol. 101b, which states: "דע כי מה שהתחלתי בזאת האגרת בחלוקה בארבעת הדברים ראשונים שבה היתה כוונתי לרמוז לך דעת המקובלים בענין סוד העבור."

aims to display a familiarity of the concept and knowledge of its prominent role in some of the non-prophetic forms of kabbalah. Moshe Idel has opined that this discussion of Abulafia does not go beyond a mere display of familiarity, against which Abulafia sets up his own intellectualist theory of the secret of impregnation as related to an intellectualist idea of *devekut*, unio mystica.¹² Notwithstanding Idel's deft analysis and the veritable connection of impregnation and unio mystica in Abulafia, Abulafia's positive language concerning metempsychosis throughout his epistle suggests a more complex picture in which he does lend support to the idea.¹³ Whether or not Abulafia himself endorsed a transmigrationist idea in relation to the secret of impregnation, there is no question that in its Latin context of an overall summary of kabbalah, Abulafia's epistle as translated by Mithridates clearly presented Pico with a positive kabbalistic perspective of metempsychosis.

Abulafia's statement that "it shall be understood by the wise that the secret of the truth of impregnation lies between separation and conjunction"¹⁴ indeed seems to indicate an idea of unio mystica in accord with Pico's general theory of concordance, unity and conjunction, rather than a theory connected to metempsychosis. Nevertheless, in continuation to the above statement concerning "the truth of impregnation," Abulafia alla Mithridates writes:

Those who are perfect will understand that the separate souls are either many or one, and if separate, [the soul] will be liberated—or it will descend to the pit of corruption; or it will remain in one of the other holes for eternal generations; or it will return in order to live again in the presence of its Creator before the universal resurrection; or it will be restored two or three times.¹⁵

¹² Professor Idel has explicitly related this opinion to me in conversation, and it is also readily apparent in his writings on the general Abulafian theory of the secret of impregnation. For more on Abulafia's intellectualist idea and Idel's understanding, see: Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* [Hebrew], 2001, pp. 145–148. Also see the discussion surrounding footnote 39 in chapter 4, above.

¹³ For my full argument concerning Abulafia's language concerning metempsychosis in *Vzot l'Yehuda*, see the discussion surrounding footnotes 42 and 44 in chapter 4, above.

¹⁴ Vatican Ebr. 190, fol. 121a: "intelligatur ab intelligenti—secretum veritatis prae-nationis que est inter separationem et coniunctionem."

¹⁵ Ibid: "Et perfecti comprehendunt animas separatas aut multas aut unam, et si separata liberabitur—aut descendet ad puteum corruptionis; aut remanebit in altera focarum ad eternas generationes; aut redibit ut iterum vivat coram Creatore suo ante universalem resurrectionem; aut restorabitur bis vel ter."

The language here, that the soul “will return in order to live again” and that “it will be restored two or three times,” has clear transmigratory implications. In fact, in the original Hebrew text, that which Mithridates renders “*restorabitur*,” “it will be restored,” appears as “*titgalgel*,” literally, “it will transmigrate.”¹⁶ Moreover, the mention of “two or three times” for this restoration, or transmigration, is taken directly from Job 23:29 and is a verse classically used by kabbalistic thinkers as a proof text for the idea that the transmigration of the individual soul takes place a maximum of three times. Whether or not Pico was aware of the original transmigratory implications of the above passage from Abulafia, the relation between the secret of impregnation and transmigration throughout *V’zot l’Yehuda*, even in its Latin version, remains clear. Notwithstanding this connection and the extreme consonance of Abulafia’s statement of separation and conjunction in regard to impregnation with Pico’s entire project of unity and unio mystica, Pico interestingly makes no mention of Abulafia and his epistle in his own ruminations on the subject of metempsychosis.

Apart from Abulafia stands another possible kabbalistic source for a concept of transmigration that is quite germane to Pico’s overall thought, namely, the cosmic model of transmigration of the fourteenth century Jewish thinker Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi. Ashkenazi’s cosmic model of transmigration, known as *din b’nei halof* and entailing a dialectical process of universal constancy through collective change and differentiation,¹⁷ may have reached Pico via two separate viable means. The first of these possible ways is through one of Pico’s prominent Jewish teachers in matters of kabbalah, Rabbi Yohanan Alemanno.¹⁸ Indeed, Ashkenazi’s cosmic paradigm acted as an important element in the formulation of Alemanno’s own theory of transmigration,¹⁹ and may very well have been transmitted by the latter to his student and patron, Pico. Notwithstanding Pico’s failure to mention Ashkenazi, his own Neoplatonic theory of transmigration and unity, to be explained below, holds great consonance with the idea of *din b’nei halof*, an idea that may very well have been conveyed to him implicitly or secondarily

¹⁶ See: JTS ms. 1887, Fol. 98a.

¹⁷ For more on Ashkenazi’s theory of *din b’nei halof*, see above, pp. 195–197.

¹⁸ See footnote footnote 2 in chapter 6, above, for references concerning Pico’s relation to Alemanno.

¹⁹ See chapter six, above.

through Alemanno's own teachings and writings.²⁰ Given the extreme accord and the seeming novelty of Ashkenazi and then of both Alemanno and Pico over 150 years later, it is important to allow for the complex possibility of the tacit flow of knowledge from Ashkenazi through Alemanno to Pico, thereby allowing for a much more multifaceted and fuller picture of Renaissance notions of the cosmos, previously considered to be patently and simplistically novel.

Another possible means of transmission of Ashkenazi's unique idea to Pico is through the mysterious figure known as Dattilo. Not much is known about Dattilo, who is first mentioned by Pico in his *Apologia* of 1487, though statements by Pico's colleague Antonius Cronicus, which were cited by Pico and which involve a positive view of the Trinity by Dattilo, indicate that the latter was a Jewish apostate to Christianity.²¹ Beyond the scant information provided by Pico concerning Dattilo, the German Catholic orientalist Johann Albrecht Widmanstadt attests to the fact that some forty years after Pico's encounter with the apostate, Widmanstadt himself attended a series of lectures in Turin given by the selfsame Dattilo.²² In Widmanstadt's writings, he claims that Dattilo was one of Pico's teachers, possibly based on what he heard from Dattilo himself. He goes on to describe one of Dattilo's central teachings:

Certain living seeds lie hidden in the bowels of the earth and in the elements that surround it. In the course of this world's [that is, nature's] tireless efforts, and as a result of the struggle of creation and decay, these living seeds travel through various [forms of] plants, bushes, fruit trees and living creatures, all the way to the human body, and through to the sentient soul. Indeed, after a heavenly soul has been poured into them, they are eventually admitted into eternal bliss, even though they are, by comparison to this [highest soul] inferior and subject to it, because

²⁰ It is important to note that in accord with the practice of the time, Alemanno himself never mentions Ashkenazi's name and fails to cite him as a source, even when directly copying lengthy passages. What would now be considered "bad scholarship" or even plagiarism was then, and especially in the writings of Alemanno, commonplace, making the contemporary deciphering of his vast corpus of works, which was informed by a vast number of precedents, all the more difficult.

²¹ Pico, *Opera omnia*, p. 124, quoted in Scholem, "The Beginnings of the Christian kabbalah," p. 41, fn. 2: "Cujus rei testem gravissimum habeo Antonium Cronicum... qui suis auribus cum apud eum essem in convivio audivit Datilum Hebraeum peritum hujus scientiae in Christianorum prorsus de trinitate sententiam pedibus manibusque descendere."

²² For sources of the Dattilo story in the accounts of Widmanstadt and Pico, see: Cassuto, *The Jews in Florence*, p. 247, footnotes 163 and 164. See also Scholem, "The Beginnings of Christian kabbalah," pp. 18–20.

they are of the earth. And thus, there are some among the kabbalists who believe that all living things are granted the hope of redemption. I [here Widmanstadt interjects his own commentary] have quoted all this in order to point out the manner in which monstrous ideas burst forth from the kabbalah of the Jews.²³

Herein lies a cosmic picture of transmigration revolving around the concept of the seed, in which all forms of life, from plants to the sentient soul, participate in the constant struggle of creation and decay. According to Gershom Scholem, “Dattilo was merely presenting, in a slightly veiled form, the cardinal doctrine concerning the transformation of all things from the simplest life form to the highest level of the sefirot.” Scholem continues, noting that “Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi of Barcelona... was the first to develop the idea in detail during the period 1300–25,” and that Ashkenazi’s “commentary on *Sefer Yesirah* [in which the idea was greatly developed] was widely circulated in Italy around 1500, and Dattilo could have encountered it in any number of manuscripts.”²⁴ If Scholem is correct, then considering Dattilo’s connection with Pico, considering that this passage purportedly expounds one of Dattilo’s central teachings, and considering the fact that such a picture parallels Pico’s own cosmic idea of transformation, which will be shown, then Dattilo could very well have been another means by which Pico may have been influenced by Ashkenazi’s cosmic trans migratory model of *din b’nei halof*.

The explicit linkage of Dattilo’s idea by Widmanstadt to kabbalistic ideas of redemption for all living things seems to support Scholem’s claim for a *din b’nei halof* type of paradigm as standing firmly behind Dattilo’s teachings. Such ideas and their kabbalistic bases would have certainly found favor with Pico, given his great propensity for kabbalistic thought. In the words of the great Pico scholar, Eugenio Garin, “In a certain sense, it is possible to say that the kabbalah and Jewish culture take a position in Pico analogous to that which from one standpoint Hermetism and *prisca theologia*, and from another standpoint Plato and the platonic tradition, have in the Ficinian worldview.”²⁵ Notwithstanding

²³ Cited by Joseph Perles, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der hebräischen und aramäischen Studien*, Munich, 1884, p. 186, and translated into English in Scholem, “The Beginnings of Christian kabbalah,” p. 19. Parenthetical notes obtain within Scholem’s article.

²⁴ Scholem, “The Beginnings of Christian kabbalah,” p. 20. Here, the parenthetical notes are mine, for clarification.

²⁵ Eugenio Garin, “L’umanesimo italiano e la cultura ebraica,” p. 369.

both Dattilo's overt kabbalistic association and Pico's proclivity for kabbalah, it is highly important to mention that he makes no mention of the kabbalah, let alone of Ashkenazi, in his own thoughts concerning transmigration. While the theory of *din b'nei halof* may have been tacitly standing in the background of Pico's thought, another source, in addition to or apart from the kabbalistic likes of Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, may be at play in this cosmic theory as based on seeds, and which in the thought of Pico develops into a full-fledged model of cosmic union in the individual human soul through transmigration, and of the converse transmigration of the individual soul through the cosmos that is unified through the individual human.

Over forty years before Dattilo's declaration to Widmanstadt that "certain living seeds lie hidden in the bowels of the earth and in the elements that surround it," Marsilio Ficino wrote that "present everywhere through earth and water in an artful and vital nature are the spiritual and life-giving seeds of everything."²⁶ Based on the Plotinian idea of *logoi spermatikoi*, the idea that 'seminal reasons' pervade the concrete world as the concrete hypostases of Ideas and stand as the backbone of the growth processes of all individual forms, Ficino's idea of seeds is deeply connected to nature and to the idea of the *spiritus*.²⁷ In Ficino's thought, "nature is identified as the 'power of generation'," and "the seeds of nature...are assigned to a sphere located between the soul and nature."²⁸ Similarly, the *spiritus*, which is the medium between the *anima* and the body, acts as the vector of the invisible, divine seeds of natural things. This is the case not only for the *spiritus mundi*, the *anima mundi* and the world body, but on the individual level as well since, as Ficino himself states, "it is not a species that comes forth from one of these 'seminal powers' but rather an individual of the species."²⁹ Given the wide usage of the Plotinian view within Ficino, the extreme importance of the intermediary *spiritus* for Ficino's own conception of transmigration,³⁰ and the usage of the entire seminal idea in order

²⁶ *Platonic Theology*, vol. I, p. 147, quoted in Hiroshi Hirai, "Concepts of Seeds and Nature," p. 268: "ubique per terram et aquam in natura quadam artificiosa vitalique spiritualia et vivifica semina omnium."

²⁷ For a careful analysis of this idea as developed in Ficino, see: Hirai, "Concepts of Seeds and Nature."

²⁸ Hirai, p. 262.

²⁹ *Platonic Theology*, vol. II, p. 117, quoted in Hirai, p. 269: "Non enim a bulla illarum fit species ipsa, sed quiddam potius particulare sub specie."

³⁰ See chapter eight, below.

to explain the development and organization of the natural world, it is reasonable to assume that Plotinus' views as filtered through Ficino may have had an impact upon both Dattilo and upon Pico, as much as if not moreso than those of Ashkenazi. Widmanstadt's recounting of Dattilo's "monstrous ideas" of the kabbalah may very well have come from the likes of Ashkenazi, but even if they were, they also seem to have been peppered by the non-kabbalistic likes of Plotinus, possibly as filtered through Ficino. In Pico's own theories of transmigration, in fact, no explicit mention is made of kabbalah or of kabbalists, whereas Neoplatonic, and especially Plotinian philosophy plays a major role.

Within Pico's *Conclusiones nongentae*, written in 1486 and perhaps his most encyclopedic work, Pico explicitly mentions the theory of transmigration at least four times and hints to it on several other occasions. Though they are derived from diverse sources and are stated in various parts of the *Conclusiones*, Pico's statements in that work concerning transmigration relate to each other. The first of the overt references, based on the thought of Plotinus, assertively states that "the soul that sinned in either a terrestrial or aerial body lives the life of a beast after death."³¹ Such a bold statement seems to endorse the rather radical notion of transmigration into beasts, and approval of the authority behind the assertion seems to be the case, considering Pico's great esteem for Plotinus.³² Indeed, in his *Oratio*, written simultaneously with his *Conclusiones* and intended to be their introduction, Pico states:

In Plotinus there is no one thing in particular for you to admire,³³ for he offers himself to our admiration in every part; and while he speaks in a divine manner about divine things, and of human things in a manner far above man, with a learned indirectness of discourse, the sweating Platonists scarcely understand.³⁴

³¹ *Theses*, p. 299. "Anima quae peccavit vel in terreno vel in aereo corpore post mortem bruti vitam vivit."

³² For an interesting and lucid exposition of 'post-Plotinian' philosophy, which adopted Plotinian ideals and of which Pico was a part, see: Celenza, "The Search for Ancient Wisdom in Early-Modern Europe," especially pp. 117–119.

³³ Wallis translates 'admiror' as 'to wonder'. While Wallis's translation is certainly valid, 'to admire' here, in my opinion, more fully captures the nuance of Pico's great esteem for Plotinus.

³⁴ *Dignity*, p. 23: "In Plotino primum quicquam non est quod admireris, qui se undique praebet admirandum, quem de divinis divine, de humanis longe supra hominem docta sermonis obliquitate loquentem, sudantes Platonici vix intelligunt" (*Oratio*, pp. 52–54). As Farmer has noted, this last statement about the "sudantes Platonici" (the sweating Platonists) may be a jab at Ficino, with whom Pico may have had differences concerning the understanding of Plotinian philosophy. See: Farmer, p. 12, fn. 35.

Taken at its face value, Pico's conclusion concerning the sinning soul, coupled with his high regard for Plotinus as exemplified in the *Oratio*, could be understood as an explicit espousal of the idea of radical metempsychosis.

Recent scholarship has rejected the more literal reading of Pico's approach to transmigration for a more allegorically inclined assessment. S.A. Farmer, for example states that "Pico normally interpreted transmigration as a symbol of men living the 'vegetative' or 'brutish' life,"³⁵ and that "Pico would have presumably interpreted those sections of the Platonic corpus that discuss the transmigration of souls allegorically."³⁶ Similarly, Michael J.B. Allen, while presenting an overall perspicacious account of the place of man in his article, "Cultura Hominis: Giovanni Pico, Marsilio Ficino and the Idea of Man," states in a footnote within the article, "Both Pico and Ficino rejected metempsychosis. To believe that the rational soul could pass into irrational animals was the sublime Plotinus's one great error, rejected by his successors in the pagan as well as the Christian traditions."³⁷ According to both of these accounts, Pico rejected Plotinus's theory of metempsychosis and placed allegory above literality in his assessment of the doctrine. Following is a different picture, of both Pico's relation to the literality of Plotinian philosophy concerning metempsychosis, and of the place of allegory not as a replacement for, but as a coexistent to literality as a possible understanding in Pico's assessment of the transmigration of souls.

Pico's own understanding of the literal sense as coeternal with the allegorical sense can be gleaned from a telling passage in his *Apology*, written in 1487 in defense of his original thirteen conclusiones condemned by the Church in March of that same year. There he writes:

Indeed, just as with us is a four-fold method of expounding the Bible, literal, mystical or allegorical, tropological and anagogical, thus it is with the Jews. With them, the literal sense is called Peshat...the allegorical Midrash...the tropological is called Sechel, which Abraham ibn Ezra pursues, wherein he does not expound upon the literal sense, and Levi ben Gershom and many others [hold this view], and above all Rabbi Moses the Egyptian.³⁸ The anagogical sense is called kabbalah, and this is because of that statement that says that the Torah was handed over to

³⁵ *Theses*, p. 488, fn.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 454, fn.

³⁷ "Cultura Hominis," p. 188, fn. 40.

³⁸ Moses Maimonides.

Moses by God, and was accepted in succession, in a proclaimed manner, almost always following the anagogical meaning.³⁹

According to this theory, four valid methods subsist for interpreting Scriptures, and while the allegorical method may be more refined than the literal, it does not displace its validity. Indeed, concerning the four-fold method of exposition, Pico himself instructs in the *Heptaplus*, “If there is anywhere a discussion of the intelligible world, we surely can, or at least we should, interpret all the details in respect to all the others, so that just as that world contains in itself all the lower natures, so also the same passage may put us in mind of the rest of the worlds.”⁴⁰ If this is the case and if, as Moshe Idel has taught, for the likes of Pico “a book means not only a reservoir of information but also the idea of a certain order which stems from the divine realm,”⁴¹ then there is no reason why the idea that various methods remain coextensively valid for interpreting Scriptures should not also apply to an understanding of man. This is especially the case since, as Idel has noted, in the Renaissance, the relationship between the book of God and the book of nature came into focus and started to shift in a new direction. If, as for Pico, man is the microcosmic node that shares in both God *and* nature,⁴² then not only do both books apply to him, his very essence reflects in both. As Pico states in the *Oratio*, the Delphic precept “‘Know thyself’ arouses us and urges us towards the knowledge of all nature, of which man’s nature is the medium and, as it were,

³⁹ Iohannis Pici Morandolae, *Apologia*, in *Opera Omnia*, Basel, 1557, p. 178: Sicut enim apud nos est quadruplex modus exponendi Bibliam, literalis, mysticus sive allegoricus, tropologicus et anagogicus, it est et apud Hebraeos. Litteralis apud eos dicitur Pesat... Allegoricus Midras... Tropologicus dicitur Sechel, quem sequuntur Abraham Abnazra [Aben Ezra], ubi literaliter non exponit, et Leui Bengerson et multi alii, et ante omnes Rabi Moses Aegyptius. Anagogicus dicitur Cabala, et hoc quia illa expositione que dicitur ore Dei tradita Moysi, et accepta per successionem, modo praedicto, quasi semper sensum sequitur Anagogicum.” For a ginger analysis of this passage in relation to Bahya ben Asher’s possible influence upon Pico, see: Wirszubski, appendix 23, pp. 262–263. This four-fold method of interpretation might also relate to Pico’s four-fold understanding of the nature of man’s soul, discussed below, pp. 226–229. In such a case, each level of interpretation would correspond to a different level of the human soul, reflecting a greater reality that is simultaneously reflected upon, and within the text.

⁴⁰ *Heptaplus*, p. 80.

⁴¹ “‘Book of God’ and ‘Book of Law’ in Late 15th Century Florence,” p. 7. Within this article, Idel eruditely discusses two different ways of reading the Book, which made their way into the thought of Pico, astrological and kabbalistic.

⁴² This is discussed further below.

the union.”⁴³ In such a case, methods of ‘knowing’ the cosmic Book should also apply to man’s ‘knowing’ of himself, since as the medium and union, he shares his divinely given order with the order reflected in the Book, and in a sense, himself becomes a book for understanding the order of the cosmos. Hence, an allegorical interpretation of man’s soul and its transmigration between the spheres of God and nature can, and certainly does exist in the writings of Pico, but to assert that it supplants the literal sense that Pico also seems to espouse would be against Pico’s very own beliefs.

Hence, the possibility of a veridical sense to transmigration in parts of Pico’s writings should not altogether be ruled out simply due to allegoresis as expressed in other parts. This is especially the case within his *Conclusiones*, particularly considering the clarity of his language in regard to the Plotinian conclusion on the sinning soul, quoted above.⁴⁴ Had Pico intended completely otherwise than the literal sense, he would have used less assertive terminology, and probably would have affirmed the figurative intent in regard to the ‘admirable’ Plotinus, as he does, for example, with another of his important *prisci theologi*, Zoroaster. Indeed, regarding the latter, he writes, “By the dog, Zoroaster simply means the irrational part of the soul and corresponding things, which anyone will see is true who carefully considers all the sayings of the commentators, who themselves, just like Zoroaster, speak enigmatically.”⁴⁵ In another place, he writes, “What the Chaldean interpreters say about the first saying of Zoroaster, concerning the ladder from Tartarus to the first fire, signifies nothing but the series of natures in the universe from ungraded matter to that which in gradation extends beyond all grades.”⁴⁶ In both of these cases, Pico’s assertion of allegoric, and even symbolic language illustrates his felt need to qualify the sayings of Zoroaster

⁴³ *Dignity*, pp. 14–15: “Cognosce te ipsum ad totius naturae nos cognitionem, cuius et interstitium et quasi cynnus natura est hominis, excitat et inhortatur” (*Oratio*, p. 32).

⁴⁴ Footnote 31.

⁴⁵ *Theses*, p. 491: “Per canem nihil aliud intelligit Zoroaster quam partem inrationalem animae et proportionalia, quod ita esse uidebit qui diligenter dicta omnia expositorum considerauerit, qui et ipsi, sicut et Zoroaster, enigmatice loquuntur.”

⁴⁶ *Theses*, p. 487: “Quod dicunt interpretes chaldei super primum dictum Zoroastris, de scala a Tartaro ad primum ignem, nihil aliud significant quam seriem naturarum uniuersi a non gradu materiae ad eum qui est super omnem gradum graduate protensum.” As will be demonstrated further, this Neoplatonic idea of the series of natures in the universe from ungraded matter to that which extends beyond all grades has correlations in Pico’s understanding of human nature/s, thus affecting the entire theory of the transmigration of human souls.

as allegorical and symbolical. No such qualification applies to Pico's Plotinian assertion of transmigration into beasts, indicating his possible support for the literal idea. Pico's potential maintenance of veritable transmigration should also not be ruled out in consideration of his faith in other *prisci theologi* in another of his unequivocal assertions concerning transmigration, which states: "All Indian, Persian, Egyptian, and Chaldean wise-men believed in the transmigration of souls."⁴⁷ Though he neither supports nor refutes the doctrine in this last statement, his use of the reverential expression 'wise-men', and his sweeping employment of the term 'all' in reference to cultural trends of thought that deeply affected his own syncretism are highly suggestive.

Pico derives his Plotinian conclusion concerning the transmigration of sinning human souls into beasts from the *Enneads* 1.11, in which Plotinus states:

And the animals, in what way or degree do they possess the Animate? If there be in them, as the opinion goes, human Souls that have sinned, then the Animating-Principle in its separable phase does not enter directly into the brute; it is there but not there to them; they are aware only of the image of the Soul and of that only by being aware of the body organized and determined by that image.⁴⁸

According to this theory, the sinning soul that, in the words of Pico "lives the life of a beast" nevertheless remains human; it does not enter into a direct state of conjunction with the body of the beast, but acts as an animating principle that organizes and determines the body of the beast through its own image. This whole process extends for Pico into the vegetative state. According to another of his explicit conclusions concerning transmigration, he states, "by the roots of the earth they (i.e., the Chaldean interpreters of Zoroaster) can only mean the vegetative life, which conforms to the words of Empedocles, who posits transanimation even into plants."⁴⁹ Just as the human soul can live the life of a beast through its sins, so it can become even more debase and live the life of a plant.

⁴⁷ *Theses*, p. 305: "Transcorporationem animarum crediderunt omnes sapientes Indorum, Persarum, Aegyptiorum, et Chaldeorum."

⁴⁸ Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, p. 5.

⁴⁹ *Theses*, p. 489: "Per radices terrae nihil aliud intelligere possunt quam vitam vegetalem, convenienter ad dicta Empedoclis, qui point transanimationem etiam in plantas."

This type of transmigration into beasts or plants, as well as transmigration into higher beings, is possible due to man's universal nature. For Pico, man as the microcosm reflecting the tripartite nature of the universe is himself tripartite.⁵⁰ In his *Heptaplus*, he elaborates upon this tripartite mirroring of the cosmos in man, stating:

The rational soul is called heaven, for Aristotle calls the heaven a self-moving living being,⁵¹ and our soul (as the Platonists prove) is a self-moving substance.⁵² Heaven is a circle, and the soul is also a circle, or rather, as Plotinus writes, heaven is a circle because its soul is a circle⁵³... The body is called earth, because it is an earthly and heavy substance. Made from dirt (*humus*), as Moses writes, it gave its name to man (*homo*).⁵⁴ But between the earthly body and the heavenly substance of the soul there had to be a connecting link to join together such different natures; to this task was assigned that delicate and airy body which physicians and philosophers call the spirit and which Aristotle says is of diviner nature than the elements and corresponds by analogy to heaven. This is called "light," a term which could not better suit the opinion of physicians and philosophers, who all agree that it is of a very bright substance and that nothing pleases, fosters, and refreshes it more than light.⁵⁵

In yet another place, his *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni*, written in the same year as the *Conclusiones*, Pico writes:

In man there are two bodies (as I shall prove in my Council, citing the opinions of Aristotle and of Plato). One of the two is eternal; it is called

⁵⁰ For more the tripartite nature of the universe in Pico, see his *Heptaplus*. For the possible Kabbalistic sources of this idea in Pico, see the astute analysis of Wirszubski, pp. 245–251. For more on the trend of the tripartite nature of man and of the soul vehicle in some of Pico's contemporaries, see my article, "Circularity, the Soul Vehicle, and the Renaissance Rebirth of Reincarnation," pp. 75–78 and pp. 89–92.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, II.6, *The Complete Works*, pp. 475–476.

⁵² Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245c, p. 29.

⁵³ *Enneads* ii.2.1, pp. 40–41. As will be shown below, this idea of parallel circularity in the heavens and in the soul has repercussions on the various associations and subsequent transformations of the human soul.

⁵⁴ This may be taken from the same tradition as Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, who, in his commentary on Numbers 19:2 writes that through his wisdom and intelligence, man named the creatures, each according to its nature. When asked by God what man's own name would be, he responds, "Man (*Adam*), for I was created from the earth (*min ha-adamah*). שִׁנְבִרְאִי מִן הָאֲדָמָה, אָדָם, אָמַר לִפְנֵי, אֵלֹהִים, לֵאמֹר, לֹא אֶתָּה מִן הָאֲדָמָה." For other points of the possible influence of Bahya ben Asher's commentary on Pico, see Wirszubski, pp. 248–250 and pp. 262–263.

⁵⁵ Pico, *Heptaplus*, pp. 118–119. For more on a parallel idea of 'light' as related to the soul in the thought of Abarbanel, see pp. 118–119 above. For a different idea of light and the soul, related to the candle metaphor, see the discussions of Hayyat and Alcastiel, p. 158 above.

by the Platonists the “heavenly vehicle” and is the body to which the rational soul directly gives life. The other body is corruptible; that is, the body which we see with our corporeal eyes, and which is composed of the four elements.⁵⁶

Hence, man is made up of three parts, one his immaterial soul, one his earthly body composed from an admixture of the four elements, and one the ‘spiritus’, which joins the former to the latter by acting as the vehicle of the former in the realm of the latter.

Pico further divides and elaborates the first of the three human parts, the immaterial soul, thereby giving an even greater picture of the cosmos as reflected in and existing within man. In his *Commentary*, he continues his description of man by explaining the vital portions, which parallel the vital parts of the cosmos. After the soul-vehicle and the earthly body,

The next part in Man is the vegetative part, by which the second or corruptible body is procreated, is nourished, and grows, and the first or eternal body lives with everlasting life. The third part of Man is the sensitive or moving part, through which he corresponds to the irrational animals. Fourth is the rational part, which is peculiar to Man and the other rational animals, and which is believed by the Latin Aristotelians to be the highest and noblest part of our soul. Actually, however, still higher than the rational part is the intellectual and angelic part, through which Man corresponds to the angels, just as through the sensitive part he corresponds to the beasts. The apex of this intellectual part the Platonists call the “unity” of the soul, and they say that it is the part through which Man is joined directly with God, and, as it were, corresponds to God, just as through the vegetative part he corresponds to the plants.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Pico, *Commentary*, p. 91, Italian version (*Commento*), p. 25: “Nell’uomo sono due corpi, come nel nostro concilio proveremmo. Uno eterno chiamato da’ Platonici Vehiculo celeste, il quale da l’anima rationale è immediate vivificato, l’altro corrodibile, quale noi veggiamo con gli occhi corporali composto di quattro elementi.”

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 91–92: “Poi è in lui la vegetative per la quale questo corrottile corpo si genera, si nutrisce, e cresce, e quello eterno vive di perpetua vita. Terbio vi è la parte sensitiva e motiva, per la quale ha convenientia con li animali irrazionali. Quarto vi è la parte rationale, quale è propria de l’uomo e delli animali rationali, e da’ peripatetici latini è creduta essere l’ultima e la più nobil parte dell’anima nostra, nonostante che sopra essa sia la parte, intellettuale e angelica, per la quale l’uomo così conviene con li Angeli, come per la parte sensitiva conviene con le bestie. El sommo di questa parte intellettuale chiamano e’ platonici unità dell’anima, e vogliono sia quella per la quale l’uomo immediatamente con Dio si congiunge, e quasi con lui conviene, come per la parte vegetativa conviene con le piante” (*Commento*, p. 25).

The vegetative and the sensitive parts link man to the plant and the animal realms, respectively. The rational part relates to epistemic knowledge and a philosophic comprehension of the supreme good, and the intellectual part relates to a superior form of knowledge, the height of which is unity. Here, Pico asserts the limits of rational knowledge,⁵⁸ placing the Platonic conception of 'unity' above the Aristotelian notion of ratiocination. Notwithstanding this hierarchical distinction between Platonic and Aristotelian thought concerning the soul, in his contemporaneously written *Conclusiones*, Pico interestingly declares the Aristotelian notion of the active intellect to be the highest portion of the human soul. There he writes: "The whole soul does not descend when it descends,"⁵⁹ and "the active intellect is nothing but the part of the soul that dwells above and does not fall."⁶⁰ For Pico, Platonic unity consists of conjunction with the Aristotelian active intellect, which according to him should actually be counted as a part of the human soul. Hence, along with the vegetative, sensitive and rational parts, man has an intellectual part within his soul, the height of which is a portion that is semi-divine and that constantly remains within the immaterial sphere.

When heeded to through free-will, the semi-divine portion of the soul, interpreted in Aristotelian fashion as the active intellect, can elevate the human being to semi-divine status. As Pico writes, "When the soul is assimilated to the intellect in an elevated fashion, motion in the vehicle becomes perfectly circular."⁶¹ Taken together with his statement in the *Heptaplus* that "the Saracens and our own people call God a circle,"⁶² the notion that the assimilation of the human soul to the active intellect creates a perfectly circular motion in the soul-vehicle, which is the spiritus, can be understood to mean that through participation, the human soul and its vehicle partake in the divine, and even become semi-divine. Correspondingly, the assimilation of the human

⁵⁸ For more on this, see: Lelli, "*Prisca Philosophia* and *Docto Religio*."

⁵⁹ *Theses*, p. 297: "Non tota descendit anima quum descendit." This is based on the *Enneads*, iv.1.1, p. 139, in which Plotinus states: "The entity...described as 'consisting of the undivided soul and of the soul divided among bodies,' contains a soul which is at once above and below, attached to the Supreme and yet reaching down to this sphere, like a radius from a centre."

⁶⁰ *Theses*, p. 303: "Intellectus agens nihil est aliud quam pars animae quae sursum manet et non cadit."

⁶¹ *Theses*, p. 313: "Cum excellenter ad intellectum assimilatur anima, fit in vehiculo motus perfecte circularis."

⁶² *Heptaplus*, p. 108.

soul to one of its lower parts will cause it to partake in a lower nature through the medium of the soul vehicle. The human soul assimilated to one of the other three parts, whether rational, brutish, or vegetative, will become the form and organizing principle of that which is either a rational animal, a brute, or a plant.

In the higher state of conjunction with the active intellect occurs a transfiguration for the soul of man into a higher, celestial being, whereas in the lower state occurs a transmigration and transubstantiation of that selfsame soul into the vital principle of humans, animals or even plants. In any one of these cases, the soul remains human throughout by way of its possible participation in any of the four domains through its other three natures and through the medium of the soul vehicle that can carry it to those domains. Pico writes, “Human nature, the tie and knot of the world, is located in the middle of the hierarchy of being and just as every middle participates in the extremes, so Man, through his various parts, has some relation or correspondence to every part of the world. For this reason he is often called a Microcosm, that is, a little world.”⁶³ Thus, a human soul may participate in the divine realm by becoming angelic through assimilation of its parts with its part that is the active intellect, may participate in the human realm through its act of reason, or may participate in the beastly or vegetative realms by veridically becoming the animating force for an animal or a plant. Nevertheless, the human soul never becomes entirely assimilated in any one realm, as by its very ontological nature it always still has its other three parts and its vehicle, which carries it. Something always remains outside of any given state of the human soul, though through free-will as manifest through the possibility to participate in every level of

⁶³ *Commentary*, p. 91: “La natura dell’uomo, quasi vincolo e nodo del mondo, è collocata nel grado mezzo dello universo, e come ogni mezzo partecipa de li estremi, così l’uomo per diverse sue parti con tutte le parti del mondo ha communione e convenientia, per la qual cagione si suole chiamare Microcosmo, cioè piccol mondo” (*Commento*, pp. 24–25). Compare this to the idea already forcefully presented in Ibn al-Sid al-Batalyawsi’s *Book of Imaginary Circles*, with which Pico may have become acquainted, either indirectly through other Hebrew writings on which al-Batalyawsi had an influence, or perhaps directly through his Jewish teacher Yohanan Alemanno, who was heavily influenced by this work. Al-Batalyawsi writes: “God, Blessed is He, created Man last of all the creatures, and gathered into his creation all that was in the world... And because of this, he is called a microcosm... And he is prepared to rise and to attain the higher world and to descend and to attain the lower world, and it was already said in this regard that he is in the middle, between two extremes” (p. 26).

the cosmos due to his universal nature,⁶⁴ man can choose to attenuate certain parts and emphasize others, thus bringing himself into different spheres.

Through his six parts, the four parts of the soul, the spiritus and the corporeal body, man not only reflects the cosmos in his being, he has the potentiality to participate in it on every level. Hence, in contradistinction to the claim of Kristeller that “for Pico, man has no determined nature and no fixed place in the hierarchy of beings, but he is somehow placed outside this hierarchy,”⁶⁵ Pico’s philosophy of man does place man within the great-chain-of-being, giving him freedom and potentiality by making his nature no one thing, but manifoldly inclusive of all things. As Michael J.B. Allen has astutely noted in regard to Pico’s philosophy of man, “There is no real question... of being ‘outside’ the universal hierarchy, but rather of ‘moving’ within it: there is freedom, but not ‘unlimited freedom’.”⁶⁶ Man’s freedom derives not from anything external nor from his being external to nature, but from the four parts of his soul, his immortal body that carries those four parts, and his corruptible body with which the immortal body conjoins, thereby bringing it into relation with the immaterial four parts of the soul. All of these human elements, including the four parts of the soul, reflect and participate in different levels within the universal hierarchy. This allows for a transmigration of souls that is very natural to the nature of man, but which is always participated and is never fully ontological.

According to Pico, this doctrine of participated human transmigration as based upon the Plotinian conception of the identity between higher and lower mental states and higher and lower ontological spheres, and on the Plotinian theory of the soul vehicle as the bond that allows for movement between the different spheres, presents a difficulty for Platonic philosophy. In the final of his four theses that explicitly mention the idea of transmigration, Pico writes:

⁶⁴ Al-Batalyawsi also writes on this idea of ‘possibility’ and free choice in man due to his manifold, composite nature as the microcosm. On pp. 27–28 of his *Book of Imaginary Circles*, he writes about man: “He is a part of ‘the possible’, and the nature of the possible is to be between that which is necessary and that which is impossible... He will dress in a certain form at one time, and will disrobe from the same form another time. And he will be a certain form one time in potential, and another time in actuality.” For more on the idea of the “Possible” in Renaissance thought, see: Idel, “Man as the ‘Possible’ Entity.”

⁶⁵ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, p. 175.

⁶⁶ “Cultura Hominis,” p. 187.

From that saying of Plato in the *Phaedrus*, “Unless the soul of man had contemplated those things that truly exist, it would not have entered into this animal,” if rightly understood, it will be known that the opinion of Plotinus placing the transmigration of souls into beasts does not conform to the mind of Plato.⁶⁷

Pico seems here to be making a problematic statement, considering the preceding statement in the *Phaedrus* that “a human soul can enter a wild animal, and a soul that was once human can move from an animal to a human being again.”⁶⁸ Such a blatant declaration certainly does not place the transmigration of souls into beasts outside of the conformation of the mind of Plato. Plato indeed affirms the transmigration of souls into beasts, and Pico most probably would have known this. One possible explanation for this discrepancy might be a diversity of opinion as to that which constitutes the ‘human soul’, and consequently, as to that which constitutes transmigration. In his conclusion, Pico seems to understand the saying of Socrates that “Unless the soul of man had contemplated those things that truly exist, it would not have entered into this animal”⁶⁹ to assert that by gaining at least a glimpse of the world of Forms before its descent, the soul becomes truly human by taking on the human body, becoming its form. According to this perception, the human soul is human in its functional conjunction with the human body; in any other state, whether celestial, beastly, or vegetative, it is not truly human. Thus, according to Plato’s theory as understood by Pico, the transmigration of a human soul into the realm of beasts cannot truly occur.

In opposition, Pico’s conception of the human soul holds it to be ontologically human, whether it is in a perfected state in its assimilation to the active intellect and the subsequent circular motion of the spiritus, or whether it is in a rational, bestial or vegetative state and the subsequent attraction of the spiritus to matter. The human soul remains human throughout and thus, while it can participate in that

⁶⁷ *Theses*, p. 455: “Ex dicto illo Platonis in Phedro, quod nisi anima hominis ea que uere sunt intuita esset, in hoc animal non uenisset, si recte intelligatur, intelligetur quod opinion Plotini ponens transmigrationem animarum in bruta non est ad mentem Platonis.”

⁶⁸ *Phaedrus*, 249b, p. 36. For a fuller discussion of the Platonic position on this, see my “Circularity,” pp. 71–72.

⁶⁹ *Phaedrus*, 249c–250a. Benjamin Jowett translates this statement in a different manner: “Every soul of man has in the way of nature beheld true being; this was the condition of her passing into the form of man.”

which is divine, rational, bestial or vegetative through its own parts that are divine, rational, bestial and vegetative, it never actually fully *becomes* any of these, as it retains its other parts, even when these are minimized at the accentuation of any one. Hence, the human soul, as ontologically human, can transmigrate in a participated though not fully transformative manner, even into the spheres of beasts and plants.

Notwithstanding the possible veridical interpretation of Pico's stand on the participated transmigration of human souls, a metaphorical understanding most certainly applies to his intellectual project. As Michael J.B. Allen has perceptively observed, "the *Oratio* is concerned not with the subtle but particular issue (stemming from the Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis) of what happens to man's essence if he chooses to become a particular non-human entity, a fly, a pig, even an angel; but rather with the broader question regarding his choice of a fundamental ontological level."⁷⁰ An allegorical approach certainly does apply to Pico's writings, but it does not supersede the literal approach. Rather, due to the literal approach's ontologically participated nature, it lends the allegorical approach even further support. The two coexist, and though the allegorical approach is more coherently developed by Pico, and may even be more exalted by him, it reflects on a certain ontological reality in the nature of man that, in turn, reflects it. Circular 'unity' between literality and allegory exists, then, in Pico's very theory of man, causing it to emulate the highest part of his actual theory.

Pico's allegorical reading of transmigration expresses itself most fully in the opening portions of his *Oratio*. There, hearkening back to the idea of the seed as expressed by his Jewish teacher Dattilo and his older contemporary Ficino, Pico writes:

At man's birth the Father placed in him every sort of seed and sprouts of every kind of life. The seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear their fruit in him. If he cultivates vegetable seeds, he will become a plant. If the seeds of sensation, he will grow into a brute. If rational, he will come out a heavenly animal. If intellectual, he will be an angel, and a son of God. And if he is not contented with the lot of any creature but takes himself up into the center of his own unity, then, made one spirit with God and settled in the solitary darkness of the Father, who is above all things, he will stand ahead of all things.⁷¹

⁷⁰ "Cultura Hominis," p. 188.

⁷¹ *Dignity*, p. 5: "Nascenti homini omnifaria semina et omnigenae vitae germina indidit Pater; quae quisque excoluerit illa adolescent, et fructus suos ferent in illo. Si

From his birth and throughout his lived life, man has the power to choose to cultivate any of his four parts, or through the central position of 'his own unity' of all and with the All, he can supersede each individually and unitively stand with God. Hence, 'unio mystica' is not only a unitive cleaving to God, it is a unity within man, making the four parts of his soul into one spirit, in emulation of the one spirit of God. By emphasizing any one part, man becomes partial, whether it be a vegetative, brutish, heavenly-animalistic, or even angelic partiality. By emphasizing no single part but unifying them all, he becomes semi-divine and 'will stand ahead of all things.' This applies to the lived life of man from which man can break out of the confines, even temporarily, through a recognition of his centrally lived position and an emphasis upon no extreme but on the all.

Pico continues regarding man's flexibly concrete embodied position on earth and the determinant nature of concentration on any one part of the soul. In a passage in the *Oratio* that shortly follows the one quoted above, Pico's earthly, allegorical intentions regarding the natures of the human soul and their positions as the possible forms for man become clear. He writes:

It is not the rind which makes the plant, but a dull and non-sentient nature; not the hide which makes a beast of burden, but a brutal and sensual soul; not the spherical body which makes the heavens, but right reason; and not a separateness from the body but a spiritual intelligence which makes an angel. For example, if you see a man given over to his belly and crawling upon the ground, it is a bush not a man that you see. If you see anyone blinded by the illusions of his empty and calypso-like imagination, seized by the desire of scratching, and delivered over to the senses, it is a brute not a man that you see. If you come upon a philosopher winnowing out all things by right reason, he is a heavenly not an earthly animal. If you come upon a pure contemplator, ignorant of the body, banished to the innermost places of the mind, he is not an earthly, not a heavenly animal; he more superbly is a divinity clothed with human flesh.⁷²

vegetalia, planta fiet. Si sensualia, obrutescet. Si ratioanalia, celeste evadet animal. Si intellectualia, angelus erit et Dei filius, et si nulla creaturarum sorte contentus in unitatis centrum suae se receperit, unus cum Deo spiritus cactus, in solitaria Patris caligine qui est super omnia constitutus omnibus antestabit" (*Oratio*, p. 8).

⁷² *Dignity*, p. 6: "Neque enim plantam cortex, sed stupida et nihil sentiens natura; neque iumenta corium, sed bruta anima et sensualis; nec caelum orbiculatum corpus, sed recta ratio; nec sequestration corporis, sed spiritalis intelligentia angelum facit. Si quem enim videris deditum ventri humi serpentem hominem, frutex est, non homo, quem vides; si quem in fantasiae quasi Calypsus vanis praestigiis caecutientem et

Here, Pico transfers the idea of participated transmigration for the human soul to the particularly lived human life, interpreting each individually lived human experience according to the four-fold nature of the human soul and the choice, within life, to emphasize any one of the four natures. Man's eternally contingent nature, due to his four part soul and his immortal vehicle that carries the soul, reflects itself temporally in man's distinctive, earthly existence and in the choice of four modes of being within that existence. This makes man into a 'chameleon', to use Pico's terminology, and is based, as he states, on the transformative doctrines for man of both the secret Hebrew theology and the Pythagoreans.⁷³ Man can transform himself in his particular life as man because, even in a temporally and spatially bounded existence as man, he reflects upon and partakes in the cosmic, unbounded nature of that which is human, which in turn reflects upon and partakes in the macrocosm of existence. Even in a concrete state of lowly embodied existence as that supreme animal which is man, the human remains a microcosm that mirrors the veritable processes of overall existence.

In a later work, Pico seems to have a change of heart concerning the validity of the doctrine of transmigration. He neither indicates its veritable affirmation as he does in his *Conclusiones*, nor positively adapts it to allegory as he does in the *Oratio*, but rather, commenting upon the doctrine of the destiny of the impious, Pico indicates the seeming impiety of the doctrine of transmigration itself. In his commentary on Psalm 11, written in or some time after 1488,⁷⁴ Pico writes:

And Hugo and Augustine interpret that 'they will walk in a circular fashion'⁷⁵ in reference to the circulation of the mind of those among worldly

subscalpenti delinitum illecebra sensibus mancipatum, brutum est, non homo, quem vides. Si recta philosophum ratione omnia discernentem, hunc venereris; caeleste est animal, non terrenum. Si purum contemplatorem corporis nescium, in penetralia mentis relegatum, hic non terrenum, non caeleste animal; hic augustius est numen humana carne circumvestitum" (*Oratio*, p. 10).

⁷³ *Dignity*, pp. 5–6. In regard to the Hebrew tradition, Pico explicitly mentions the esoteric concept that the biblical personage Enoch transmuted into an angel of God. He would have known this tradition that holds Enoch to have been transformed into God's highest ministering angel, *Metatron*, through Abraham Abulafia's *Sitrei Torah*, which he had in Latin translation. For more on Pico, *Metatron* and Abulafia, see: Wirszubski, appendix 13, pp. 231–234. In regard to metempsychosis, Pico refers to the Pythagoreans, for whom "wicked men are deformed into brutes and, if you believe Empedocles, into plants too" (*Dignity*, p. 6). This last statement concerning Empedocles reflects the statement in his *Conclusiones* concerning metempsychosis into plants, discussed above.

⁷⁴ See Antonino Raspanti, "Datazione," p. 32.

⁷⁵ Ps. 12:9. סביב רשעים יתהלכון

goods, where also in Proverbs it is written of the impious: “He lets loose the wheel of bad fortunes against them,”⁷⁶ and elsewhere the prophet says: “My God, place them like a wheel.”⁷⁷ That if someone were to interpret these words from his own understanding rather than that of the author, he would be able here to refute⁷⁸ the transmigration of souls, so that the sense would be: It is a dogma of the impious that human souls return to states, periods and circuits and thus, with successive order the same soul enters into many people; but you rather, according to your height have multiplied them, ascribing to a single man his single soul.⁷⁹

This passage clearly seems to have been influenced by chapter four, book seventeen of Marsilio Ficino’s *Platonic Theology*. There, Ficino writes concerning those who he believes ‘misinterpret’ Plato’s idea of soul-circuits as some literal type of transmigration of human souls into beasts: “Such is the view of these philosophers, to which the prophetic verse runs counter: ‘The wicked walk in a circle.’ It is as if the verse were saying that those who introduce soul-circuits of this kind must be condemned as wicked.”⁸⁰ It is perhaps no coincidence that both Pico and Ficino introduce this passage from Psalms in direct relation to transmigration, both associating the doctrine with some sense of circularity and a misinterpretation of it with some sense of wickedness.

⁷⁶ Proverbs 20:26. The Hebrew text is: וישב עליהם אופן

⁷⁷ Ps. 83:14, אלהי שיתמו כגלגל

⁷⁸ Raspanti translates “redarguere” as “dimostrare irrefragabilmente,” allowing for a much more orthodox reading of Pico’s passage. According to the extensive GEORGES-CALONGHI Latin-Italian dictionary, “redarguere” certainly can have this significance as based on its use by the second century C.E. writer Aulo Gellio, who would presumably have been the source, either directly or indirectly, for Pico’s usage here. Nevertheless, this is a secondary definition for “redarguere” (also according to GEORGES-CALONGHI), the primary definition being: “to demonstrate irrefutably false,” “to confound,” or “to refute.” Notwithstanding authorial intent, Pico’s use of this term with a secondary definition that lies contrary to the primary definition serves ‘to confound’ the reader, whether intentionally or not. I thank Father Carlo Ruffino of Genova for bringing the secondary definition and its sources to my attention.

⁷⁹ *Expositiones*, p. 106: “Et illam in circuitu ambulationem exponit Hugo et Augustinus de volutatione mentis eorum circa mundane, unde et in *Proverbis* de impiis scribitur: *immittit illis rotam malorum*, et alibi propheta inquit: *Deus meus, pone illos ut rotam*. Quod si quis ex sua potius quam ex auctoris mente haec verba interpreter, poterit hic redarguere transcorporationem animorum, ut sit sensus: impiorum es dogma per status, periodos et circuitus revolvi humanos animos atque ita succedenti ordine pluribus eundem animum adesse; se<d> tu potius secundum altitudinem tuam singulis hominibus singulos ascribens animos illos multiplicasti.”

⁸⁰ *Platonic Theology*, vol. 6, p. 45. “Haec illi, quibus propheticum illud obiicitur: ‘In circuitu impij ambulant.’ Quasi dicat illos esse impios iudicandos, qui eiusmodi animarum circuitus introducunt.”

Whatever the case for influences, a primary reading of this passage seems to reveal the refutation of the doctrine of transmigration by Pico himself.⁸¹ Playing upon the idea of ‘impiety’, Pico jumps from the idea of the fate of the impious to ‘walk in a circular fashion’ or to be placed ‘like a wheel’ according to the psalmist, and to have the ‘wheel of bad fortunes’ set against them according to the author of Proverbs, to the idea that the revolution of their souls as expressed in these verses is in itself an impious proposal. This impiety, proven by the fact that the very doctrine itself revolves around impiety, is ultimately due to the fact that God has ascribed an individual soul to each individual,⁸² thereby making revolutions into other individuals impossible.

Upon further analysis however, a more complex picture arises from Pico’s commentary on Psalm 11. The refutation of transmigration as impious due to the need to allow for God’s multiplication of souls to fit multiple people holds for one interpreting ‘from his own understanding’ and *not* from the understanding ‘of the author.’ According to this reading, Pico’s psalmist and author of Proverbs probably did have transmigration for the souls of the impious in mind when writing about ‘circular’ movement and ‘wheels’. Such a reading cannot truly be disputed, for it comes directly from the words of the sacred Scriptures. Hence, for Pico, the validity and veracity of the doctrine of transmigration stands, despite his failure to assert it here forthrightly and his ‘confounding’ language of ‘refutation’.⁸³ Perhaps Pico purposefully perplexes with his language, possibly due to the papal censures and restrictions placed on him until 1493, possibly due to his reconciliation and subsequently close relationship with the conservative Savonarola, or possibly so as not to irritate his patron Lorenzo the Magnificent, under whose close eye he operated⁸⁴ due to the numerous prior events in which the former had rescued Pico.

⁸¹ Also, and more directly, according to Raspanti’s reading. See note 78 above.

⁸² This is in accord with Thomas Aquinas, who states in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, “God created a soul specifically for each one [i.e., each individual human being]” (book II, chapter 83.38, Anderson p. 284). This is based upon *Vulgate* Psalm 32:15, which states: “He who has made the hearts of every one of them, he who considers all of their deeds” (“fingens partier cor eorum intellegens omnia opera eorum”).

⁸³ His language of ‘refutation’ is literally ‘confounding’ as well. See footnote 78 above.

⁸⁴ Lorenzo’s close watch on Pico’s literary activity is attested to by a letter dated June 13, 1489, that he wrote to Lanfredini, his ambassador in Rome. There Lorenzo writes concerning Pico: “Ha fatto e fa continuamente degnissime opera in theologia: comenta e’ psalmi, scrive alcune alter degne cose theologiche” (quoted in Raspanti, p. 32).

In any case, from his *Conclusiones* to his *Expositiones in Psalmos*, Pico's writings on transmigration do not remain consistent throughout, and do not divulge an unambiguously complete theory of man and his soul. In the earlier writings, man and Scriptures can be interpreted using the same four-fold hermeneutic methods that do not supplant each other, as man is reflected in the Scriptures and both reflect the natures of God and the universe. In the later *Expositiones*, authorial Scriptural dicta take precedence over, and even supplant the rational exposition of man. Perhaps this divergence is due to the extreme heterodoxies of the earlier strata of Pico's writings, which later had to be attenuated due to the failure and condemnation of his *Conclusiones* in 1487.⁸⁵ Perhaps it specifically has to do with one of the originally condemned thirteen conclusions, which explicitly states, "[If sayings of the saints did not exist whose language seemed to clearly state the opposite, I would firmly assert] . . . that for a mortal sin of a finite time an infinite temporal penalty is not due, but only a finite penalty."⁸⁶ This assertion, which certainly would hold for temporally charged transmigration in the function of punishment for the impious as indicated by the passages in Psalms and Proverbs, was amended by Pico in his *Apologia* of 1487 to state that "a mortal soul is deserving of eternal punishment due to the demerit that it induces," and "whoever dies in mortal sin, even if it is only one mortal sin, will be punished for eternity."⁸⁷ Such an emendation, made in order to appease the Church, would certainly disrupt the idea of transmigration for the wicked, causing a discrepancy in Pico's writings and the need to veil his later language. Or perhaps the inconsistency that is apparent in Pico's writings on transmigration is due to the fact that he died at the age of 31 and therefore was unable to mature his philosophy of unity into a fully coherent, systematic unity.⁸⁸ Whatever the reason or reasons for divergence may be, in spite

⁸⁵ For more on the examination and condemnation of the *Conclusiones* by the commission of Pope Innocent VIII, see: Albano Biondi, "La doppia inchiesta," and idem, "Il giudizio sulle conclusiones della commissione pontificia," in Pico, *Conclusiones nongentae*, pp. xix–xxii.

⁸⁶ *Theses*, p. 431: "Nisi essent dicta sanctorum quae in manifesto sui sermonis uidentur dicere oppositum, firmiter assererem . . . quod peccato mortali finiti temporis non debetur pena infinita secundum tempus, sed finita tantum."

⁸⁷ *Conclusiones nongentae*, p. 145: "Peccatum mortale est demeritorie dignum poena aeterna," and "Quidlibet decedens in peccato mortali, etiam si in uno tantum decedat, punietur in aeternum" (p. 144).

⁸⁸ Any speculation as to the direction that Pico's philosophy may have taken had he been given the opportunity to live out a full lifespan and to mature his philosophy

of the discrepancies, a sense for the Scriptural support of the validity of transmigration does peer through Pico's veil of confounding and non-assertive language in his *Expositiones*, lending tacit support to his earlier assertions of veridically participated Plotinian transmigration and its positive, individually-lived human allegorical counterpart.

fully remains just that, speculation. All that can be asserted is the incomplete nature of the philosophy that Pico did leave behind.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MARSILIO FICINO, CIRCULARITY AND REBIRTH

Circular movement does not spend its force, but gathers whatever belongs to it into itself again, and just when it is thought to fail, it renews itself.¹

The idea of cycles and concepts of circularity played a central role in Renaissance humanist notions of renewal and rebirth. From Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in the Christian camp to Isaac Abarbanel and Yohanan Alemanno in the Jewish camp, circularity represented a picture of the cosmos; indeed, according to these thinkers, the universe is one big circuit starting from God, descending to the microcosm of man as its final purpose, and returning to its initial starting point in God.² Leone Ebreo, the son of Isaac Abarbanel who acted as a Renaissance nexus between worlds, partially by drawing upon Arabic, Jewish and Christian ideas and partially by originally having his magnum opus, *Dialoghi d'amore*, disseminated in the vernacular Italian, sums up the concept succinctly, attributing it to Arabic thought.³ In Ebreo's words,

The Arabs make the universe to be a circle, the beginning of which is God; and from Him a continuous chain of being descends to first matter, which is the most removed from the Divinity, and there the circle turns and ascends through the various degrees of being until it reaches the point of origin, to wit, divine beauty, with which the human intellect is finally united.⁴

¹ Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 5:1, volume 2, p. 15. "Circuitus enim non effundit vires, sed sua quaeque recolligit in seipsum et cum deficere putatur, se renovat."

² This idea abounds within the works of the authors mentioned. See, for example, Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, p. 46; Pico, *Commento sopra una canzone d'amore*, book I, ch. 14, English version, pp. 110–111; Alemanno, *Sefer Sha'ar ha-Heshek*, p. 38; and Abarbanel, *Commentary on the Torah*, Genesis 1, p. 65.

³ For more on some possible Jewish and Arabic sources in Ebreo's thought, and especially Avicenna's *al-Risāla fī 'l-Ishq*, see the erudite article of Shlomo Pines, "Medieval Doctrines in Renaissance Garb?"

⁴ Leone Ebreo, *The Philosophy of Love*, translated by F. Friedeberg-Seeley and Jean H. Barnes, London: Soncino Press, 1937, p. 335. The original Italian reads: "gl'Arabi fanno una linea circolare de l'universo, il principio de la quale è la divinità, e da lei

Whether this idea was originally Arabic as attested to by Ebreo himself,⁵ or whether it derived from other sources,⁶ there is no doubt about the fact of the idea's extreme importance to general Renaissance philosophical sensibilities as attested to and summed up by Ebreo and as possibly hearkening back to both Greek and Arabic sources. Dually inspired by the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and the twelfth century *Book of Imaginary Circles* by the Spanish-Arab philosopher Ibn al-Sid al-Batalyawsi, the idea of the cycle spoke volumes not only to Renaissance thinkers' notions of the workings of the universe and to their understandings of the concept of time,⁷ it also keenly spoke to their conceptions of the human condition. According to this theory, man holds a central position in the universe between the spiritual and the material realms, thereby making him at once the nexus of the world and the only truly contingent entity within the world. Moreover, and perhaps more interestingly, as the microcosm, man holds within himself, and in fact embodies, the very notion of circularity itself. This embodiment of circularity within humanity occurs in a notion of cyclicity for the human soul that made its way into the thought of the famous Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino, namely the transmigration of human souls. For Ficino, the rather complex picture of the idea of transmigration is fundamentally tied to the complex Neoplatonic concept of the soul vehicle, and presents a problem of conflict between his philosophical sensibilities and his religious loyalties.

For Ficino, the issue of man's circular nature as a microcosm within a circular universe arises primarily in the context of philosophical

succedendo incantenatamente d'uno in uno viene a la materia prima, che è la piu distante da quella, e da lei vā ascendendo e approssimandosi di grado in grado fin' che si torna a finire in quel' punto, del quale è principio, cio è ne la bellezza divina, per la coppulatione de l'intelletto humano con quella. (*Dialoghi d'Amore*, introduction, bibliography and notes by Carl Gebhardt, volume III Bibliotheca Spinozana, Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1929, III, 76b).

⁵ For a solid argument for the Arab Neoplatonist ibn al-Sid al-Batalyawsi as Ebreo's source for the circle idea and an interesting discussion of the relation between Ebreo, this source, Alemanno and Isaac Abarbanel, see: Idel, "Sources for the Circle Metaphor."

⁶ For the case for Renaissance Christian humanist, and specifically Ficinian sources for Ebreo's theory, specifically, see: Shoshana Gershenzon, "The Circle Metaphor in Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'Amore*."

⁷ The body of literature concerning Renaissance notions of circularity with respect to the workings of the universe is too ample to cite here. For an astute treatment of cyclical notions of time, specifically within the thought of Ficino, see Michael J.B. Allen, "Life as a Dead Platonist."

psychology, the philosophical study of the soul. Within his psychological masterwork *The Platonic Theology*, aptly subtitled “On the Immortality of Souls,” Ficino takes up the question of the soul’s position within the universe and this position’s implications for the soul’s movement. In book III, chapter II he writes, “The soul is the middle level of being. It links and unites all the levels above it and below it when it ascends to the higher and descends to the lower levels.”⁸ According to this theory, the soul takes part in both the higher and the lower realms of existence, though fully belongs to neither. Rather, it is in between the incorporeal and the corporeal, the eternal and the temporal, the divine and the terrestrial, acting as the knot that ties all Being together. It is the mean of existence, yet it does not remain statically in the center, for it is precisely through its constant “becoming or being moved”⁹ that it can be the mean which binds the extremes. As Ficino writes, “[B]y a natural instinct it ascends to the higher and descends to the lower,”¹⁰ without abandoning the lower in its ascent and without abandoning the higher in its descent. Indeed, within the human soul, “the divisible is harmoniously tempered with the indivisible, the different with the same, and motion with rest, as the high-pitched with the bass.”¹¹ In this manner, the soul contains within itself both the upper and the lower realms and binds these realms together; it is at once the microcosm, and as such is the glue that joins the cosmos together.

In order to explain the soul’s conjunction of opposites, Ficino has recourse to Plato’s *Phaedrus*, in which the soul is likened to a teamed chariot and its charioteer. There Socrates states, “To begin with, our driver is in charge of a pair of horses; second, one of his horses is beautiful and good and from stock of the same sort, while the other is the opposite and has the opposite sort of bloodline.”¹² The chariot thus pulls in different directions in an often painfully difficult process. A good driver, however, can follow in the path of the gods as closely as possible

⁸ [Ficino’s *Theologia Platonica* is quoted from the English edition of Allen and Hankins when available; otherwise it is from the edition of Marcel]. Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, iii:ii, vol. 1, p. 231. “Anima est medius rerum gradus, atque omnes gradus tam superiores quam inferiores connectit in unum, dum ipsa et ad superos ascendit et descendit ad inferos.”

⁹ Ibid., p. 233. “...medium erit illud quod semper fit, id est movetur.”

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 235. “Quapropter naturali quodam instinctu ascendit ad supera, descendit ad infera.”

¹¹ *Platonic Theology* xvii, ii, vol. 6, p. 17. “Igitur in ea, ut cetera praetermittam, partibile impartibili, alterum eodem, motus statu quasi acutum gravi harmonice temperatur.”

¹² *Phaedrus*, 246B, p. 31.

and, in so doing, will be “carried around in a circular motion” so that he can get a brief glimpse of Reality before his inevitable descent.¹³ For this reason, according to Ficino, “they [i.e., the Pythagoreans and Platonists] call the soul a chariot because the motions it effects are circular.”¹⁴ He continues to exposit:

They also assign it two wings, the instinct of the intellect for Truth itself and the will for the Good itself; a charioteer, namely the mind; the charioteer’s head which is a divine unity higher than the mind; higher horses, namely identity and rest; lower horses, namely otherness and motion; and a good and a bad horse, namely the nature of wrathful passion and appetitive desire. For wrath seems closer to reason than desire.¹⁵

According to Ficino, the good horse of the *Phaedrus* represents reason of both the universal and the particular kinds, whereas the worse horse represents the imagination and the vegetative power and is connected to nature and the appetite.¹⁶ The charioteer, whose job it is to control the two extremes in an attempt to grasp Reality, represents the intellect and therefore the “essence” of the soul.¹⁷ The soul inclines to the godly through its faculty of reason and to the earthly through its faculty of imagination and can strike a balance and attempted harmony between the two only through its well exercised power of the intellect. In such an attempt at balance and harmony, the chariot of the soul travels in a series of circuits. According to Ficino, “the most perfect of all motions...is the circular motion, which is also the only sempiternal motion among motions.”¹⁸ Hence, the individual soul exhibits perfection in its movement, and in so doing remains beyond the bounds of time.

¹³ *Phaedrus*, 248A, p. 34.

¹⁴ *Platonic Theology* xvii, ii, vol. 6, p. 25. “...quod animam ideo currum vocant, quia motus efficit circulares.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–27. “Alas duas, scilicet instinctum intellectus ad ipsum verum atque voluntatis ad ipsum bonum; aurigam mentem; caput aurigae, divinam unitatem mente superiorem; equos superiores, scilicet idem et statum; equos inferiores, scilicet alterum atque motum; item equum bonum atque malum, scilicet irascendi et concupiscendi naturam. Ira enim propinquior rationi quam libido esse videtur.”

¹⁶ *Cf. ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁷ Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino*, p. 88. See also: *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer*, 2.2, pp. 402–409.

¹⁸ *Platonic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 245. “Motionum omnium perfectissimus...est circuitus, qui etiam solus omnium motionum est sempiternus.” This is an extension of the Pythagorean notion that “the most beautiful figure is the sphere among solids, and the circle among plane figures” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, book viii, 35, p. 351).

By circling back upon itself, the soul remains at once in constant motion yet fixed, at once a part of the cosmic processes yet immortal.

Here, Ficino is reflecting the theory of perfect cosmic motion as reflected in the microcosm of man. The ‘chariot,’ the individual soul, moves in that most perfect, circular manner because it is reflecting the movers of the astral bodies, the cosmic souls that move those bodies in a circular fashion. This idea is expressed by the fifth century B.C.E. Pythagorean, Alcmeon of Croton, who states that “the soul is immortal and that it is continually in motion like the sun.”¹⁹ Plato appropriates this idea of astral circularity, and when writing of the cosmos, notes that its spherical shape is “the figure that keeps itself in all directions equidistant from its center to its extremities and which, of all figures, is the most perfect and most similar to itself.”²⁰ He goes on to state that its motion “especially attends intellect and prudence,” since it moves “uniformly in the same spot and within itself . . . by revolving in a circle.”²¹ Aristotle picks up on the notion of the fixed yet infinite movement of cosmic bodies as elaborated by Plato,²² and within his *Physics*, isolates out the notion of circular movement itself. Indeed, within book VIII of the *Physics*, he states, “Let us now proceed to maintain that it is possible that there should be an infinite motion that is single and continuous, and that this motion is rotary motion.”²³ According to Aristotle, as based upon the cosmic movement theories of his predecessors, only circular motion is perpetual, precisely because it is not obtruded and is centered around a fixed point.

For Ficino, the notion of a fixed, unobtruded, perpetual form of motion in the circle, as based in astral theory, allows for the better assertion of his own theory of the soul in the microcosm which is man. By circling, the soul is able to ascend to the peaks of the highest levels of existence and to descend to the depths of the lowest levels in a constant state of motion, without ever being stopped by limitations and without ever being fully absorbed, either by the heights or by

¹⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, viii, 83, p. 397. This idea is also expressed within the *Phaedrus*, 245C–E. For more on Pythagorean notions of the soul, including those of Alcmeon, see Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, pp. 100–120.

²⁰ *Timaeus*, 33B, p. 62.

²¹ *Ibid.* 34A, p. 63.

²² See his *On the Heavens*, book I, chapters 4 and 5, *The Complete Works* pp. 451–454.

²³ *Physics*, VIII.8, 261b 27–29, in *Ibid.*, p. 437.

the depths. Contiguous with its constant motion, the invariable law of cyclicity allows the soul to occupy a position of extreme stability. Hence, the soul is at once mobile and fixed, precisely allowing it to be the center of the world that connects all existing things into a unity.²⁴ Indeed souls, according to Ficino, “are moved in a circle,” and hence invariably “are moved forever.”²⁵ Ficino emphasizes the eternity of circular movement in relation to souls:

Circular motion, as it recurs once, so it recurs twice, three times, four times, and for the same reason; and in the circuit the end and the beginning are the same. Thus when it seems to be finishing, it is just beginning. Sempiternal circular motion, then, is proper to the third essence [i.e., the soul] insofar as the essence is brought back in a circle to itself through motion. If it is moved from itself, it is also moved to itself, in order for it to make an end of the motion where a beginning exists, seeing that the cause itself of motion, in a sense, produces motion for its own sake. So the third essence, starting from itself, circles perpetually back to itself, by unfolding its powers from the highest powers, through the middle and down to the lowest, and likewise by enfolding them again commencing from the lowest, through the middle, and up to the highest.²⁶

Ficino’s notion of the soul’s circular motion radically asserts an eternal nature to the soul, with neither beginning nor end. The soul is in constant motion, cycling through the different stages and levels of Being, and actually beginning where it only seems to be ending.

Drawn to its logical conclusion, Ficino’s theory of the soul’s movement from its source in itself to its source, from the incorporeal realms of existence to the corporeal and then back again *ad infinitum*, bears a striking resemblance to and resonance with theories of metempsychosis. A soul that has seemingly reached its end is actually beginning a new cycle and, conversely, a soul that seems to be beginning on its path is actually only finishing one cycle and continuing on its never ending course. Through its constant circulation through the upper and lower worlds, not only does the human soul bind the universe together into one complete stable whole, it continually changes position, entering

²⁴ Perhaps Ficino derived this notion from the *Asclepius*, 31, where Hermes Trismegistus states that god, who is the model imitated by all of sensible reality (including man, whose soul itself can achieve to the level of a god), eternally stirs within himself, yet through such an eternal, cyclical stirring, is eternally fixed. For an English translation of the relevant passage, see: *Hermetica*, p. 86.

²⁵ *Platonic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 13. “Moventur in circulum...moventur et semper.” This is based on the argument of Alcmeon, expressed in note 19 above.

²⁶ *Platonic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 245.

and re-entering into both the terrestrial and heavenly realms. In one of the important Hermetic sources that Ficino translated, the treatise *Corpus Hermeticum* IV, 8, also called *Crater sive Monas*, Hermes tells his son Tat, “Do you see how many bodies we must pass through, my child, how many troops of demons, (cosmic) connections and stellar circuits in order to hasten to the one and only?”²⁷ Here exists a clear correlation to Ficino’s own theories of “cosmic connections and stellar circuits,” paralleled in the circuits of the soul of man which, in its circulation, connects the terrestrial to the divine. Hailed by Ficino to Cosimo di Medici as “the first among philosophers... [who] progressed from natural philosophy and mathematics to the contemplation of the gods and was first to discourse most learnedly concerning the majesty of God, the order of daemons, and the transmigration of souls,”²⁸ it is only reasonable to deduce that Hermes’ view of transmigration in connection to stellar circuits had a profound effect upon Ficino’s own views of the human soul and its connection to the cosmos.

In addition to the Hermetic writings, many of Ficino’s sources, such as Plotinus and Plato, support the idea of transmigration.²⁹ For Ficino, such sources not only provide precedent, they provide a certain sense of authority. This is due to his theory of *prisca theologia*,³⁰ in which he argues that a harmonious unity underlies the differences of six important ancient thinkers culminating in Plato, a unity which points to the basic theological core of Christianity. Ficino writes:

²⁷ “Cernis o fili quod corpora coelestia transcendere nos opus est, quodque choris daemonum abesse, abesse ambitumque astrorum eorumque progressus superare, ut ad unum solumque Deum tendamus...” in Ficino, *Opera*, vol. II, p. 1842, *Mercurii Trismegisti Liber de potestate et sapientia Dei*, cap. III, *Mercurii ad Tatium Crater, sive Monas*. In the on-line catalogue of the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam, 2003, published by Frank von Lamoén, (http://www.rimmanlibrary.nl/c/p/pub/on_pub/pat/pat_pri_B1.html) *Corpus Hermeticum* in Ficino’s translation no. 21, the author notes that Ficino translates *soomata* (bodies) as *corpora coelestia* (heavenly bodies), thereby putting emphasis on the ascent of the soul through the celestial spheres and astutely taking emphasis away from the possibility of metempsychosis. It does not, however, as notes Lamoén, exclude the idea of metempsychosis, as in principle, the soul can return from the spheres.

²⁸ Quoted in Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*, p. 202.

²⁹ See, for example, Plotinus’s *Enneads*, III, 4.2, and Plato’s *Republic*, book X as well as his *Phaedrus* 248D–249C and *Phaedo* 70–71 and 81, respectively. For an additional Hermetic source for this doctrine, see *Asclepius* 12 (*Hermetica*, p. 74).

³⁰ For more on the *prisca theologia* tradition, already discussed at length above, see the seminal work by Schmitt, “Perennial Philosophy.” For the treatment of this tradition in both Christian and Jewish sources, see: Idel, “Prisca Theologia in Marsilio Ficino,” and Lelli, “*Prisca Philosophia* and *Docta Religio*.”

With regard to these matters pertaining to theology, six theologians, once supreme, were in mutual accord. The first is said to have been Zoroaster, the chief of the Magi, and the second Mercurius Trismegistus, the prince of the Egyptian priests. Succeeding him was Orpheus, and then Aglaophemus was initiated into the sacred [mysteries] of Orpheus. In theology Pythagoras came after Aglaophemus; and after Pythagoras came Plato who embraced the universal wisdom of all of them and enhanced and illuminated it in his writings.³¹

At least four of these six ancient authorities espouse some doctrine of transmigration. Indeed, according to Ficino, some of these theologians maintain that “our souls, like celestial souls, don the various forms of bodies and at the end of fixed cycles of time they are wrapped in the same bodies as before. Zoroaster calls this *palingenesis*, that is, regeneration; and Mercurius has much to say about it with his son Tat.”³² Like the celestial souls, human souls move in a fixed circular pattern, regenerating themselves in that circle as they move in and out of various bodies. Not only is this idea expressed by the likes of Zoroaster and Mercurius, also known as Hermes, it is also expounded by both Pythagoras³³ and by Ficino’s ultimate champion, Plato.

The doctrine of transmigration connected to soul movement as espoused by these *prisci theologi* presents Ficino with a theological problem. As a major spokesman for Christianity,³⁴ he is faced with the question of how to uphold the veracity of the *prisci theologi* when they blatantly advocate a doctrine that runs contrary to the dictates of Christianity. Indeed, the early Church Father Tertullian disputes the concept at length in his work *De Anima*,³⁵ linking it to a ‘falsehood’

³¹ *Platonic Theology*, vol. 6, p. 7. “In rebus his quae ad theologiam pertinent, sex olim summi theologia consenserunt, quorum primus fuisse traditur Zoroaster, Magorum caput, secundus Mercurius Trismegistus, princeps sacerdotum Aegyptiorum. Mercurio successit Orpheus. Orphei sacris initiatus fuit Aglaophemus. Aglaophemo successit in theologia Pythagoras, Pythagorae Plato, qui universam eorum sapientiam suis litteris comprehendit, auxit, illustravit.”

³² *Ibid.*, p. 35. “...sic animae nostrae, animorum caelestium similes, varias formas corporum induuntur, certisque curriculis temporum iisdem quibus antea corporibus involuntur. Quam *palingenesian*, id est regenerationem, Zoroaster appellat, de qua multa Mercurius cum filio suo Tatío disputat.” For explicit reference to Mercurius and his son Tat, see fn. 27 above.

³³ Pythagoras’s account of his own soul migrations is recorded by Diogenes Laertius, viii, 2–5, pp. 323–325.

³⁴ Indeed, Ficino was ordained a priest in 1473 and eventually became a canon of Florence’s cathedral in 1487.

³⁵ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, vol. XV, “The Writings of Tertullian”, vol. II, edited by Alexander Roberts and James

propagated by Hermes, Plato, and ultimately, Pythagoras. Similarly Augustine, a Church authority of no less stature than Tertullian, disdains the idea as expressed by Plato, Plotinus and Porphyry, by attacking the idea of “cycles in which blessedness and misery succeed one another in turn.”³⁶ Thomas Aquinas finds the doctrine philosophically untenable due to the fact that according to the laws of generation and corruption, “it is impossible for one and the same thing to be reproduced by generation,”³⁷ and states that according to Biblical proof, “God created a soul specifically for each one [i.e., each individual human being].”³⁸ Shortly before Ficino’s time, the doctrine was opposed by the famous Cardinal Johannes Bessarion,³⁹ even though Bessarion’s teacher, Georgius Gemistus Pletho, seems to have espoused a platonic version of metempsychosis in his opposition to Latin Aristotelian views of immortality.⁴⁰ Interestingly, the latter’s appearance in Florence in 1439 for the Council of Florence, which was together with Bessarion, not only brought questions of immortality to the fore, it is said to have prompted Cosimo de Medici to enlist Ficino for the sake of making Plato and Neoplatonism available to the Latin public. Regardless, in Ficino’s own day, the doctrine of metempsychosis was condemned by the Inquisition in articles published at the University of Pisa in 1490.⁴¹ All of this opposition to the doctrine by reputable figures of Christian authority puts Ficino, the Christian Neoplatonist and syncretist proponent of *prisca theologia*, in a quandary.

According to the erudite studies of Paul Oskar Kristeller, James Hankins, Christopher Celenza, and Michael J.B. Allen, Ficino deals with this quandary through the attenuation of the literal sense of the doctrine of transmigration, especially within the teachings of Ficino’s

Donaldson, translated by Peter Holmes, Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1870, pp. 410–541. See there especially, chapters xxviii–xxxv.

³⁶ Augustine, *The City of God*, book xii, chapter 21, p. 529. See there also book x, chapter 30, and book xii, chapter 20.

³⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, book II, chapter 83.37, p. 284.

³⁸ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, book II, chapter 83.38, p. 284. This is based upon *Vulgate* Psalm 32:15, which states: “He who has made the hearts of every one of them, he who considers all of their deeds” (“fingens partier cor eorum intellegens omnia opera eorum”).

³⁹ *In Calumniam Platonis*, II, 3, and discussed in Allen, “Life as a Dead Platonist,” p. 173, and in Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, vol. 1, pp. 257–259.

⁴⁰ Blum, “The Immortality of the Soul,” p. 213.

⁴¹ See: Verde, *Lo studio fiorentino 1473–1503*, vol. 4, p. 914, referenced in Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, p. 358, fn. 252.

ultimate pagan protagonist, Plato. Kristeller understands this attenuation to take shape through extreme allegory, as based upon Ficinan texts like the following, dealing with the marvels of the human soul:

It lives the life of the plant when it yields to the body by abundant nourishing; the life of the beast when it flatters the senses; the life of man when it reflects through its reason on human affairs; that of heroes when it inquires into natural things; that of demons when it considers mathematics; that of angels when it contemplates the divine mysteries; that of God when it does all for God's sake. Each man's Soul experiences in some way all these possibilities in itself, but different Souls in different ways. And so the human species strives to become all things by living the lives of all things. In admiration of that fact, Mercurius Trismegistus says that man is a great miracle.⁴²

Through this text, Kristeller sees that for Ficino, "Wherever Plato seems to speak of a transmigration of the human Soul into other natural species, we must understand by it the different forms and habits of human life."⁴³ Through such means of allegory, according to Kristeller, Ficino can reconcile Plato with Christian dogma.

James Hankins picks up on and advances Kristeller's argument, claiming that "Metempsychosis as referred to in Plato and the other ancient theologians was to be understood as a mystery; to understand it in a literal sense was a vulgar error first put about in the late Academy."⁴⁴ It should be understood as a proto-Christian prophecy of bodily resurrection, as an exposition by the *prisci theologi* of the very Christian notion of purgatory, or as an allegory of the return of the individual soul to God through inner contemplation. When it cannot be understood in any sense but the literal within Plato's writings, according to Ficino, then Plato is simply recounting one of the teachings of his predecessor Pythagoras, a teaching to which Plato himself did not wholly subscribe. Hankins calls this last argument "the Degrees of Truth principle."⁴⁵ Though Pythagoras is important to Ficino and, as a *priscus theologus* advances certain truths pointing to the certainty of Christianity, he is less important than Plato and is at times a bit farther away from the Truth than is Plato. As such, a doctrine like transmigration that treads

⁴² Ficino, *Opera*, I, p. 309, cited in Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, p. 118.

⁴³ Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, p. 118.

⁴⁴ Hankins, "Ficino," p. 657.

⁴⁵ *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, p. 358. Hankins notes that this argument is not wholly consistent.

upon the Truth claims of Christianity, even when it appears in the works of Plato, can be attributed to Plato's precursor Pythagoras.

Christopher Celenza takes the "Degrees of Truth principle" a step further,⁴⁶ noting a placement of blame not only upon Pythagoras, but upon some of Plato's interpreters as well. Indeed, the first chapter of the seventeenth book of the *Platonic Theology* opens with the question, "What is the soul's status before it approaches the body, and what after it leaves?"⁴⁷ This is a question that Ficino goes on to discuss throughout book seventeen. In this context, he discusses the views of six post-Platonic academies⁴⁸ and argues that the last two, the Roman and the Lycian, were gravely mistaken. This is due to the fact that they failed to realize in regard to Plato that "doubtless a number of his words are poetical rather than philosophical,"⁴⁹ especially concerning the soul's "circuits;" this mistake caused these last two academies to support a literal idea of rebirth and reincarnation. Ficino goes on to discuss what he believes to be the 'correct' interpretation of Plato's assertions concerning the circular movements of the soul:

So, treading in the footsteps of Xenocrates and Ammonius, we do not deny that Plato had affirmed certainties about the soul, but much that he says about the soul's circuit, being poetic, we take to mean differently than the words appear to signify [literally]. And this is especially since he did not invent such circuits himself but described those of others: first those invented by the Egyptian priests under the figure of the purging of souls, and then those intoned in poetic songs only by Orpheus, Empedocles, and Heraclitus. I leave aside the fact that Pythagoras introduced the transmigrations of souls always into those his customary conversations and symbols.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ See his "Pythagoras in the Renaissance," pp. 685–689.

⁴⁷ *Platonic Theology*, vol. 6, p. 7. "Qualis sit animae status antequam ad corpus accedat, quails etiam post discessum."

⁴⁸ These are the old Greek academy under Xenocrates, the middle Greek under Arcesilaus, the new Greek under Carneades, the Egyptian under Ammonius, the Roman under Plotinus, and the Lycian under Proclus. See *Platonic Theology*, 17:1.

⁴⁹ *Platonic Theology*, vol. 6, p. 31. "...multa proculdubio poetica sunt potius quam philosophica."

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 45–47. "Nos ergo Xenocratis et Ammonii vestigial sequentes Platonem affirmavisse quaedam de anima non negamus, sed multa, quae de circuitu eius ab ipso tractantur, tamquam poetica, aliter intellegimus quam verba videantur significare. Praesertim cum circuitus huiusmodi haud ipse invenerit, sed narraverit alienos: primum quidem ab Aegyptiis sacerdotibus sub purgandarum animarum figura confictos, deinde ab Orpheo, Empedocle, Heraclito poeticis dumtaxat carminibus decantatos. Mitto quod Pythagoras animarum transmigrations consuetis illis semper confabulationibus suis symbolisque inseruit."

By asserting the error of literal interpretation and the mistaken linkage of Plato's soul-circuits to transmigration, Ficino subtly explains the theory of soul movement as allegorical. By asserting the "poetical" over the literal in regard to Plato's genuine doctrine, he allows Plato to take expression in a manner compatible with Christian dictates. Moreover, by asserting the "customary discussions" by Pythagoras of transmigration, Ficino is able to resort back to the original "Degree of Truth principle," thereby exonerating Plato. As Celenza notes, for Ficino "there would be nothing wrong with an heretical position like metempsychosis appearing in the dialogues, so long as one understood that the position was not Platonic."⁵¹ Through Plato's later interpreters as well as through his early predecessor Pythagoras, Ficino is able to salvage the authority of Plato from the pitfalls of a literal connection to transmigration.

Michael J.B. Allen perspicaciously explains and details Ficino's "poetical" Plato, noting Ficino's need to attenuate the idea of transmigration in to animals within Platonic thought by means of radical allegory. This need for extreme allegory expresses itself most clearly in regard to a passage in the *Phaedrus* that appears immediately after Plato's own allegory of the charioteer and his teamed chariot. There, speaking of the circuits of the chariots, or souls, Socrates states:

If any soul becomes a companion to a god and catches sight of any true thing, it will be unharmed until the next circuit; and if it is able to do this every time, it will always be safe. If, on the other hand, it does not see anything true because it could not keep up, and by some accident takes on a burden of forgetfulness and wrongdoing, then it is weighed down, sheds its wings and falls to earth. At that point, according to the law, the soul is not born into a wild animal in its first incarnation; but a soul that has seen the most will be planted in the seed of a man who will be a lover of wisdom [i.e., a philosopher] or of beauty, or will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love.⁵²

A charioteer who controls his chariot well enough to follow closely in the path of the gods and to get a good glimpse at anything from the world of Ideas will remain safe from the perils of descent, i.e., bodily incarnation. One that does not have good control and cannot keep up with the gods within the Ideal realm will fall to earth by cycling into

⁵¹ "Pythagoras in the Renaissance," p. 697.

⁵² *Phaedrus*, 248C–D, p. 35.

bodily incarnation. Those who have grasped the most from the godly realm will become philosophers, while those who have grasped the least will become tyrants. Socrates continues:

If, after the third cycle...the [philosophers'] souls have chosen such a life three times in a row, they grow their wings back, and they depart... As for the rest, once their first life is over, they come to judgment; and, once judged, some are condemned to go to places of punishment beneath the earth and pay the full penalty for their injustice, while the others are lifted up by justice to a place in heaven where they live in the manner the life they led in human form has earned them. [After the first entire cycle], both groups arrive at a choice and allotment of second lives, and each soul chooses the life it wants. From there, a human soul can enter a wild animal, and a soul that was once human can move from an animal to a human being again.⁵³

After the initial incarnation, philosophers are given three cycles to prove themselves and to escape from the plight of embodiment. Other souls are judged and are awarded and punished accordingly. At this point, souls not only move between heaven, earth and the subterranean realm, but also between human beings and animals.

Though rather cryptic, these Platonic passages explicitly endorse the notion of transmigration into and out of animals. In order to deal with this, Ficino combines allegory and the 'Degree of Truth principle,' stating that Socrates here "uses poetic license and describes Pythagorean notions rather than his own."⁵⁴ Ficino does not, as Allen has importantly noted, dedicate any formal commentary to these highly important and, for Ficino, controversial passages, but rather treats them with two of his longest summae within his *Phaedrus* commentary, chapters 24 and 25.⁵⁵ Within these summae, Ficino states, "The soul that has just descended from heaven cannot be precipitated into a beast, for souls are purgatorially dispatched to treat with beasts when, having deviated still further from the celestial property, they have laid aside human characteristics

⁵³ *Phaedrus*, 249A–B, p. 36.

⁵⁴ *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer*, p. 77. See also Celenza, "Pythagoras in the Renaissance," p. 689.

⁵⁵ Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino*, p. 165. Perhaps this absence of a formal commentary is due to Ficino's immediate dismissal of the ideas as Pythagorean, thereby allowing him to forsake them more easily than had he thought them to be authentically Platonic.

and doffed those of wild animals.”⁵⁶ Even then, according to Allen, it is only the *characteristics*⁵⁷ that associate with beasts and not human souls in actu. This is due to the fact that:

The rational soul does not cross over into a beast in order to become the soul of the beast's body. When it has exchanged its desire and disposition for those of a beast, however, it falls into the companionship of beasts,⁵⁸ as Proclus and Hermias maintain... For the shape of a beast's body is not appropriate for the rational soul, just as the shape of a man's body does not accord with the irrational soul.⁵⁹

Here, Ficino's sense of allegory reaches its peak, and he interestingly attempts to salvage Plato's views of transmigration through an allusion to Aristotle. The rational soul of a man never actually *becomes* the irrational soul of a beast, as such would not only negate the central position of man's soul, it would be impossible according to the dictates of form and matter.⁶⁰ Man's rational soul cannot forcibly be superimposed upon the shape of the beast, just as the irrational soul cannot falsely be applied to the shape of a man.⁶¹ Rather, when one acts squalidly and gives in to his beastly passions, then he “falls into the companionship of beasts” within his very own, human life.⁶² Man has the choice to follow his beastly instincts and consequently to live like a beast, or to pursue his divine intellect and to live like a god.

The above analyses nicely explain how a cleric the stature of Ficino could readily hold to a system of *prisca theologia* as based upon ancient

⁵⁶ *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer*, p. 164.

⁵⁷ “mores”.

⁵⁸ “in bestarium commertia cadit”.

⁵⁹ *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer*, p. 172.

⁶⁰ Here, Ficino is relying upon the Aristotelian notion that the soul is “the form of a natural body having life potentiality within it” cf. *De Anima*, book II.1, 412a, 20, *The Complete Works*, p. 656.

⁶¹ Again, this is the Aristotelian view expressed in *De Anima*, book I.3, 407b 22–26. There, Aristotle refutes the “Pythagorean myths, that any soul could be clothed in any body.” This, he claims, is “an absurd view, for each body seems to have a form and shape of its own. It is as absurd as to say that the art of carpentry could embody itself in flutes; each art must use its own tools, each soul its body” cf. *Complete Works*, p. 650.

⁶² This allegorical idea was probably highly influenced by the *Corpus Hermeticum* XII, where it states, “When man is not guided by intellect, he falls below himself into an animal state... God's two gifts to man of intellect and the word have the same value as immortality. If man makes right use of these, he differs in no way from the immortals” (quoted in Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 33).

authorities who support an idea that is not amenable to the Christian Church. Ficino was indeed careful with concepts that could be deemed heretical, and attempted to assuage such concepts through the medium of language. As a Christian spokesman, he could not forthrightly tell his average Christian audience that he upheld Platonic doctrine to the highest level of Truth without compromising a part of that literal doctrine.

Nevertheless, the idea of potentially veritable types of transmigration pokes its head through the shroud of some of Ficino's writings, indicating a more complex picture in which he allows for its latent possibility in certain forms. These forms limit the possibility to human to human transmigration within the terrestrial world, and include the possibility of human to demonic or angelic transmigration between planes of existence. Interestingly, a different type of *prisca theologia*, which is not mentioned in the *Platonic Theology*, seems to stand as the central pillar of support for these ideas, namely, the kabbalah.⁶³ Indeed, in an important passage in his Commentary on Plotinus concerning divine retribution, written in 1492, Ficino writes:

The kabbalist teachers of the Jews also confirm such conditions for the sake of punishment, reckoning that the human souls repeatedly return to this life only under human form: and thus the sins that are treatable are purified; but it can only return three times.⁶⁴ These indeed are to suffice until the final judgment, and it [i.e., the soul] should be purified of its vices, and should merit to become more blessed than its descent: that it would truly have thrown out reason to always remain on a level that is inferior to that which is rational; that is, of the same imagination and disposition as the brute.⁶⁵ They add to this, so that no one can excuse his own sin, that at that time, all of the souls were present when God gave the Law to Moses.⁶⁶ In truth, they do not sufficiently demonstrate this

⁶³ I thank Dr. Guido Bartolucci for bringing to my attention the following passages in Ficino's writings related to the kabbalah and transmigration.

⁶⁴ This idea of three times is derived from Job 33:29–30 and is very prevalent within kabbalistic literature. Cf. *Zohar* II, 114:2, Recanati on *parashat vayeshev*, Abulafia, "V'zot L'Yehuda," in *Sefer Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, p. 24.

⁶⁵ This idea seems to be more Plotinian than it is Kabbalistic. See my lengthy discussion of the Plotinian idea of participated transmigration in the previous chapter on Pico, who makes great use of the idea of the human soul remaining human, yet possibly being of the same imagination and disposition as the brute.

⁶⁶ This is based on Deuteronomy 29:13 and elaborated in BT Shabbat 146a. Within the Jewish textual context, however, the idea is limited to all the souls of *Israel*, who stood at Mount Sinai, and excludes the gentile nations. Here, Ficino seems to be universalizing the idea.

continuous period. Indeed, they judge a transformation of this type to be possible to come about until the end of the movement of the world, which will be followed by the quiet of the eternal Sabbath and the eternal beatitude of those who are good. They declare that this is what David intended in psalm 36 [37]: 18: "Of the innocent, their inheritance is forever."⁶⁷ Likewise, the holy will be preserved in eternity.⁶⁸

It is not clear which texts or which people provided Ficino with this "kabbalistic" information, as notions of transmigration for the purification of sins, the limit to three returns, the presence of all souls at the giving of the Law, and the eternal Sabbath at the end of days are all very wide-spread concepts within kabbalistic literature concerning transmigration. Nevertheless, the assertions in the passage do seem to be drawn from kabbalistic lore, and while Ficino doubts the kabbalistic periodization of possible transmigration from the giving of the Law to the end of the world, he does seem to accept the confirmation of a human to human type of return for the soul. This is highly significant, as within kabbalistic literature itself, such claims were steeped in argument. Indeed, the commentary on the Torah of Menahem Recanati, one of the most wide-spread kabbalistic sources in Italy of Ficino's day, explicitly takes up this matter. Commenting on Leviticus 22:28, which states: "No animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young," Recanati writes:

The later masters of the kabbalah have ideas which we doubt concerning the secret of impregnation,⁶⁹ if it happens in terms of beasts, and they have brought great proofs for their words from the hint of the Scriptures. And according to their words, if a man and his wife, or a mother and

⁶⁷ The full text of the Vulgate reads: Novit Dominus dies immaculorum, et hæreditas eorum in æternum erit (The Lord knows the days of the innocent, and their inheritance shall endure forever).

⁶⁸ Ficino, *Opera* II, p. 1694: "Talem quoque puniendi conditionem Chabalistae Hebraeorum doctores comprobant, putantes animas hominum saepius in hanc vitam, sub figura tantum humana revolui: atque ita curabilia peccata pergari, sed ter tantum huc posse reverti. Haec enim ad probationem sufficere et quae his vicibus purgata fuerit, meruitque beatiorem fieri, quam ante descensum: quae vero prorsus abiecerit rationem restare semper in gradu quodam ad rationem inferiore, id est in ipsa imaginatione affectuque brutali. Addunt ne quis suum excuset peccatum, omnes tunc animas adfuisse quando Deus dedit Mosi legem. Perpetuum vero periodum non satis probant. Transformationem enim eiusmodi usque ad finem mundane motus posse fieri arbitrantur, quem sequatur aeterni sabbati quies, aeternaque beatitudo bonorum. Huc Davidis (36[37], 18) illud tendere iudicant: Immaculorum hæreditas in aeternum. Item sancti in aeternum conservabuntur."

⁶⁹ *Sod ha-'ibbur*, a concept classically connected to transmigration in kabbalistic literature.

her son have sinned, they will transmigrate there (i.e., into the realm of beasts). Thus, the Torah had mercy upon them not to uproot them on the same day, for even though they are in the body of a beast, they still have the sparks of the intellectual soul within them. And from this you will understand the great reason for the prohibition against causing suffering to animals.⁷⁰

Though Recanati praises the proofs of such assertions and even methodically explains them, he forthrightly expresses his doubt concerning the matter of transmigration into beasts. This is corroborated by his usage of the phrase “the later masters of the kabbalah,”⁷¹ a phrase that he typically uses in his writings to demarcate a kabbalistic idea with which he does not agree. Despite his own stance, which falls in line with Ficino’s approach, his mere mention of such interpretation concerning animals displays a diversity in kabbalistic thought much greater than that known to Ficino. For Ficino, the kabbalists are of one voice concerning the matter, and if that voice is to be understood, it can act as a point of ancient authority.

Later in his commentary on Plotinus, Ficino writes a section “On the transmigration of the soul and why it does not pass into beasts.”⁷² There he seems to reiterate the “kabbalistic” idea mentioned earlier and to support the idea of a human to human transmigration, negating only the possibility of transmigration into animals. He writes there concerning transmigration, “Although in a certain way the human soul in itself is changed, it is never transmuted into a species beyond fixed human boundaries.”⁷³ Here and throughout the work, Ficino allows for the possibility of a human to human type of transmigration, over and against the possibility of transmigration into beasts. Later in the work, this idea is explicitly asserted by Ficino and is again corroborated by the kabbalists. “I say that the human souls only descend into human bodies,” he writes, continuing, “Indeed, in this way we regulate the Platonic opinion, which further along will be regulated, if the opinion shall be received from the Jews that the soul comes into the human only three times, always followed by its being either miserable or blessed.”⁷⁴ Though he attenuates the kabbalistic point of view in the

⁷⁰ Recanati, *Commentary*, volume 2, pp. 108–109.

⁷¹ בעלי הקבלה האחרונים.

⁷² “In Plotinum,” in Ficino *Opera*, II, pp. 1709–1711.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 1709. “Quanquam hominis anima quodammodo in seipsa mutetur nunquam tamen ultra certos humanae speciei terminus transmutatur.”

⁷⁴ *Opera*, p. 1755: Humanas dico animas et ad corpora tantum humana descendere,

face of Plato by conditionally stating “if the opinion shall be received,” his point seems clear. He wants to allow for human to human transmigration and to regulate Plato’s position concerning transmigration into animals, not only by attributing such theories in Plato’s writings to Pythagoras, as discussed above, but by bringing the kabbalists into the mix of *prisci theologi*.

In a different passage in the same work which follows the same line of argument, Ficino states:

For they all [i.e., the Jews] indisputably grant that our soul can be returned to nothing other than human bodies: indeed, it can by no means be adapted to a brutes; it can, however, be adapted to demonic figures, for at the beginning, the spiritual body is similar to the bodies of demons.⁷⁵

Here Ficino adds a new element to the argument of transmigration as based upon ancient Jewish lore, namely, not only the possibility of human to human transmigration, but that of transmigration between the human and the demonic realms. This may be derived from the Metatron traditions of Jewish mysticism, which were known to Ficino’s younger contemporary Pico⁷⁶ and which maintain that the biblical figure Enoch mentioned in Genesis 5:22 was transformed into a fiery angel who sits at the right hand of God. It could also be connected to the idea of the astral body which is made of the ethereal material of the heavenly hosts, an idea fully developed by Ficino and discussed below, but also picked up on by thinkers like Abarbanel and integrated into the Jewish tradition.⁷⁷ Whatever the case may be, the idea seems to have been accepted by Ficino and may very well stand as the theoretical backdrop for an assertion that he made in a letter written in the same year that he completed his commentary on Plotinus. Upon the death of Lorenzo di Medici, Ficino wrote to Lorenzo’s son Giovanni, “Such prodigious events partly signify the greatness of the transmigrating soul, partly the damage of the inhabited world, partly the transmission of an

sic enim opinionem Platonice moderamus, quae erit insuper moderatio; si ab Hebraeis accipiat, existimantibus ter solum animam in hominem devenire, postremo simpliciter fore vel miseram vel beatam.

⁷⁵ *Opera*, p. 1705: Si hactenus Plotinus sentiat a Timaeo Pythagorico, non dissentiet et ab Aristotele forsitan non dissidebit, nec improbabitur ab Hebraeis. Hi namque omnes facile concedent animam nostrum per corpora duntaxat hominum posse revolui: brutis vere nequaquam accommodari: accommodari vero daemonicis posse figures: nam habet et ab initio spirituale corpus corporibus daemonum, quam simillimum.

⁷⁶ Cf., footnote 73 in chapter 7, above.

⁷⁷ Cf., footnote 72 in chapter 3, above.

antique power to its heirs.”⁷⁸ Here, Ficino explains the extraordinary occurrences at the point of Lorenzo’s death, including the immediate transmigration of his soul from the earthly realm into the realm of good celestial demons. The idea of the Jews cited above concerning the adaptation of humans to demonic figures seems here to take full concrete force and full positive assertion for Ficino in the case of Lorenzo the Great. Moreover, allegoricism cannot possibly apply here since, due to the reality of the situation of Lorenzo’s death, he cannot be said to be allegorically striving toward angelicism within his own life, as his own bodily life no longer holds any consequence.

Elsewhere in his commentary on Plotinus, Ficino further writes concerning demons and transmigration: “Either Plato was reincarnated in Plotinus (something the Pythagoreans will easily grant us), or the same demon was given first to Plato and then to Plotinus (something the Platonists will not refuse); anyhow it is the same spirit which breathes both in the mouth of Plato and in that of Plotinus.”⁷⁹ Ficino ends this section by stating that “Plato himself is talking about Plotinus when he exclaims: ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, on whom my favor rests, listen to him.’”⁸⁰ Here, Ficino explicitly endorses the idea of the transmigration of Plato’s soul into Plotinus. Interestingly, the endorsement begins with a claim regarding demons, perhaps influenced by the assertion of “the Jews” as cited above, and ends with a verse from the Gospels, perhaps in an attempt to Christianize the fundamental link between the soul of Plato and that of Plotinus. Either Plato was reincarnated in Plotinus, or they shared the same demon. In any case, the spirit of these two thinkers is the same according to Ficino. Later in the same work, addressing Lorenzo di Medici shortly before his death, Ficino writes, “As regards Plato, we sent him to you a long time ago, so that,

⁷⁸ Cf. “Ficino’s letter to Giovanni di Medici, 15 April 1492, on his Father’s Death,” in Ficino, *Opera*, I, p. 931. “Quae quidem prodigia partim maiestatem transmigrantis animae, partim detrimentum orbi populi, partim successionem antiquae potestatis in haeredes significare videntur.”

⁷⁹ Plotinus, *Plotini Opera Omnia*, edited by F. Creuzer, vol. I, Oxford, 1835, p. xi, quoted in Saffrey, “Florence, 1492,” p. 495. “Sive enim Plato quondam in Plotino revixit (quod facile nobis Pythagorici dabunt) sive demon idem Platonem quidem prius afflavit, deinde vero Plotinum (quod Platonici nulli negabunt), omnio aspirator idem os Platonium afflat atque Plotinium.”

⁸⁰ Ibid., Saffrey, p. 496. “Platonem ipsum exclamare sic erga Plotinum existimetis: Hic est filius meus dilectus, in quo mihi undique placeo, ipsum audite.” Saffrey notes that this is a quotation from the Gospel according to Matthew, reporting the words of God the Father during Transfiguration.

in a way, he could live again in your person, in whom Cosimo is also reliving; and being born again, he grew up as we had hoped he would, and now he is happily thriving as an adult.”⁸¹ Though this idea could be understood metaphorically, the specific use of the verbs ‘revixit’ (reliving) and ‘renatus’ (reborn) indicates some type of conflation between Cosimo’s and Lorenzo’s souls, in which Cosimo can relive and thrive through the person of Lorenzo.

Allegory and the “Degree of Truth principle,” then, hold weight for Ficino up to a certain point. This point is the one in which blatant heterodoxies within Platonic doctrine must become subservient to Christian sensibilities. The clearest instance of this is the idea of transmigration into animals. Ficino finds this idea completely untenable and it therefore needs to be explained away, even, as is seen within his Commentary on Plotinus, on the basis of the possibility for human to human transmigration.⁸² This latter possibility, along with the possibility for transmigration into the demonic realm, is ultimately endorsed by the Jewish kabbalists and thus does hold support from at least one group of *prisci theologi*. In the case of the theory of soul-circuits, the use of allegory on the part of Ficino is an attempt not to dismiss the doctrine of transmigration altogether, but to adapt the ‘heretical’ dogma into a Christian context. Within those places in his writings, the veritable idea of transmigration can be seen peering through the veil of allegorical language.

The idea of veridical transmigration takes its fullest expression within Ficino’s writings on the *vehiculum animae*, the soul vehicle. This idea, articulated among Ficino’s influences by Proclus, Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblicus,⁸³ holds that between the human soul and the human body there exists a *tertium quid*, an entity that is less material than the substance of the body yet more substantial than the purely immaterial soul. This entity, known as the ‘soul vehicle,’ links the incorporeal soul to the fleshly body and survives the death of that selfsame body. Also known as the ‘astral body,’ the soul vehicle is made up of lucent matter

⁸¹ Plotinus, *Plotini Opera Omnia*, xviii, quoted in Saffrey, p. 500. “Platonem quidem ipsum misimus ad te jamdiu, ut apud eum aliquando revivisceret, in quo revixit Cosmus, atque renatus adolevit ad votum, et feliciter floret adultus.”

⁸² Ibid. There he quotes Iamblicus, who says that “the soul preserves its own species in any transmutation whatsoever” (“Iamblico placuisse videtur dicenti, animam in qualibet transmutatione suam speciem conservare”).

⁸³ For more on the history of this Neoplatonic idea, see: Dodds, “The Astral Body in Neoplatonism,” pp. 313–321.

similar to the stars and spheres of the heavens, and thus receives celestial influences and is spherical in shape and movement. Ficino describes the astral body as follows:

As they [i.e., pure souls] fall from the Milky Way, through Cancer, into the body, they are wrapped in a special transparent astral body; swathed in this wrapping, they are then enclosed in earthly bodies. For the order of nature requires that the perfectly pure soul is not able to descend into this most impure body until the soul receives a certain mediating and pure covering. This covering, since it is coarser than the soul, but purer and finer than the body, is regarded by the Platonists as the most appropriate link between the soul and its earthly body.⁸⁴

He further expands upon this idea within the *Platonic Theology*, stating:

Some people think that the souls in whichever sphere spend a life convenient to that sphere. They think that the souls come out of the spheres by their own vehicles, and finally after many centuries, they come down to the elements and spend a demonic life in fire and air, a human or animal life on earth. Then finally, by similar grades, they go back to the celestial realms.⁸⁵

Through a connection with this vehicle, the soul can move from the celestial realm into corporeal existence, as well as in and out of existence within other realms of the cosmos. It is the ‘chariot’ of the soul, without which the soul would not be able to travel in its revolutions.

In a subtle move that seeks to attenuate the Neoplatonic character of the idea of the chariot, Ficino links the idea to the Christian mystical concept of *raptus* and the biblical phenomenon of ascent, thereby allowing him to expound upon it in greater detail. Concerning the matter, he writes that “in such a fiery chariot, the Magi and the Platonists would say, Elias and Paul were swept up into Heaven, and eventually, after the Last Judgment, the body that our [theologians] call the glorified body will be similarly enraptured.”⁸⁶ As Stéphane

⁸⁴ Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, speech vi, chapter 4, p. 112.

⁸⁵ *Théologie platonicienne*, XVIII, 5, tome III, p. 197. “Nonnulli vero putant animas in qualibet sphaera ad certum tempus vitam agere sphaerae illi convenientem. Sortiri anima sphaeris singulis vehicula propria, ac tandem post multas saecula ad elementa descendere atque in igni et aere daemonicam, in terra humanam brutalemve vitam agere. Item similibus gradibus tandem ad superna redire.” See also *Ibid.*, xvii, 3, p. 164: “Agit quandoque daemonicam vitam in igne similiter, tum heroicam in aere, humanam in terra atque ferinam”.

⁸⁶ *Platonic Theology*, vol. 4, p. 206: “Tali quodam igneo curru Magi atque Platonici

Toussaint has noted, “the emphasis on the very term *currus* [chariot] presents a subtle compromise between two traditions, the biblical and the platonic.”⁸⁷ Through an oblique inference of identity as based on an otherwise equivocal usage of the word ‘chariot’ in the platonic and in the biblical traditions, respectively, Ficino brings ‘the Magi and the Platonists’ into direct contact with ‘Elias and Paul’, and even with the Christian theologians. The chariot of Plato’s *Phaedrus* meets the chariot of the biblical Ezekiel and of the ancient Hebrew mystical tradition, becoming one for Ficino and allowing for a greater integration of Neoplatonic ideas into his Christian interpretation, and simultaneously, for a Christianization of those very Neoplatonic ideas. Toussaint sums up the idea succinctly, stating that “once the link becomes established for him between Hebrew mysticism and Platonic metaphysics, Ficino assumes that a Chaldean doctrine, actually a Neoplatonic theory, can furnish a theurgical basis for the *raptus* on the chariot. This is the very idea of the *vehiculum animae*, the *currus* of the soul.”⁸⁸ The chariot as a vehicle moves the soul, making the Christian idea of *raptus* no different than the Neoplatonic idea of ethereal mediation in the *idolum*.

Despite Ficino’s valiant attempt at reconciliation, the notion of the soul vehicle presupposes the pre-existence of the soul and its transmigration through the various spheres of existence. Such ideas clearly do not fit into orthodox Christian eschatology and as such, as Daniel P. Walker has aptly noted, Renaissance discussions of the astral body are scarce and are usually guarded.⁸⁹ As a committed Neoplatonist, Ficino wrote extensively upon the topic,⁹⁰ but indeed, his language is quite cautious. At the beginning of his explicit discussion of it in the *Platonic Theology*, for example, he is sure to state, “It is sometimes pleasant to play poetically with the ancients,”⁹¹ indicating a non-literal, ‘poetical’ understanding of this ‘ancient’ doctrine. In other places, he refers to it as the ‘spiritus,’⁹²

Heliam Paulumque raptos in caelum fuisse dicerent, ac demum post mundi iudicium corpus quod nostril glorificatum nominant, similiter raptum iri.”

⁸⁷ Stéphane Toussaint, “Zoroaster and the Flying Egg.”

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, p. 39, fn. 4. There Walker notes that Bessarion interpreted it as the “Catholic spiritual body,” and Nicholas Leonicus wrote about it but gravely warned his readers not to accept Platonic ideas that do not conform to Christianity.

⁹⁰ See especially *Platonic Theology*, xviii:iv–v.

⁹¹ *Platonic Theology*, xviii:v, quoted in Walker, “The Astral Body in Renaissance Medicine,” p. 123. “Delectat tamen cum antiquis interdum poeice ludere.”

⁹² See, for example, *Platonic Theology* vii:6, *infra* and xv:1.

thereby circumventing any astral or migratory nomenclature, and even goes so far as to say that “it is generated by the heart’s heat out of the finest part of the blood and thence spread through the whole body.”⁹³ Daniel P. Walker notes that the avoidance of its astral origin and its linkage to cosmic mobility has to do with the doctrine’s obvious unorthodoxy as an idea that assumes the pre-existence of the soul and metempsychosis.⁹⁴ This would especially apply to Ficino’s *Platonic Theology*, which was intended as a Christian Neoplatonic work for a popular audience. Nevertheless, as Walker mentions, Ficino’s ‘human spirit’ is in some measure connected to the idea of the astral body. This can be witnessed to by the influence upon him of Synesius’ *De Insomniis*, a work that employs the idea of the ‘spiritus’ as the soul vehicle and that Ficino translated in 1488. Moreover, in *Corpus Hermeticum* X, 13, as translated by Ficino, “The human soul is carried in this manner: the mind [is lodged] in the faculty of reasoning, the faculty of reasoning in the soul, the soul in the spirit, the spirit in the body. The spirit is then spread through the veins and arteries and blood: it stirs the living thing from all sides: it sustains the formless mass and the hanging of the body: it also turns all around.”⁹⁵ According to this passage, the spirit does not *originate* in the blood of the body, but is lodged in the body and takes action through the blood. It is an entity from outside that acts to connect the soul to the body. Ficino understood this, even at the points where he tried to alleviate the radical unorthodoxy of the doctrine. In any case, the doctrine had a profound influence upon Ficino, and in other parts of his writings, as will be shown shortly, takes on a more literal character.

Whether literal or veiled in poesis, the Neoplatonists, including Ficino, naturally find authority for this idea within the dialogues of Plato.⁹⁶ One of these sources of authority is the image of the Phaedran charioteer, in which the chariot plays a crucial role in the cyclical movement of the soul from the divine sphere to the earthly sphere and back again. Though the myth itself includes absolutely no indication of an ethereal

⁹³ *Platonic Theology*, vii:6, vol. 2, p. 235.

⁹⁴ Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, p. 39.

⁹⁵ “Anima hominis in hunc vehitur modum: mens in ratione ‘ratio in anima’ anima in spiritu (spiritus), spiritus in corpore. Spiritus per venas arteriasque: sanguinemque diffusus: animal undique ciet: molemque corporis suspensam substat: atque circumfert.” In Ficino, *Opera*, II, p. 1848, “Mercurij Trismegisti Clavis ad Tatium”.

⁹⁶ For details, see Dodds, “The Astral Body,” p. 315, and Walker, “The Astral Body in Renaissance Medicine,” p. 122.

nature in regard to the chariot, or a special connection between the chariot and the astral planes, its imagery of vehicular movement for the soul provides an important precedent for the Neoplatonic idea. As has been amply shown, Ficino's theory of cyclical soul movement is deeply influenced by this myth, and the connection of the chariot to the *vehiculum animae*, even if allegorical, cannot be disregarded.

Another important Platonic source of authority for the Neoplatonic idea of the soul vehicle, which leads to a more literal interpretation within Ficino, lies in Plato's *Timaeus*. There, Timaeus speaks of the mixing bowl of the soul. At creation, according to Timaeus, the demiurge poured the ingredients of the soul into this mixing bowl and, after mixing them up, divided the mixture "into souls equal in number to the stars."⁹⁷ He then assigned each one to a star, and "having mounted them, as it were, in a chariot,"⁹⁸ implanted them in bodies, where they were subject to affections and sensations. Timaeus continues:

He who has lived well throughout his appropriate time would make his way back to the dwelling of his lawful star and would have a life that was happy and habitual to him. But he who had failed to live well would, in his second birth, take on a woman's nature. If in that form he still did not refrain from evil, then in whatever mode he might make himself bad, he would always take on some such bestial nature in the similitude of that mode of life that was born in him. And he would keep changing and would not cease from his labors until he had reached the following point: not before he should draw along with the circuit of the Same and Similar that was in himself the vast mob of fire and water and air and earth that had later grown over it and, having mastered by reason that roaring and irrational mob, reach the form of his first and best condition.⁹⁹

Commenting upon this passage, Ficino significantly adopts a rather literal interpretation. In his Commentary on Plotinus he writes:

From the thinking of Timaeus, therefore, it is proper to say that the soul of a man that sinning, has fallen into perverse reason and the most impetuous imagination, after death will soon be in an aerial body, which it now also possesses. By the very same perverse and impetuous thoughts, it [i.e., the soul] is violently whirled among the lowest demons, which torment it with similar stings until, recognizing the cause of so great a torment and the removal of itself from the intellect, it returns to it [i.e., the intellect] step by step...and indeed, it [i.e., the soul] can be lifted

⁹⁷ *Timaeus*, 41E, p. 72.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 42B–D, pp. 72–73.

up to the order of higher demons and finally to the stars themselves, together with the celestial body, which the soul has from the beginning, each [soul] by its own [star] . . . and everywhere it [i.e., the soul] conserves its human property. In fact, man is earthly, aerial, and is celestial; he is also solar and martial [i.e., of Mars].¹⁰⁰

Here, Ficino picks up on the Timaestian idea of individual souls being associated with individual stars and then being mounted upon chariots, and interprets this connection as the creation of the soul vehicle, called by him here the “aerial body.” The human soul is individuated by this body, and can travel within the cosmos through it. Ficino is arguing here against the theory of transmigration into beasts by explicitly asserting the ubiquitous conservation of the soul’s human property by means of the soul vehicle, in contradistinction to Plato’s original affirmation of the bad soul’s possible change into one of a bestial nature. In order to achieve this, he proposes a rather literal understanding of the idea of the soul vehicle and the transmigration of the individual soul by means of this very vehicle.

Ficino the Christian Neoplatonist, faithful to the teachings of Plato yet devout in his religion, had the complex task ahead of him of reconciling the Platonic teachings of transmigration with the dictates of Christianity. As a Christian cleric who sought to introduce Plato and the *prisci theologi* into the Christian world, Ficino obviously could not consistently and categorically reveal convictions drawn from the *prisci theologi* that would be considered heretical by the *christiani theologi*. Ficino could not candidly and definitively tell his average Christian audience that the soul actually travels through the spheres before its entrance into the human body and after its departure there from, or that human souls reincarnate from human body to human body, as he seems to have thought was the case with both Plato in Plotinus and Cosimo in Lorenzo. Nevertheless, he expresses support for such ideas throughout

¹⁰⁰ “In plotinum,” in Ficino, *Opera*, p. 1710. “Oportet igitur ex Timaei sententia dicere, hominis animam, quae peccando in rationem perversam imaginationemque vehementiorem prolapsa est, post obitum mox in aërio corpore, quod nunc etiam possidet, eadem ipsa cogitationis perversitate vehementiaque torqueri inter infimos daemones, similibus animam stimulis subpungentes, quousque tantae angustiae causam recognoscens fuisse aversionem ipsam ab intellectu, paulatim revertatur ad ipsum . . . atque ita gradatim in sublimiorum daemonum ordinem elevetur, et ad ipsas denique stellas una cum coelesti corpore, quod possidet ab initio unaquaeque ad illam, vel cujus ordinem a principio sortita est, vel cui reddit vivendo se similem, ubique vero proprietatem conservat humanam. Est enim homo terrenus, est aërius, est et coelestis, est in super solari set Martius.”

his works, as possible through the Neoplatonic concept of the soul vehicle and as supported by the Jewish kabbalists. Ficino treats this concept in itself in a highly cautious manner, yet his treatment of his sources for this idea and his later writings, in which he is more explicit about the support for transmigration itself, reveal a certain acceptance of the soul vehicle's astral origins. In its connection with the pre-existence of the soul and with metempsychosis, however, this doctrine is also often shrouded by Ficino. Nevertheless, he reveals enough, both in terms of the soul vehicle and in terms of transmigration, to show a complex, sometimes inconsistent picture within his own thought. In many cases in his writings, he attempts to attenuate these doctrines, yet in many cases, his latent support for their veridicality peers through the veil of attenuation. Still in other cases, in his writings of 1492, he expresses his support for the possibility of transmigration as based upon the Jewish Kabbalah and by means of the Neoplatonic soul vehicle. Taken together, all of these aspects present a complex picture of a complex thinker who, while both Christian and Neoplatonic, was not always able to harmoniously combine the two.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Now that this point in our historical view of Italian civilization has been reached, it is time to speak of the influence of antiquity, the ‘new birth’ of which has been one-sidedly chosen as the name to sum up the whole period. The conditions which have been hitherto described would have sufficed, apart from antiquity, to upturn and to mature the national mind; and most of the intellectual tendencies which yet remain to be noticed would be conceivable without it.¹

Thus writes the famed Swiss historian of the Italian Renaissance, Jacob Burckhardt, in his celebrated and highly influential *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, published for the first time in 1860. Burckhardt, who had little penchant for “new birth,” even of the metaphorical type, goes on in his book to devote an entire section to it, entitled “The Revival of Antiquity.”² He explains this seemingly dichotomous contradiction: “Both what has gone before and what we have still to discuss are coloured in a thousand ways by the influence of the ancient world; and though the essence of the phenomena might still have been the same without the classical revival, it is only with and through this revival that they are actually manifested to us.”³ Burckhardt the trained and adept historian could not ignore the framework of rebirth that surrounded that phenomenological space and period known as the ‘Italian Renaissance,’ while Burckhardt the theoretician of modern progress and above all, of individualism, had little regard for the role of antiquity in that society which he saw, perhaps not coincidentally framed in a language opposed to ‘rebirth,’ as comprising “the firstborn among the sons of modern Europe.”⁴ For Burckhardt the protestant theologian, influenced by Schopenhauer’s philosophy of the human will, as well as by his older contemporaries such as Alexis de Tocqueville and others who were

¹ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, p. 104.

² Kerrigan and Braden note that “Burckhardt is not especially happy with the designation ‘Renaissance,’ which he occasionally puts in quotation marks,” and that “the section in the *Civilization* on ‘the influence of antiquity...’ comes not first but third” in the order of Burckhardt’s treatments of ‘Renaissance’ topics. See: *The Idea of the Renaissance*, p. 10.

³ Burckhardt, p. 104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

struggling with the rather new Enlightenment concepts of emancipation, private citizenship and liberty and questions of ‘individualism’ in general reigned supreme. In the oft quoted words of Burckhardt himself, his opinion held that medieval man “was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category.” In the Renaissance, by contrast, “man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such.”⁵ Such a language of individualism pervades Burckhardt’s work on the Italian Renaissance. Somewhat ironically, he found the penultimate model of individualism by himself looking back, not to antiquity, but to the Renaissance itself. Perhaps his proposition “that it was not the revival of antiquity alone, but its union with the genius of the Italian people, which achieved the conquest of the western world,” which he claims “as one of the chief propositions” of his book, penetrated Burckhardt’s own sense of novel genius. Perhaps he saw a turn to the Renaissance as a mere framework for his own theoretical ‘renaissance’. If so, then by definition of the very word, he dialectically truly saw his seemingly novel ‘genius’ in his ‘innovative’ ideas, already in the period under study.

Whatever the case may be, Burckhardt’s ideas have had a wide-ranging impact on the study of the Renaissance, an impact which is still very much felt today. He most certainly influenced the philosopher, and historian of philosophy, Ernst Cassirer, who read the history of Renaissance thought in general as the history of the idea of the subjective individual. Mirroring Burckhardt’s dichotomous reading of history, Cassirer writes:

In the medieval doctrine of two worlds, and in all the dualisms derived from it, man simply stands apart from the forces that are fighting over him; he is, in a sense, at their mercy. Though he experiences the conflict of these forces, he takes no active part in it... In the Renaissance a different image emerges ever more clearly. The old image of Fortune with a wheel, seizing men and dragging them along, sometimes raising them, sometimes throwing them down into the abyss, now gives way to the depiction of Fortune with a *sailboat*. And this bark is not controlled by Fortune alone—man himself is steering it.⁶

⁵ Ibid. Italics in the original.

⁶ Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos*, pp. 76–77. For a critique of Cassirer, see Peter Gay, “The Social History of Ideas.” Gay argues that by focusing exclusively upon the history of ideas, Cassirer was excessively detached from social processes, and therefore from a more comprehensive understanding of history. This is quite ironic, given the appellation of Burckhardt, who clearly stands in the background of Cassirer’s

Cassirer is clearly taking Burckhardt's divisions between the medieval collective and the Renaissance 'spiritual *individual*,' and emphasizing what he perceives to be the 'novel' characteristic of autonomy for that individual.

Cassirer's contemporary, the highly influential historian of Renaissance thought Paul Oskar Kristeller, writes that "the pervasive individualism of the period" is "a phenomenon admirably described by Burckhardt and often misunderstood by his critics."⁷ He goes on to explain the meaning of 'individualism' as a certain sense of importance attached to personal experiences and individual thoughts, and writes, "I cannot help feeling that the widespread and prominent concern of Renaissance thinkers with the immortality of the soul was on the metaphysical level another expression of the same kind of individualism,"⁸ thus bringing Renaissance metaphysics into the realm of Burckhardian individualism.

More recently, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin has read the Renaissance as a progressive shift from feudal agriculture to an increasingly urban market society. In her opinion, this brought with it a widening shift of consciousness concerning individual autonomy and consequently, a new orientation of faith based on the subjective and more fluid positioning of the human being within the paradigm of cognition.⁹ This too parallels Burckhardt's idea of Renaissance men "not as members of a corporate group but as individuals,"¹⁰ showing a lasting Burckhardian influence.

Of late, Burckhardt's theories and methodologies have come under a greater sense of criticism. Notwithstanding this trend, Burckhardt's thoughts themselves and their expressions in later scholarship, such as that of Cassirer and Kristeller, still hold great importance. In the words of the Renaissance Latinist Christopher Celenza, relating a conversation with an older scholar and possibly reflecting Celenza's own Burckhardian/Reniassancian feeling of a need to return to the

thought, as "the father of cultural history," that school of thought that sees the need to examine the whole of life in regard to any historical period in order to get the fullest picture. For a general analysis of the problem of cultural and intellectual history (and the problem of purely textual analyses), see Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, especially pp. 23–71.

⁷ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, p. 183.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman*, pp. 3–22.

¹⁰ Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance*, p. xii.

ultimate questions and means of discourse of our ancestors in order to innovate: "The one thing he remembered most when he thought back on the scholarly climate of the day (i.e., the 1950s and 1960s) was that there was debate: debate about what the Italian Renaissance was, debate about its legacy, debate about how far it extended socially, and so on."¹¹ Celenza goes on to discuss the intellectual impact of Burckhardt, only to challenge the latter's methodology for lack of recourse to Latin literature. Notwithstanding, or perhaps due to its challenge, Celenza's own thought concerning the period indicates the contemporary importance of Burckhardtian thought in regard to the Renaissance, even for thinkers like Celenza himself. In the words of Wallace Ferguson, which still hold true almost sixty years after they were written, Burckhardt's theory's "unique place in the history of Renaissance historiography is attested today by the virulence of its opponents no less than by the more moderate defense of those who still find in it an essential verity."¹²

Quite analogous to Celenza's approach, in the area of Jewish studies, David Ruderman has observed that new researchers have come "to reexamine the issue of periodization: What precisely do the terms *Renaissance*, *ghetto*, *baroque* or *early modern* mean when applied to Jewish history? In what ways did the Renaissance and the ghetto era initiate a process of restructuring a medieval and traditional Jewish mentality?"¹³ Though Ruderman accurately remarks that this reexamination comes as a challenge to the "overly romantic Burckhardtian [sic] perspective"¹⁴ of the previous generation of Jewish studies scholars of the Italian Renaissance, such as Cecil Roth and Moses Avigdor Shulvass, the mere mention of the term *early modern* in regard to the period, and the idea of the restructuring of medieval mentality as the initiation of a new direction in Jewish thought both have strongly Burckhardtian overtones.

In continuation of the inevitable cycle of scholarship that seeks to form a new approach by looking back and partly basing itself upon the learned, albeit scrutinized authority of past thought, the age-old, Burckhardtian style questions can be raised again for this present study. What was the relation of the thinkers examined above to the period of antiquity? Was the reference to antiquity a merely exterior framework

¹¹ Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance*, p. xi.

¹² *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, p. 179.

¹³ Ruderman, "Introduction," p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

for progressive, 'early modern' thought, as Burckhardt and his followers would claim, or was it conceived much differently? Was there truly any notion of a 'rebirth' of ancient thought that distinguished the period from its predecessors? Was there really any novel notion of the 'individual,' as opposed to the collective, that may have characterized a shift of consciousness to more modern conceptions of autonomy and personal identity? Finally, what other patterns of thought seem to be characteristic of the thought and reasoning of the period and region under study? The above study of the notion of metempsychosis, which itself is a concept of 'rebirth' based upon the concept of the past coming into contact with the present, which then can affect the future, all through the medium of the 'individual' human soul, seems to provide some answers to these 'perennial' questions.

In terms of the rebirth of antiquity, the discussions throughout this study clearly show the extreme importance of antique sources, not only for the framing of Renaissance ideas concerning metempsychosis, but also in terms of providing them with ultimate authority. The discussions of the *prisca theologia* tradition make this fact of the Renaissance readily apparent. For Renaissance thinkers, it was not enough to simply assert a belief in metempsychosis or even to show that its foundations lay on solid logical grounds; it was necessary to find historical precedent within ancient texts. All of the thinkers discussed above, including both the detractors such as Moshe ha-Kohen Ashkenazi and the more philosophically bent theorists such as Abarbanel and Ficino, based their ideas upon ancient authorities, from the bible to the 'ancient' kabbalah, to Hermes, to Plato. Even when an innovation was made, it was done in an interpretive, arcanizing style, and more often than not involved the conjunction of various ancient theories, whether done in an explicit or a tacit manner. In the Renaissance, a true rebirth happened by the running together of new and old, with the new often emerging out of the running together of old and old. This occurred not out of coincidence, but out of the authoritarian need for authority. In the Renaissance conception, as in the medieval conception before it, an argument based on the bible, for instance, proved more accurate than an argument based on pure logic, precisely due to its biblical basis. Indeed, the innovation of the period did not see a modernistic move away from such authority for a more subjective view, but rather saw the expansion of texts deemed to be authoritative. This expansion partly involves the new medium of printing, partly the new translation of old texts, such as Ficino's Latin version of the *Corpus Hermeticum*,

published in 1463 with a vernacular version published in September of the same year,¹⁵ and partly the general ‘flow of knowledge,’ characterized by the meeting between Jewish thinkers from different cultural and intellectual backgrounds and between Jewish and Christian savants. In contrast to the Burckhardian theory that novel intellectual tendencies of the period would be conceivable without the ancient framework, thinkers of the Italian Renaissance seem to have had a more complex relationship to the past, which not only framed their thoughts, but fundamentally informed them and, paradoxically, by being expanded to include variant ancient authorities, allowed for their novelty. This is the case not only with Jewish thinkers of the time, but with Ficino and Pico as well.

Starkly characteristic of this paradoxically ‘novel’ trend in *prisca theologia* is the ‘rebirth’ of Pythagoras as an ancient authority. Even though the ‘medievals’ also looked to the past for authority, Moshe Idel notes that the Pythagorean aspect of ancient philosophy had “been neglected by the Middle Age Jewish and Christian sources.”¹⁶ He takes the Jewish case specifically, and notes that though Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism were referred to several times and in several different contexts by medieval Jewish thinkers, they seldom had a positive connotation. As a case in point he takes Maimonides, and basing himself upon the enigmatic chapter 8, part II of the *Guide*, which states that Pythagoras believed in the harmonics of the spheres, an idea shot down by Aristotelian reason, Idel surmises that Maimonides “grouped Pythagoras together with the obsolete ancient philosophers,”¹⁷ and the negative attitude of Aristotle to Pythagoreanism “had been “indubitably decisive in his marginalization.”¹⁸ Importantly, Idel notes in regard to medieval kabbalistic thought and Pythagoras:

Even the kabbalists, who were only marginally affected by the negative evaluations of the Aristotelian-biased philosophers, do not mention this

¹⁵ See note 22 in chapter 3, above.

¹⁶ Idel, “Introduction to the Bison Book Edition,” p. xi.

¹⁷ ‘Obsolete,’ presumably, because his thought had been turned over by Aristotle.

¹⁸ Idel, “Introduction to the Bison Book Edition,” p. xi. An example of Aristotle’s critique of Pythagoras, specifically related to the idea of metempsychosis, exists in his *De Anima* Book I, chapter 3, *Complete Works*, p. 650. There, Aristotle deems the “Pythagorean myths, that any soul could be clothed in any body,” to be “an absurd view, for each body seems to have a form and a shape of its own. It is as absurd,” writes Aristotle, “as to say that the art of carpentry could embody itself in flutes; each art must use its tools, each soul its body.”

figure but very rarely. Their interest in numerology, metempsychosis, or magic seems to be independent from a direct and significant influence of genuine or spuriously attributed writings of “the head of the philosophers.”¹⁹

In regard to Renaissance discussions of metempsychosis, it is important to note in this context that of the scholars discussed above, the Aristotelian Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, whose struggle is ultimately against the belief in metempsychosis, directly invokes Pythagoras as the founder of the idea; by doing so, he is attempting to show metempsychosis to be a foreign implant into Jewish thought. Though seemingly following in the footsteps of Pythagoras’ medieval detractors, such as Maimonides, Ashkenazi’s direct invocation of Pythagoras as the originator of the idea of metempsychosis, which stands as the very core of his debate, marks a subtle shift of consciousness by bringing Pythagoras to center stage. This centralization may reflect a personal knowledge of Pythagoras by Ashkenazi, and it may reflect a wider cultural knowledge of Pythagoras and Pythagorean concepts, which Ashkenazi saw as being falsely wrapped in Jewish garb in the form of kabbalah. Idel points out that Eusebius’ *Praeparatio Evangelica*, which, as noted above, was translated into Latin in 1448 by the Cretan humanist George of Trebizond,²⁰ was highly important for the Renaissance proliferation of Pythagorean thought. Given Trebizond’s Cretan origins, it can plausibly be surmised that Pythagoras was already known in Crete through the *Praeparatio* at a relatively early date. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that in 1466, elite members of the Jewish community may have had access to this book, not only, quite possibly, in its Latin translation, but also in the Greek original. Whatever the case may be for the actual transmission of Pythagorean ideas, there is no doubt that Ashkenazi’s seemingly ‘traditional’ use of Pythagoras against a ‘Jewish’ belief in metempsychosis marks a subtle shift of consciousness. This shift not only involves a fairly novel awareness and recognition of Pythagoras’ positive claims for metempsychosis, it also involves his unreserved linkage

¹⁹ Ibid. Though Scholem and others (see: Langermann, “Studies in Medieval Hebrew Pythagoreanism,” p. 219) have argued for Neopythagorean ideas in *Sefer Yetzirah*, which was widely circulated and appraised in medieval Jewish mystical circles, Yehuda Liebes has skillfully argued that there is no connection between Pythagoras and *Sefer Yetzirah*. See: Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetzira*, p. 13 and p. 36. Under consideration of Liebes’ arguments, Idel’s characterization of a medieval kabbalistic distance from Pythagoreanism stands.

²⁰ See notes 54 and 55 in chapter 5, above.

of Pythagoras to the kabbalistic tradition. Ashkenazi seems to be one of the first thinkers, if not the very first, to explicitly link Pythagoreanism to kabbalah. Despite its negative connotation in Ashkenazi, this linkage marks a novelty in the conceptualization of that which is 'kabbalah' and in the overall fight for intellectual authority.

In contradistinction to Ashkenazi, no less than four of the Renaissance authors discussed above hold an overall positive view of Pythagoras in regard to the topic of metempsychosis. Abarbanel and Genazzano in the Jewish camp, and Ficino and Pico in the Christian camp, mark a new direction in the valuing of Pythagoras as a *priscus theologus*. Such a valuing turns Ashkenazi's picture on its head by expanding the boundaries of that which is acceptable as ancient authority and legitimizing the intellectual leanings of Pythagoras. Not only does Abarbanel explicitly mention Pythagoras as one of the ancient philosophers in his positive assessment of the logical possibility of metempsychosis, he states that Socrates and Pythagoras "perhaps received it [i.e., the notion of metempsychosis] from the first generations and from the time of the prophets. But Aristotle and the interpreters of his books very much refused this belief, and they thought that metempsychosis is an impossibility."²¹ In direct contrast to Ashkenazi's theory, Abarbanel gives both Socrates and Pythagoras greater credence than Aristotle by noting their greater antiquity, and he goes so far in his positive assessment and legitimization to connect them to the prophets. In a different context, in connection to cosmic cycles, Abarbanel shows a more nuanced familiarity with Pythagoreanism by mentioning Empedocles who, according to Diogenes Laertius, was a pupil of Pythagoras.²² Abarbanel appeals to Empedocles as an authority on "the wise men of the nations and their ancient philosophers,"²³ and quite possibly as one of those wise, ancient philosophers himself. It is reasonable to assume that Empedocles' Pythagorean thought concerning cosmic cycles may have had an influence on Abarbanel's own theory of *palingenesis* as explicated in regard to *shmittot* and *yovelot* and explained above, in chapter three. Whatever the case may be for influence, Abarbanel's explicit mention of the figure Empedocles is very telling, in that it openly and positively recognizes

²¹ Commentary on Deuteronomy 25:5, p. 385: "אולי קבלוהו מהדורות הראשונים ומזמן הנביאים. ואמנם אריסטו ומפרשי ספריו, מאנו מאד הדעת הזה, וחשבו שגלגול הנפשות הוא דבר נמנע מעצמו."

²² See: Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of the Philosophers*, viii.

²³ See above, note 135 in chapter 3, above, and the discussion surrounding it.

a parallel Pythagorean theory of cosmic cycles to the one that he is expounding. In Abarbanel, Pythagoreanism undoubtedly takes an important position in regard to the kabbalistic concepts of metempsychosis and cosmic cycles, and also, perhaps, in regard to palingenesis in connection to the latter of these two kabbalistic concepts.

Along with Ashkenazi and Abarbanel, Moshe Idel has noted that Genazzano “seems to be one of the first who related, explicitly, Pythagoreanism and kabbalah.”²⁴ Like both Ashkenazi and Abarbanel, he does so through the medium of metempsychosis, and like Abarbanel, he gives Pythagoreanism an overall positive reading and an exalted status. Indeed, Genazzano goes beyond Abarbanel’s statement that Pythagoras may have received the idea of metempsychosis during the time of the prophets, and actively asserts that Numenius the Pythagorean loved Moses’ Torah and thought himself to be a reincarnation of the ultimate of prophets, Moses.²⁵ The explicit mention of Numenius, many of whose writings are preserved in the text of Eusebius’ *Praeparatio Evangelica*, along with other evidences discussed above,²⁶ indicate that Genazzano may very well have been familiar with the *Praeparatio*, and was most certainly familiar with *prisca theologia* traditions that accorded Pythagoras a place of respect. Despite his reticent statement that the idea of transmigration into the bodies of animals, as held by some of the later kabbalists, is not a rabbinic idea, but “is the opinion of a certain ancient philosopher such as Pythagoras and his faction,”²⁷ his opinion of Pythagoras remains high. Indeed, Moshe Idel has observed, in regard to this last statement, that it could possibly “mean that Pythagoras preserved ancient Jewish traditions which do not occur in the ‘ancient’ kabbalistic texts, but only in the later layers of kabbalah.”²⁸ Alternately, it could be a criticism based on the idea of a foreign implant into Judaism by later kabbalists, similar to the Pythagorean argument of Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi. Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt that in the thought of Genazzano concerning metempsychosis, kabbalah and Pythagoreanism are complexly intertwined.

²⁴ Idel, “Introduction to the Bison Book Edition,” p. xiv.

²⁵ See note 48 in chapter 5, above.

²⁶ See chapter 5, footnote 56 and the surrounding discussion.

²⁷ *La lettera preziosa*, p. 154: “היא דעת איזה פילוסוף קדום כגון פתאגוריים וסיעתו.”

²⁸ Idel, “Introduction to the Bison Book Edition,” p. xiv.

In the meanderings of the Christian thinkers discussed above, Pythagoras takes on a much different picture than that of a straight relationship to kabbalah. Concerning Christian Renaissance thinkers, Michael Allen warns, "The concept of Renaissance Pythagoreanism begs many questions; and we are still entitled to doubt whether it can be usefully distinguished from Renaissance Neoplatonism."²⁹ Taking this warning as a point of departure, Christopher Celenza observes that nevertheless, "one can note that Plotinian Neoplatonism itself became somewhat 'Pythagoreanized' under the influence of Iamblichus and that this Pythagoreanized Neoplatonism was passed down to, among others, Syrianus and Proclus."³⁰ Hence, a complex picture subsists in terms of the relationship between Neoplatonism and Pythagoreanism, to which should be added the thoughts of Ficino and Pico. While Ficino specifically mentions Proclus in regard to the possibility of the soul falling into companionship with beasts,³¹ a clearly Pythagorean idea, Pico's dependence upon and extreme respect for Plotinus can possibly be seen as dependence on and respect for a 'Pythagoreanized' Plotinus. This is especially the case in terms of Pico's discussions, based on Plotinus, of transmigration into the realm of beasts, and it can certainly be seen if the veridical aspect of transmigration is allowed as a possibility in the thought of Pico. It can also be seen through the specific invocation, as support, of the Pythagorean Empedocles, and an attribution to him by Pico of the idea of transmigration into plants.³² In the case of Ficino, it is important to note that while he seemingly scapegoats Pythagoras in regard to metempsychosis in order to safeguard Plato through the 'degrees of truth principle,'³³ Pythagoras constantly recurs and is consistently mentioned as Plato's teacher on Ficino's lists of *prisca theologia*. Moreover, in his later commentary on Plotinus, which contains hints to a more veritable view of transmigration and may be a case of Celenza's 'Pythagoreanized Plotinus' rearing its head, Ficino explicitly calls upon the Pythagoreans for positive support of the idea of Plato's reincarnation into Plotinus.³⁴ In a complex dialectic, the *prisca theologia*

²⁹ Michael J.B. Allen, "Two Commentaries on the *Phaedrus*: Ficino's Indebtedness to Hermias," *Journal of the Warburg and Courland Institutes*, 43 (1980), p. 127, quoted in Celenza, "Pythagoras in the Renaissance," p. 671.

³⁰ Celenza, "Pythagoras in the Renaissance," p. 671.

³¹ See footnote 59 in chapter 8, above.

³² See footnote 49 in chapter 7, above.

³³ See footnote 45 in chapter 8, above.

³⁴ See footnote 79 in chapter 8, above.

tradition of the Italian Renaissance seems to have felt the authoritative influence of those such as Pythagoras and his ilk as much as it utilized such authorities for the framing of its own notions.

Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism not only act as a prime example of the complex Renaissance relationship to ancient authority, which also includes the bible, the anciently perceived kabbalistic tradition, Plato and Hermes, among others, their example brings with it another complex characteristic of Italian Renaissance thought, namely, the intricate interplay between reason and religio-mystical thought. In the words of Celenza, "there have always been two dimensions reported about the Pythagorean tradition: the religious and the scientific. The misstep of rationalist historiography has been to polarize these two aspects, to separate facets which were originally intimately linked."³⁵ Celenza continues, "[T]o have a full picture of Pythagoreanism one must connect its religious and rational facets."³⁶ Though they were certainly not cognizant of Celenza's critique of Pythagorean historiography, which incidentally also applies to the historiography of Renaissance thought itself, and though they may not have specifically linked the phenomenon to 'Pythagoreanism' per se, the Renaissance thinkers examined above all sought to find some type of balance between and integral amalgamation of reason and religion. From Balbo to Ficino and from Abarbanel to Pico, all of the thinkers outlined here busied themselves with the dialectical relationship between philosophy and mysticism, between rational logic and revealed prophecy.

Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, the most stridently austere 'philosopher' among the group, saw the incessant need for all received wisdom to be reasoned,³⁷ and mentioned the dangers of falling into chaos by not doing so on the one hand, and by divulging reasoned secrets of prophecy to the uninitiated on the other hand. This is challenged by Balbo who, following in the footsteps of Moses of Burgos, claims that the prophetic mystics see far and wide precisely because of the fact that they stand upon the heads of the philosophers.³⁸ In this, he sets up a hierarchical view, which is followed in step by Abarbanel, who sees metempsychosis as a logical 'possibility' but which is a truth that is ultimately beyond

³⁵ Celenza, "Pythagoras in the Renaissance," p. 669.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See footnote 56 in chapter 1, above.

³⁸ See footnote 44 in chapter 1, above.

rational assertion in faith, and who sees the *yovel* as the ultimate cosmological and cosmogonical expression of the point beyond all human knowledge. This hierarchy is also followed by Genazzano, though in a more nuanced manner. Genazzano sees two paths to the doctrine of metempsychosis, the Torah path and the reasoned manner, with the former superior in that it is based in the revelation of God himself and the latter veritable only inasmuch as it hearkens back to and derives its premises from the former. Alemanno also sets up a hierarchy, though in relation to metempsychosis, the question of mysticism and philosophy for him rests on the paradoxical dualism of unity and separation and the *ad infinitum* unity and separation of unity and separation itself (or alternately, “themselves,” depending on the given state). In this, he is aided by texts with mythical elements, such as *Sefer ha-Peli’ah*, but he actively blurs those elements in a seemingly conscious move of opting for the Neoplatonic notions of the One and the many in relation to his overall mystical stance. Coming from the more mythical background of post-Zoharic Spain, Hayyat explicitly condemns such philosophically bent interpretations of mysticism, but then makes great usage of Abulafian thought and of specifically Aristotelian philosophical language. Ficino and Pico face a very different, though related problem in the reconciliation of the mystical doctrine of metempsychosis of the *prisci theologi* and the orthodox views of the Church concerning the nature and status of the human soul. For Pico, the literal and the allegorical readings conjoin, in a subtle manner allowing for both the philosophical and the mystical Plotinian ideas of unity through participated transmigration. For Ficino, the conjunction of the mythical and the philosophical elements of Neoplatonic thought, especially in regard to the idea of the soul vehicle, which itself dangerously borders on heterodoxy, allows him to attempt to posit some type of positive view of metempsychosis.

It could certainly be argued, and rightfully so, that attempts to reconcile and harmoniously integrate reason and revealed knowledge, and at times to recognize a hierarchical relationship, is not a phenomenon that is unique to the Italian Renaissance. Many thinkers who came before contemplated such ideas and dealt with such problems; one who most palpably comes to mind is the early twelfth century Spanish Jewish thinker, Judah Halevi. In his classic philosophical work of anti-philosophy, the *Kuzari*, Halevi writes, concerning the example of creation, “The received tradition from Adam, from Noah, and from

Moshe, peace be upon him, is the witness of prophecy, which is more trustworthy than the witness of logical syllogism.”³⁹ In Halevi’s view, the tradition regarding creation and the chronology of the world are true because they were received in prophecy from the Absolute source of Truth. The Greek philosophers, by contrast, lacked a divinely revealed religion and thus were forced to rely upon their intellects. From this point of departure they developed an impressive legacy of philosophical discourse, but this discourse’s limits lie within its very point of departure. In the words of Diana Lobel, astutely paraphrasing the *Kuzari*, “Had Aristotle possessed a true tradition that taught the creation of the world, he would have used his logical arguments to document creation, rather than to prove that the world is eternal.”⁴⁰ This applies for all areas of inquiry. According to Halevi, philosophy is certainly methodologically adept, perhaps even moreso than Judaism itself;⁴¹ the problem lies in its basic premise, or lack thereof, and in this area, Judaism is not only superior, it contains the Truth of prophecy.

Notwithstanding such precedent, there is no doubt that similar questions and ideas prevailed in the thought of Renaissance scholars. Indeed, such precedence does not detract from the importance of this way of thinking about revelation and reason for Italian Renaissance thought, and perhaps it is due to such an interest in these thoughts that only a generation later, according to extant Hebrew book lists, the *Kuzari* enjoyed a wide circulation in Italian environs,⁴² and was published in Fano in 1506, and again in Venice in both 1547 and 1594.⁴³ Moreover, it is important to note in the context of the overall discussion here, that the *Kuzari* had a significant influence upon both Alemanno and Abarbanel,⁴⁴ and that Genazzano mentions it as an important counterfoil to Maimonidean philosophy. In his words,

³⁹ p. 21: קבלה מאדם, מנח וממשה ע"ה עדות הנבואה, שהיא נאמנה מעדות ההקש וההגיוני. It is important to point out that the word קבלה as it appears in the text does not signify the mystical tradition typically known as ‘kabbalah’, but prophetic reception that is passed down through the generations.

⁴⁰ *Between Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 14.

⁴¹ For a shrewd analysis of the *Kuzari* following this line of thought, and of the veritable dialogue, albeit not simultaneous, between the characters of the philosopher and the Jewish *haver*, see: Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,” *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, pp. 95–141.

⁴² See: Adam Shear, “Chapter 3: The Kuzari in Early Modern Italy,” *The Later History of a Medieval Hebrew Book*, section 3.0.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, section 3.1.2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, sections 3.5.3, 3.6, and 3.7.

There has already been a book composed against the *Guide*, and it is the *Kuzari*, for he who studies it carefully. And know, my brother, that there has been no other book composed that agrees with the Truth as it does, and it does not differ from the kabbalah at all. There is nothing perverse or crooked⁴⁵ in its words, for all of them are straight for he who understands.⁴⁶

Genazzano's usage of the phrases 'he who studies it carefully,' and 'he who understands' indicates a philosophical type of esotericization of the *Kuzari*, at whose core stands the mystical, ontological esotericism of the kabbalah.⁴⁷ This mystical core is indicated by Genazzano's parity of the *Kuzari* with kabbalistic lore, by the very means of the *Kuzari*'s extreme agreement with the Truth. In line with the rest of Genazzano's thought, he follows out a complex dualistic path, which in reality is one philosophical esoteric path that, when untangled and made exoteric, ultimately leads to the ontologically esoteric core of the kabbalah. As such, Genazzano's philosophically esoteric kabbalization of the *Kuzari* is quite telling, and in and of itself marks a new direction in Italian Renaissance conceptualizations of the dialectical problem of reason and religion. Indeed, apart from Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi who saw a clear opposition, all of the Jewish thinkers discussed above viewed philosophical reasoning as leading, in one way or another, to a kabbalistic core. This is the case even with Hayyat, who denounces such reasoning but then proceeds to utilize it. For all of these thinkers, not only does revealed religion become equated with kabbalistic lore, philosophical analysis becomes a valuable tool with which to explicate and to arrive at that revealed kabbalistic lore, notwithstanding its limits in unraveling that lore's fundamental secret in the paradox. In addition to the Jewish thinkers, the Christian thinkers outlined above were also utilizing rational thought in an attempt to prove the superior nature of that which lies beyond all rational thought. In the words of Fabrizio Lelli, "Scholars belonging to both religions outlined a common

⁴⁵ Proverbs, 8:8.

⁴⁶ *La lettera preziosa*, p. 139: "כבר חובר ספר כנגד המורה והוא הכוזרי למי שיעיין בו בדקות. ודע אחי כי לא חובר ספר מסכים אל האמת כמוהו ובלתי חולק על הקבלה כלל אין בדבריו נפתל ועקש כי כלם נכוחים למבין." In contradistinction to Halevi himself, Genazzano does seem to be indicating the kabbalistic tradition through the usage of the word קבלה.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the important distinction between philosophical and mystical esotericism, fundamentally related to the distinction between rational contradiction that can be solved or ironed out and ontological paradox that can only be recognized or accepted as such, see above, pp. 50–54.

intellectual program aiming to overcome the boundaries of human reason.”⁴⁸ Within this ‘intellectual program’, reason most certainly did not become obsolete and, in fact, it remained an integral component; nevertheless, it circled back upon itself in an infinitesimal manner of revelation and concealment, by coming to recognize its own limits in that ultimate Revelation which it ultimately attempted to reveal.

The circular nature of Renaissance thought not only involved the fluid interchange between reason and prophecy, it was based, in large part, on a circular notion of time itself. As Michael J.B. Allen notes, “It is a learned commonplace that the Renaissance humanists, inspired by poets, by the Stoics, by Cicero, by Polybius and other classical historians, and by *Ecclesiastes* 1:9, revived or at least toyed with, the notion of a cyclical or repetitive time.”⁴⁹ To the list of influences should be added the rabbinical notion of *shmittot*, which was later developed in a philosophical and kabbalistic fashion. Abarbanel was most certainly heavily influenced by the idea, primarily through the writings of Nahmanides, as was Pico. Indeed, Pico writes:

It is among the doctrines of ancient Hebrew learning that the six days of Genesis denote the six thousand years of the world, so that what are here called the works of the first day were a prophecy of things to happen in the first millennium of the world; likewise the works of the second of those in the second, and so on, with the same order of succession always kept on both sides. Among the more recent authors this opinion is also confirmed by Moses of Gerona, a theologian of foremost fame among the Hebrews.⁵⁰

Pico goes on to offer a Christological interpretation of this idea. His first clue is the creation of the moon on the fourth day to enlighten the night, indicating the advent of Jesus in the fourth millennium to enlighten the darkness of Torah. According to Jewish reckoning, notes Pico, the historical appearance of Jesus falls within the fourth millennium after the creation of the world. For further support, Pico has recourse to the rabbinic dictum in the tractate *Avodah Zarah* which states that “the world will exist for six thousand years: two thousand chaos, two thousand Torah, two thousand the days of the Messiah, in our sins that have increased.”⁵¹ The time of Torah, according to Pico’s

⁴⁸ Lelli, “*Prisca Philosophia and Docta Religio*,” p. 53.

⁴⁹ Allen, “Life as a Dead Platonist,” p. 159.

⁵⁰ *Heptaplus*, p. 158.

⁵¹ B.T. *Avodah Zarah* 9a: "ששת אלפים שנה הוי העולם שני אלפים תוהו שני אלפים"

reading, has passed, and we are now in the final days of the Messiah. Notwithstanding this Christological interpretation, Pico's invocation of the talmudic rabbis and his explicit mention of Nahmanides indicate a clear familiarity with this theory, known as *shmittot*, in its cyclical cosmic interpretation as related to the idea of *yovelot*. Indeed, it would not be a mistake to see Abarbanel's own Neoplatonico-Nahmanidean cosmic interpretation of the theory as one possible veritable response, wittingly or not, to such a Christological interpretation. This is especially the case given Abarbanel's own reckoning of the advent of the Messiah, as based on similar sources and also upon the *Zohar*, as falling within the year 1503, or at the latest, in 1531.⁵² Whatever the case may be for polemics, which here are based in a shorter term, more linear model of history, there is no doubt that the cyclical cosmic theory of *shmittot* was readily known to both Pico and to Abarbanel.

The theory of cosmic *shmittot* also most definitely had an impact upon Alemanno, though seemingly more predominantly filtered through the Byzantine *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, and also possibly through the commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah* of Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi. Incidentally, the idea of cosmic *shmittot* was also known to Hayyat through *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, and may have been known to him from other sources as well. Indeed, not only was the idea known to Hayyat, he actively linked it to the theory of transmigration,⁵³ as did the *Ma'arekhet* itself. In Nahmanidean fashion, the *Ma'arekhet* links the word *dor*, freedom, which appears in the Levitical command at the base of the theory of *shmittot*, with the word *dor*, 'generation', as it appears in the classical proof-text for transmigration from Ecclesiastes, "a generation goes and a generation comes."⁵⁴

"תורה שני אלפים ימות המשיח בעונותינו שרבו." Cited by Pico in the *Heptaplus*, pp. 159–160. This dictum enjoyed a long history in formal anti-Jewish Christian polemic. While scholars have treated its usage in specific historical contexts, nobody has written a detailed historical analysis. I am currently outlining its history, from the *Pugio Fidei* of Raymond Martini to its usage by Pico, in an article to be published that concentrates on Pico's employment of it in what I perceive to be a christological reading of Nahmanidean kabbalah. For the time-being, see: Vasoli, "Per le fonti del *Christiana religione*," p. 159, for the Latin quotation of this aggadah by both Paul of Burgos and Nicholas of Lyra. For more on its usage in the famous disputation of Tortosa, and on that disputation in general, see: Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, vol. II, pp. 170–243. The dictum was also used by Ficino in his *De Christiana Religione*, as will be pointed out in my article, as a possible source for Pico, along with Martini himself.

⁵² See: *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, pp. 21–22. For more on Abarbanel's messianic calculations, see: Netanyahu, pp. 217–226.

⁵³ *Ma'arekhet*, p. 131.

⁵⁴ Ecclesiastes, 1:4, in *Ma'arekhet*, p. 327. For a similar usage of this originally Nahmanidean interpretation: see pp. 133–134 above.

It can be inferred that this idea was also known by Genazzano, who places the *Ma'arekhet* amongst the list of books against which, in his opinion, other books do not "come close to the truth more than they do."⁵⁵ Various themes on the same topic of cosmic cycles pervade the literature that acted as the backdrop of Italian Renaissance thought, and there can be no doubt that among these, Proclus, Plotinus, Empedocles, and of course Plato, all had a profound influence, not only on the likes of Abarbanel, who compares their ideas with the similar kabbalistic notions, but on prominent Christian philosophers such as Ficino and Pico as well.

As is the case with virtually all Renaissance concepts, due to the nature of the *prisca theologia* tradition, notions of cyclical time are not exclusive to the period under study. Indeed, Renaissance thinkers actively sought to base themselves on precedents, which indeed do exist. Nevertheless, it is worthy to note the unique conglomeration of sources, among which, it is important to recognize the conjunction of specifically mystical and philosophical sources. Abarbanel's explanation by means of the Neoplatonic soul vehicle of the cosmic *yovel* as the kabbalistic *binah*, for example, or Ficino's same use of that soul vehicle in order to conflate the Elijah traditions of the bible with the Neoplatonic view of the chariot in a manner that allows for the very movement of the soul, seem to be philosophical methods that receive a pronounced position in the Renaissance. What is more, such conceptualizations of cyclical time are not emphasized in the thirteenth century Spanish Zoharic kabbalah, nor within the writings of Moshe de Leon and Joseph Gikatilla; they also did not make their way into the Sefadian kabbalistic teachings of Isaac Luria.⁵⁶ This indicates a different philosophico-kabbalistic orientation for Italian Renaissance kabbalah, which was informed in large part not only by Greek philosophical traditions, but also by Nahmanidean kabbalah,⁵⁷ through various and varied mediums, including Nahmanides himself, *Sefer Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, and Byzantine texts such as *Sefer ha-Peli'ah* and *Sefer ha-Kanah*.

⁵⁵ *La lettera preziosa*, p. 253: "דע כי מן הספרים שבאו לידי לא מצאתי מהם מתקרבים אל האמת יותר מאלו." For both Hayyat and the *Ma'arekhet* on cosmic *shmittot*, see primarily: *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, pp. 297–298, and pp. 318–319.

⁵⁶ Idel, "Some Concepts of Time," p. 168.

⁵⁷ For the Nahmanidean school/Isaac the Blind school distinction concerning two variant notions of the *yovel* in early Provencal and Geronese kabbalah, see: Idel, "The Yovel in Jewish Mysticism."

Fundamentally related to this concept of circular time is the idea of *coincidentia oppositorum*, bringing the discussion full-circle to the question of reason in relation to that which is beyond reason. This is quite natural since, as Elliot Wolfson has noted, “In the effort to discern time the mind comes to the rim of reason, the limit of language.”⁵⁸ This is due to the fact that “to discourse about time is to be caught in a circle: one cannot speak of the being of time except from the standpoint of the time of being, nor of the time of being except from the standpoint of the being of time.”⁵⁹ In a different context, Wolfson notes that the idea of the *coincidentia oppositorum* “paradoxically affirms the identity of opposites in virtue of their difference,” and “gained special prominence through the promulgation of the doctrine...by Nicholas Cusanus in fifteenth-century Italy.”⁶⁰ He goes on to explain the connection of this concept, which gained prominence in fifteenth-century Italy, with the concept of time as circularly conceived:

The validity of this surmise can be gainsaid by the simple observation that if what we consider to be “first” can be considered at the same time “last”...then the thing so considered must be both first and last at the same time and in the same relation, itself and its other.⁶¹

The circularity of *coincidentia oppositorum* in the very contemplation of time leads to a circular conception of time itself. Such a temporal idea of *coincidentia oppositorum* most certainly held importance for Alemanno, who saw progress as a return to an earlier time and vice-versa. In fact, due in part to the expansion of the *prisca theologia* ideal, the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* in relation to time can be seen to have held importance for all of the Renaissance thinkers discussed above; all of them sought a return to a pristine state in order to achieve ultimate enlightenment, or perhaps (coincidentally) oppositely, they sought out enlightenment in order to achieve a pristine state of being. Whatever the starting point (or, simultaneously, ending point), there is no denying the importance of such ideas to Renaissance conceptions of both personal and collective ‘advancement’ through a turn to the past. In this context, it seems to be no coincidence that discussions of transmigration of the souls of salvific or divinely inspired characters into later

⁵⁸ *Alef, Mem, Tau*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁰ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. xix.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. xx.

salvific, or politically or philosophically important figures, took strong hold in the discussions of the thinkers analyzed here. In the debate in Candia, this involved discussions of the soul of the future Messiah as the soul of the biblical David and of Adam before him, and also, as for Alemanno a few decades later, it involved discussions of Moses' soul as that of Seth and Abel. In the discussions of Candia and of Alemanno, the dastardly figure of Cain/Korah also comes into play. Nevertheless, in both Candia and in Alemanno,⁶² the figure Cain/Korah acts as a counterfoil to the salvation history, both personal and national, of the figure Abel/Moses. Moreover, it exhibits the same conflational characteristics of the more salvific figures discussed by the Renaissance authors above, simply representing the bleaker side of the same circular paradigm. For Genazzano, this circular paradigm involved the extremely rare assertion of the Pythagorean philosopher Numenius of Apamea as the possible reincarnation of the greatest of all the Jewish prophets, Moses. Although this was self-declared by Numenius, according to Genazzano's account, it is certainly not categorically denied or refuted by Genazzano. Finally, for Ficino, it involved the reincarnation of Plato into Plotinus, and of Cosimo, along with Plato, into the figure of Lorenzo the Great. In all of these examples, different points in time become conflated, as great men of one era, whether reprehensible or noble, are seen to be embodied in the great men of other eras. Such is the case whether the starting point of viewing these great men is arbitrarily conceived as later to earlier, or earlier to later, and such provides a model for behavior and its consequences, whether earlier or later envisioned.

In order to understand where metempsychosis truly stands in relation to cyclical notions of time, it is important to take into account some theoretical considerations concerning the concept of time itself. Moshe Idel divides religious perceptions of time into three *chronotypes*: that which he calls the *microchronos*, that which he names the *mesochronos*, and finally, that which he terms the *macrochronos*.⁶³ The *microchronic* model consists of a cyclical model related to the repetition of ritual in the life of the individual and in the life of the community. Events such as the Passover Seder are enacted time after time, year after year, in an

⁶² As based upon *Me'irat Einayim*.

⁶³ Idel, "Some Conceptions of Time and History," p. 154. See also: idem, "The Yovel in Jewish Mysticism," pp. 67–69.

attempt to continually propel those who are participating to a sacred plane through simultaneous action and re-enactment. In the case of the Seder, for example, the idea is to create a sacred time and space by taking the participants back to the Exodus from Egypt through the very enactment of the Seder itself. The *mesochronic* model consists of a linear conception that generates a specific religious history. According to this model, certain specific events, such as the creation of the world, the Sinaitic epiphany, or the future redemption, stand at unique points in time, ensuring the stability of a definitive sense of a particularized history. Finally, the *macrochronic* model entails the cyclical cosmic concept of time. As opposed to the cycles within the *microchronic* model, these cosmic cycles, according to Idel, “are periods of time that surpass any imaginable span of human life, affecting primarily the pulse of the universe.”⁶⁴ Like the *mesochronic* view, such *macrochronic* periods are beyond the immediate ritualistic life of both the individual and the community, and are more of a matter for speculation concerning general processes. Unlike the *mesochronic* view, these periods and processes are of a cosmic nature, are recurrent in character, and are dependent upon a certain superstructure that helps to differentiate one instant on the circular timeline from another. Though Idel does not explicitly state the fact, *macrochronic* time involves the idea of *coincidentia oppositorum* in return and simultaneous progress, in destruction and creation.

Shalom Rosenberg sets up a parallel model,⁶⁵ which is divided into three types: terminal time, infinite time, and cyclical time.⁶⁶ Terminal time, similar to Idel’s *mesochronos*, posits two unique points, the beginning, which is the point of creation, and the end, which is the point of redemption. Unlike in Idel’s more historically conceived *mesochronos*, Rosenberg notes that both of these points in terminal time are cosmic in character. This type of time adopts the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. Infinite time, not parallel to any of Idel’s *chronotypes* though holding some similarities with the *macrochronos*, posits that there is neither beginning

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ For yet another, earlier model, see: Maimonides, *Guide*, II, 13, pp. 281–285. Maimonides posits *creatio ex nihilo*, which in his opinion, is the view of the Torah, the constant creation and recreation from pre-existent hylic matter, which he attributes to Plato (and under which, the cyclical model could possibly exist), and the idea of eternal existence, which he attributes to Aristotle. Perhaps it is important to note that for Maimonides, time itself is an accident of creation.

⁶⁶ See: Rosenberg, “The Return to the Garden of Eden,” pp. 39–41.

nor end. While Idel ties the infinitude of the *macrochronos* to a sense of infinite circularity in cosmic cycles, Rosenberg's infinite time seems to rest on the idea of an infinite straight line, extending in each direction *ad infinitum*. In this type of time, notions of 'beginning' and 'end' lose all meaning, and as such, so do the concepts of 'creation' and 'redemption'. In contradistinction to *creatio ex nihilo*, this type of time adopts the idea of eternal regress. Rosenberg notes another type of time that is not among the three major ones, but is between the terminal and the infinite. This is a specific type of time that views a definite beginning, with an infinite expanse into the future. In this type of time, creation holds significance, but there is no end-point of redemption. If this is the case, then logically there should be another intermediary model between terminal time and infinite time, which sees no beginning point but a definitive end. In this model, creation would hold no significance, but an idea of redemption would. Rosenberg's third major archetype, cyclical time, is similar to Idel's cyclical *macrochronos*. This type of time posits the idea that there indeed exist unique points of beginning and of end, but that these points are one and the same. In this model, in the words of Rosenberg, "redemption and creation kiss each other,"⁶⁷ and eternity and *creatio ex nihilo* do not clash or exclude each other, but stand side-by-side. As with Idel's *macrochronos*, the idea of *coincidentia oppositorum* inheres in Rosenberg's characterization of cyclical time.

The question naturally arises as to where metempsychosis fits, if at all, into these typological schemata of time. As a cyclical notion connected to creation in birth and destruction or redemption in death, which oftentimes marks a new creation in a new birth, metempsychosis most definitely depends, to a degree, upon the *coincidentia oppositorum* and upon specific notions of cyclical time. However, considering the cosmic notion of *palingenesis* that is tied, in the writings of Abarbanel, for example, to the cosmic processes of *shmittot* and *yovelot* and to the cosmic cycles as expounded by Empedocles, and considering the notion in the above authors of a personal element of continual birth and death within the space of time that is already conceived to be created and which is prior to any final redemption, the answer remains far from uniform in character. All possible discrepancies in the matter are tied to the relation of the personal realm to the cosmic realm of existence. In

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 40.

the more cosmic pictures of transmigration, the fate of the individual is ultimately tied to the cosmic processes of the universe, though conversely, the practices of the individual can effect cosmic change. While certain specific circular patterns seem to be preordained, including for the soul, specific individual actions, such as the fulfillment of the commandments in the thought of Abarbanel and of Alemanno, or such as the emulation of the divine in the thought of Ficino and Pico, can effect a personal situation of salvation through enlightenment or *devekut* within the entire cosmic process. Within this type of pattern, which is fundamentally tied to the *macrochronos* and to Rosenberg's cyclical time, preordination meets free-will. In the more personal views of transmigration that take the individual human soul as a point of departure, notions of cosmic time become less relevant. Personal transmigration can occur metaphorically in regard to the *microchronos*, and veridically, without any difficulties, in regard to both the *mesochronos* and the *macrochronos*. It can likewise occur without problem in the all of the grander schemata of terminal time, in infinite time, and in cyclical time.

Notwithstanding the personal notion of metempsychosis' seeming adaptability to and congruency with all greater notions of time, as a time bound notion related to the ideas of personal creation in birth personal deliverance in death, metempsychosis has greater implications for conceptions of time itself. This is especially the case considering the fact that all of the thinkers discussed above link the ideas of personal birth and deliverance in metempsychosis to the larger ideas of the sustenance of existence and the redemption of the world. Such is the case with the concept of the human soul as the median node that connects the universe, as it appears in the thought of Alemanno, Ficino, and Pico, with the concept of retribution and punishment through the transmigration of messianic figures, as it appears in the debate in Candia, in Genazzano and in Alemanno, and with the concept of the fulfillment of the commandments as a medium for the uplifting of society in general and of exalted return, or of freedom from return due to the fulfillment of societal demands. In this last instance, Hayyat's view of metempsychosis as a device connected to the maintenance of the tree of life in the Torah, and of the flame of God in the embodied soul of man, is the most blaring and poignant. In all of these cases, personal time meets both historical time and cosmic time. In the words of Idel, "Whereas the microchronic approach informs the life of the religious person in an immediate and often intense manner, the macrochronic

view is more a matter of general speculations.”⁶⁸ In contrast to both of these, the mesochronic view provides unique examples in the form of historical mythologoumena. In metempsychosis, all of these points of apparent contrast seemingly come together.

On the macrochronic and microchronic levels, Moshe Idel notes that “the recurrence of the celestial moves, as implied by the use of the terms *galgalei ha-sefirot* and *gilgulei ha-zemanim*, is crucial for the understanding of the cyclical nature of the processes, both because they are generated by a revolving structure and because they interlace with the ritual performance, which is cyclical too.”⁶⁹ To these cosmic terms connected to the individual world of ritual performance should be added the term *gilgul neshamot*, which weaves a personal cyclical view of time into the celestial view, while at the same time basing its efficacy on the microchronic performance of the mitzvot. On the mesochronic level, historical mythologoumena not only provide an example for the microchronic action of the individual, historical figures marked by unique events actually come to live again in order to continually partake in the history of redemption as tied to both the microchronos of ritual and the macrochronos of cosmic processes. Appositely, Shalom Rosenberg writes about three interwoven and interrelated directions of thought, concerning what he calls “the restorative motif,” but which also have direct relevance for metempsychosis, which indeed is itself a type of restorative motif. In Rosenberg’s words, these three different paths take expression as follows: “in the cosmic direction—in the theory of cosmic cycles; in the historical direction—in the return to the lost Garden of Eden, or in the building of an ideal world for which the Garden of Eden acts as an example; and in the personal direction—in the return of the soul and the intellect to their source.”⁷⁰ Whatever the case may be for the separate expression of each of these directions individually, in metempsychosis, the cosmic, the historical, and the individual planes become conflated. This is possible on many levels through the theory of *coincidentia oppositorum*, and expresses itself in the Renaissance thinkers outlined above not only in their cosmological and historical analyses, but in their complex discussions of individual identity as well.

⁶⁸ Idel, “Some Concepts of Time,” p. 154.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 165.

⁷⁰ Rosenberg, “The Return to the Garden of Eden,” p. 43.

The excursus here, then, comes full circle, in a manner of speaking, to the question of the Burckhardtian notion of the Renaissance ‘individual’. For the thinkers discussed here, antiquity clearly played a much greater, more multifarious role in their Renaissance intellectual sensibilities than a mere Burckhardtian framework for novel notions of the individual self. This is the case in terms of precedential authority in the *prisca theologia* tradition, in terms of the intricate relationship of reason, as newly understood, to that which is beyond reason, as ontologically and temporally more pristinely conceived, and in terms of complex conceptions of time itself. Notwithstanding these disparities, the idea of a novel Renaissance notion of an individual that stands apart from the collective has drawn much attention and is still felt to this very day. In the wake of Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, which was published in 1980, postmodern thinkers have come to challenge the modernist, Burckhardtian notion of the Renaissance individual as an autonomous figure, seeing in it instead the forerunner of the fragmented postmodern ‘self’, which in actuality is no ‘self’ at all. In the words of Greenblatt, writing of his Renaissance researches, “Whenever I focused sharply upon a moment of apparently autonomous self-fashioning, I found not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artifact.”⁷¹ As a reversal of the Burckhardtian order, this idea sees the self not as an independent ‘individual’, but as the subjective product of social and political forces. Notwithstanding this turnabout in thought, John Jeffries Martin keenly notes that “the postmodern discussion of Renaissance subjectivities—while profoundly anti-Burckhardtian in inspiration—took form largely within a Burckhardtian framework that it was in the Renaissance that individualism or questions of identity first began to matter.”⁷² Moreover, by supplanting modernist notions of the ‘individual’ as read into the Renaissance with their own postmodernist ideas of the fragmented ‘self’, thinkers such as Greenblatt were following in Burckhardt’s footsteps by finding Renaissance precedence for their own concepts of personal identity. Martin calls for a new interpretation of the Renaissance individual that sees multiple modes of identity, all of which have the fundamental relation of the more Burckhardtian internal self to the more postmodernist external self at their core.⁷³

⁷¹ *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 257.

⁷² *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, p. 127.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Notwithstanding Martin's valiant effort to allow for greater complexity in matters of the 'self' and of 'identity', Burckhardt's Renaissance 'individual' remains in the backdrop as both a sounding board and a cornerstone to his more nuanced argument concerning the "myths of Renaissance individualism."

The question remains as to what the psychological doctrine of metempsychosis as conceived in the Renaissance can teach, if anything at all, concerning the complex matter of the 'individual'. Was there indeed a concept of a 'self', and if so, was it perceived as an individual autonomy or as a fragmented artifact that is culturally and politically constructed? Or perhaps it was conceived of in terms of inseparable internal and external forces, as John Jeffries Martin would posit. As with all questions of philosophy and identity, the answers are far from uniform. From an internal, philosophical point of view, questions arise in the debate in Candia, in Abarbanel, and in Hayyat as to what it is exactly that constitutes that entity called the 'soul', which does the transmigrating. All of these thinkers note the possible problem of two souls residing in one body, thereby noting the unique, individual nature of the soul as the core of the human being. In addition, almost all of the thinkers discussed above hold a view of the soul as a substance that is separate and that stands on its own. For Abarbanel, as for Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, for Ficino, and for Pico, individuation occurs through the composition of body and soul, but for Abarbanel, Ficino and Pico, the medium of the soul vehicle allows for individuation even after bodily death. For all of the thinkers, transmigration is a matter of punishment, reward, or purification, indicating the continuity of a specific, 'individual' entity. In most of the above thinkers, this separate entity of the soul individualizes the body by acting as its first perfection, and certain characteristics, such as the righteous characteristics of Abel and Seth in the figure of Moses, or the reprehensible characteristics of Cain in Korah, subsist throughout time and space. It is important to note that none of the thinkers analyzed above writes of transmigration in the first person, and all depend upon either biblical or philosophical characters as exemplars of the phenomenon. Only Ficino discusses transmigration in relation to his contemporaries Cosimo and Lorenzo, indicating, for most of the thinkers, a highly theoretical, and not a personal, notion of individual identity in relation to the theory of metempsychosis. Notwithstanding, there does seem to be a notion of an individual core, which is the soul, but that notion is based on the theories of the ancient philosophers and on the ruminations of the

medieval mystics. No novel notion of a 'self', whether autonomously individual, fragmentedly and constructedly artifactual, or a combination of the two, seems to obtain.

From an external, sociological point of view, all of the thinkers discussed above depend upon their respective cultural systems for the formulation of their respective ideas concerning the individual soul and its transmigrations. This is pronounced in the debate in Candia with the meeting of Ashkenazi and Byzantine Jewish culture and the debate surrounding the practical laws of levirate marriage. It is displayed in Abarbanel, Genazzano and Alemanno, who utilize 'foreign' wisdom but place kabbalah at the apex of knowledge. It takes form in Hayyat, who strives to preserve a specifically Spanish Zoharic type of kabbalah but who is inevitably influenced by his new surroundings. Finally, it comes to the fore in Ficino and Pico, who struggle with the orthodoxies⁷⁴ of the Church but who nevertheless see themselves as good Christians, as well as good philosophers.

Within all of the thinkers examined, the notion of the 'self' that transmigrates is highly dependent upon greater social structures and norms of behavior. For all of the Jewish thinkers, the Torah and the commandments act as the backbone for righteousness, with the relational commandment of levirate marriage holding a special position. For Ficino and Pico, proper communal behavior also plays a fundamental role, affecting the outcome of subsequent, or of immediate transmigrations. As such, the notion of individual autonomy in relation to the formulation of the idea of an individual soul that transmigrates is an absurd proposition. Nevertheless, due to the soul's philosophically conceived nature as an 'individual' separate entity, the idea of the self as a socially and politically constructed artifact is absurd as well. Perhaps Martin's notion of the Renaissance self as a relation of internal and external processes applies to notions of the soul as formulated in Renaissance discourses on metempsychosis. As Martin notes, "social experience and a certain experience of inwardness are *both* crucial to understanding Renaissance notions of identity."⁷⁵ In regard to metempsychosis, a caveat should be added to this perspicacious observation; in addition to contemporary social experience and the experience of

⁷⁴ For a view of Transmigration in Ficino as an attempt to expand notions of Christian orthodoxy and not necessarily challenge it with heterodoxy, as such, see: Hankins, "Marsilio Ficino on *Reminiscencia*."

⁷⁵ *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, p. 17.

inwardness, the experience of those who came before, both ancient and medieval, is highly significant. This is the case not only in terms of thought paradigms, but also in terms of paradigms of behavior and the subsequent causal transmigrations that may ensue.

Keeping in mind the fact that the idea of transmigration not only looks backward to past lives but also looks forward to eventual forms of existence, the intellectual history of the theory as outlined here can act as a springboard for further areas of research into subsequent eras of thought. Like the soul that stands at the heart of the concept, the idea of *gilgul* itself moves in many directions. As has been shown here, in the Italian Renaissance, the idea of metempsychosis was steeped in debate and took on a very speculative, theoretical nature. It moved to the fore of discussion for philosophers and kabbalists alike, and through the idea of *prisca theologia*, acted as a link between pagan, Jewish and Christian modes of thought. As a theory of movement and change, it brought forth questions of identity in a moving and changing world, both on the personal and on the communal levels. The question arises as to what effects these new lines of inquiry and these renewed conceptual challenges may have had, if any at all, upon subsequent developments in Jewish thought. The present study has sought to understand the complex phenomenon known as the “Italian Renaissance” in its relation to Jewish thought, in all of its complexities, through the complex and intriguing concept of metempsychosis. With this foundation, new lines of inquiry can be opened into further developments in intellectual history.

A generation after the period analyzed here, the doctrine of metempsychosis would move to center stage and would take on the form in which it would have its greatest influence, namely, in the kabbalah of sixteenth century Safed.⁷⁶ There, the doctrine would achieve virtually canonical status, being supported by kabbalists of all walks of life, including Shlomo Alkabetz, Moshe Cordovero, Joseph Karo, and above all, Isaac Luria and his disciple Hayyim Vital. Indeed, for Vital, the concept became the central subject of two books, *Sha’ar ha-Gilgulim* and *Sefer ha-Gilgulim*, and of the fourth part of his famed dream diary, *Sefer ha-Hezyonot*. Coincidental to the tenor of the present study, it is perhaps

⁷⁶ For a detailed analysis of this, especially in terms of Lurianic kabbalah, see: Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, chapter nine: “Metempsychosis, Mystical Fellowship, and Messianic Redemption,” pp. 300–358. See also: Scholem, “Gilgul,” pp. 228–241.

worth mentioning that Vital was from an Italian Jewish family; indeed, his father Joseph had come to Safed from Calabria, and Hayyim himself is often referred to as Hayyim Vital Calabrese. Be that as it may, there are stark differences between the complex theories of metempsychosis outlined in the writings of Vital and the other kabbalists of sixteenth century Safed, and those explained here. The Lurianic theories in particular are much more mythologically based than the philosophical expressions of the Italian Renaissance, and find their greatest textual support from the *Zohar*. For example, the idea of divine *zivvug*, or *hieros gamos*, which is amply found throughout Zoharic literature,⁷⁷ came to be central to the complex Lurianic myth of the birth and rebirth of souls.⁷⁸ In addition to such myth, it is important to note that Lurianic kabbalistic ideas of metempsychosis are also distinguished from those of the Italian Renaissance by the fact that greater emphasis is placed upon personal and practical implications. Indeed, Luria saw himself as the reincarnation of Shimon bar Yohai and the souls of his closest disciples as those of the Rashbi's inner circle, thereby extending the idea of myth into his own life and the lives of his disciples. Much of his ruminations as they have come down to us in the writings of Vital involve reading and understanding contemporary souls and their prior peregrinations in order to prescribe and effect proper *tikkunim*, acts of repair for the soul, in the present life. This type of activity characterizes much of the Lurianic purpose and sets it apart as a novelty.

While the more mythical lines of the kabbalah of Safed have extensively been probed, no scholarly analysis of the Safedian ideas of metempsychosis in comparison and contrast to Italian Renaissance developments has ever been performed. This is an important lacuna to be filled since, as Moshe Idel has argued, among the several factors contributing to the rich Safedian productivity in kabbalah should be counted "an awareness by the Safedian kabbalists of the developments in kabbalah taking place in Italy."⁷⁹ Idel goes on to note: "From its beginning, Safedian kabbalah had significant contacts with Italy. For example, one of the first Spanish kabbalists to arrive in Safed immediately after the expulsion was R. Isaac Mor Hayyim. His stay in Italy is connected with a polemic against the more philosophical position of the

⁷⁷ See, for example, *Zohar* 1:50a, 1:91b, 2:89a–b, and 2:145a.

⁷⁸ For a detailed analysis of this, see: Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, pp. 309–314.

⁷⁹ Idel, "Italy in Safed, Safed in Italy," in *Cultural Intermediaries*, p. 249.

Italian kabbalists.”⁸⁰ This connection between Safed and Italy has been overlooked in terms of metempsychosis as well. As stated at the outset of this study, Scholem and several of his followers link the Safedian ideas of transmigration to Spain, and the outburst of interest in the doctrine to the tribulations of exile. This remains a predominant view, and since Scholem, no attempt has been made to reinterpret this line of historiography. In light of the findings of the present study, which outlines rich developments of the idea on the Italian Peninsula in the generation preceding the outburst of interest in Safed, such an analysis would indeed be worthwhile. It would answer to what Idel deems “the necessity to qualify the predominant unqualified Safedo-centric vision of modern scholarship of the history of kabbalah.”⁸¹ With the foundations of this present study, the idea of metempsychosis could help to further establish the connection between the centers in Safed and Italy, helping to present a wider picture of historical processes.

An extension of the Safedian analysis that would be worthwhile in light of the present study leads full circle back to Italy from Safed. Namely, an analysis of the reception of Safedian kabbalah as it made its way outside of the confines of the community of Safed can better be understood and examined on the basis of the present findings. It is important to note in this regard that Italy was the very first place outside of the Land of Israel in which the kabbalah of sixteenth century Safed was disseminated, and from there it made its way to various other Jewish centers. Indeed, after the death of Luria and the disintegration of the center of kabbalah in Safed, Lurianic writings and teachings took their strongest hold in Italy. This phenomenon was as early as 1580, when Rabbi Samson Bakki, who was a student of Luria’s pupil Joseph ibn Tabbul, sent an entire Lurianic treatise from Jerusalem to Italy.⁸² In addition to this, Ezra da Fano copied Lurianic material while he was in the Land of Israel, which he then brought to Italy. Perhaps most importantly in this regard is Israel Saruq, who expounded a distinctive brand of Lurianic kabbalah.⁸³ Whether or not Saruq was a direct

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 256.

⁸² Ibid., p. 254.

⁸³ For more on this important figure, see: Ronit Meroz, “Contrasting Opinions Among the Founders of R. Israel Saruq’s school,” and idem, “R. Israel Sarug, a Student of the Ari: A New View of the Episode” [Hebrew], *Da’at* 28, pp. 41–51, and idem, “The Saruq School of Thought—A New History” [Hebrew] *Shalem* 7 (2000), pp. 151–193. We follow Meroz’s suggestion in footnote 1 in the first article mentioned

disciple of Luria still remains a matter of debate, but his influence is undeniable. Saruq was in northern Italy as early as 1587, and there he surrounded himself with a considerable number of distinguished disciples, some of whom would later become important kabbalists in their own right. Among these were Menahem Azariah da Fano, Ezra da Fano, Abraham Cohen Herrera, Aharon Berekhia da Modena, Natan Ottolenghi, Samuel David Ottolenghi, Issachar Ber Eilenburg, Baruch ben Baruch, Simon Cohen, Judah ben David ha-Cohen, and Solomon Ohev of Raguza.⁸⁴ It is important to note that most of these thinkers were influenced by their environs and steeped in the learning of the Italian Renaissance. This signals an intricate point of departure for examination. As Moshe Idel has perceptively taught:

The arrival of the Cordoverian and Lurianic types of kabbalah to Italy should be understood not only as the move of a series of writings from one place to another, a technical issue dealing with copyists, disciples and emissaries, and modalities of oral transmission; what is even more central is the assimilation of one type of thought, the mythical visions of Cordovero and Luria, into an ambience impregnated by a Neoplatonic mode of thinking. Scholarship should deal much more with questions concerning the meaning of the arrival of a corpus of writings in a new cultural environment. That move is not a mechanical transportation of books and manuscripts, but of complex ideas appropriated in strong ways, informed by the rich intellectual background produced by Marsilio Ficino's translation of Greek and Hellenistic treatises. This is not a simple encounter between an active father (Lurianic kabbalah) and a passive mother (the Italian Jewish Renaissance), allegedly impregnated by the father. The reading of Safedian kabbalah by the Italian kabbalists is sometimes a very strong one, reflecting hermeneutical grids of the Italian Jewish thinkers.⁸⁵

The present study provides a strong background for understanding the “hermeneutical grids” of Italian Jewish thinkers as they received Safedian forms of thought. Indeed, late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century Italian Jewish thinkers were heirs to the intellectual traditions outlined above. Idel goes on to claim that the Lurianic form of transmigration, which is marked by the reading of the souls of living individuals, did not take hold in Italy. He notes that Saruq

that according to his signature in Oxford Bodl. ms. Neubauer 1624, fol. 35, the spelling of his name should be with a *qof* and not a *gimmel*.

⁸⁴ Meroz, “Contrasting Opinions,” p. 192.

⁸⁵ *Cultural Intermediaries*, pp. 241–242.

apparently displayed this skill in Venice by discovering the previous avatars of contemporary persons, but that “this facet of Sarug’s activity provoked a sarcastic remark on Modena’s part.”⁸⁶ Whether or not this is an indication of the general attitude, the mere mention of Sarug’s activity in relation to metempsychosis is significant in itself. Moreover, even if Idel is correct in his evaluation, the “hermeneutical grid” of Italian Renaissance thought concerning metempsychosis, as presented here, can act as a solid base from which to assess the rejection of this central component of Lurianic kabbalah as this type of lore made its way to Italy.

Another area to be revisited in light of the findings of the present study is the popularity and degree of controversy that the idea of metempsychosis reached in the Jewish community of Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. In 1635, Rabbi Saul Levi Morteira of Amsterdam, who was born in Venice around 1596, preached a sermon exerting the idea of eternal damnation for certain sins. This sparked a heated debate in which Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonesca asserted the Mishnaic phrase, “All of Israel has a portion in the world-to-come.”⁸⁷ Ultimately, Aboab tried to attenuate the idea of eternal punishment in hell through the Lurianic idea of metempsychosis.⁸⁸ In his opinion, those of the people of Israel who have sinned are not condemned to eternal punishment, but undergo a series of transmigrations in a process of purification that ensures their place in the world-to-come. Such was an attempt to affirm the fundamental Jewish character of all Jewish souls, including those of the Conversos and ex-Conversos, who made up a majority of the Jewish community in Amsterdam and who were fighting a constant struggle in terms of issues of identity.⁸⁹ The idea of ultimate salvation for Israel through metempsychosis comes in Aboab’s work entitled *Nishmat Hayyim*, which deals with the concepts of reward and punishment in the hereafter. The debate concerning the matter became so heated that it involved the rabbinic authorities of Venice in the figures of Shema’ya ben Moshe di Medina and Azarya ben Ephraim Figo. It also sought to involve one of the most highly respected members of the Venetian community, Abraham Aboab, in

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 260.

⁸⁷ Sanhedrin 11:1.

⁸⁸ See the excellent article by Alexander Altmann, “Eternality of Punishment.”

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 271.

a plea for him to make an official statement to the Venetian *Beth Din*, the religious court of the community that was ultimately to decide the matter.⁹⁰ In the context of the present study, it is significant to note the heavy Venetian connection. It is also highly significant to note that Isaac Aboab de Fonesca, the proponent of the Lurianic doctrine of metempsychosis, had been tutored in kabbalah by Abraham Herrera, one of the disciples of Israel Saruq who incorporated several fundamental elements of Italian Renaissance Neoplatonic thought into his own kabbalistic theories.⁹¹ Given these close connections, and given the similarity to the situation of this live debate to that in fifteenth century Candia, along with issues of identity formation and the salvation of Israel, as have been discussed above, the present study could possibly help to present a different view of the ideational core of the situation in seventeenth century Amsterdam.

A year after the debate between Morteira and Aboab, another highly influential thinker within the Amsterdam community, Menasseh ben Israel, published a tripartite treatise on the resurrection of the dead in both Latin and Spanish.⁹² Indeed, Menasseh was gripped not only with questions of the afterlife, but like his contemporaries, with issues of identity and questions of how they relate to afterlife beliefs. His preoccupation with issues of identity is clear from his life. Not only was he one of the early Jewish teachers of Benedict Spinoza, who was later excommunicated and is widely thought to be one of the first “secular” Jewish thinkers,⁹³ Menasseh himself was an ex-*Converso* working as a leader of and spokesman for the Jewish community. In this capacity, he petitioned Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell for the readmittance of the Jews to England; he was also in close connection with non-Jewish cultural figures like the humanist and international law jurist Hugo Grotius and the artist Rembrandt. On the more personal level, Menasseh already demonstrated extraordinary talent for the study of Jewish texts at a young age, but is also said to have mastered many languages, which kept him open to the world beyond specifically Jewish

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 277.

⁹¹ For more on Herrera’s kabbalistic use of philosophy, see: Nissim Yosha, *Myth and Metaphor*, especially pp. 88–124.

⁹² Altmann, “Eternality of Punishment,” p. 270.

⁹³ Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. See pp. 4, 11, 82 for reference to Menasseh as Spinoza’s teacher.

learning. All of this points to a truly modern figure dealing with new challenges to questions of identity formation. At the heart of these challenges stood questions of the individual soul.

Sixteen years after the debate between Aboab and Morteira, Menasseh published a work under the same title as that of Aboab, *Nishmat Hayyim*. For its part, Menasseh's *Nishmat Hayyim* is a highly important philosopho-kabbalistic *summa* that focuses heavily upon the fate of the individual soul and the idea of metempsychosis. Here too, as in the debate between Aboab and Mortiera, the connections to Italian Renaissance thought are astounding. Within this work, Menasseh not only relies heavily upon his ancestor by marriage Isaac Abarbanel for novel ideas discussed in this study, such as the soul vehicle and its relation to metempsychosis,⁹⁴ he makes great reference to figures like Plato, Zoroaster, Pythagoras and Hermes. This is all despite the influence of the more mythical Lurianic Kabbalah, and is in a striking sense of deference to the *prisca theologia* tradition.⁹⁵ Such stark parallels and explicit citations of Renaissance sources and sensibilities warrant an examination, which could shed new light upon the development of thought of this incredibly important early modern Jewish thinker. Indeed, from Aboab to Mortiera to Menasseh ben Israel, the assertions and findings made in this present study can help us to reframe our understanding of the overall developments of thought within the illustrious seventeenth century Jewish community of Amsterdam, which is thought by many to have displayed the first stirrings of a more distinctively "modern" Jewish thought.

In the final analysis, metempsychosis itself acts as an interesting and important paradigm for understanding Renaissance processes of thought. It also helps to distinguish the Renaissance as its own unique historical phenomenon in the historical process of intellectual history, between earlier medieval developments that came before it, and those of early modern developments, such as the kabbalah of Safed and that of the community of Amsterdam. This is the case due to the fact that within the Renaissance, metempsychosis is a theory more forcefully perceived to be founded upon the ancient *prisca theologia* tradition, it

⁹⁴ For a partial discussion of this, see: *Nishmat Hayyim*, part I, chapter 13, pp. 64–69. The discussions abound throughout the book, and also bring in Zoharic and other proofs.

⁹⁵ See: Idel, "Kabbalah, Platonism and 'Prisca Theologia.'"

is a concept that fundamentally deals with the meeting point between reason and mystical revelation, it is a schema that is based in variant notions of time, and it is a notion that involves the individual soul and its relation to both the community and the cosmos at large. As such, an analysis of the deliberation concerning metempsychosis by the eight thinkers discussed above informs us of these complex processes, not only in variant sections of the Jewish world, but in portions of the Christian world as well. In this way, metempsychosis has allowed us to show alternate cross-currents of Italian Renaissance thought.

These cross-currents are informed by the vast literature analyzed, from the several dense and lengthy manuscripts examined, including the profuse writings of Alemanno who was himself informed by copious sources, to the full libraries of bountiful writers the likes of Abarbanel, Ficino and Pico. They are based on kabbalistic and philosophical thinkers from Spain, from Ashkenazi and Byzantine backgrounds, from native Italian Jews and from chief representatives of the Christian Italian humanist movement. Apart from their ruminations on metempsychosis, all of these prominent and prolific thinkers have in common a convergence upon the land of Italy, or Venetian ruled and run Crete, during the last decades of the fifteenth century and the early period of the sixteenth century. Indeed, from Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi to Marsilio Ficino, a complex picture of Renaissance thought concerning metempsychosis ensues. Nevertheless, it is a picture that informs of that unique and complex period known as the Italian Renaissance and of the unique kabbalistic and philosophical modes of thought that ran throughout, whether based on anciently perceived precedent or seeing itself reborn in a progressive manner as the veritable transmigration of ancient processes. In the larger picture of *coincidentia oppositorum*, an analysis of such processes helps to distinguish the period in all of its unique complexity and to see it as a fundamental point of departure for further developments in Jewish intellectual history.

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