Joseph Dan,
On Sanctity: Religion, Morality and Mysticism in Judaism and Other Religions
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Reviewed by Eli Shai

"What is essential," said the fox at the end of *The Little Prince*, "is invisible to the eye." Such is a principal tenet of the Kabala, Jewish mysticism, and to a large degree it has characterized the academic study of Kabala as well. Joseph Dan, a noted professor of mysticism at the Hebrew University, has attempted to relieve the inscrutability of the topic through a study of Jewish mystical literature aimed at a general audience. Yet Dan is not one to rehash academic commonplace; in *On Sanctity: Religion, Morality and Mysticism in Judaism and Other Religions*, Dan breaks important theoretical ground, parting with long-held assumptions whose origin is in the general study of mysticism, and many of which reflect a mystical vocabulary that is not at all Jewish, but Christian.

Dan begins by charting out a methodological middle path for his inquiry: While some scholars of Judaism ignore the achievements of the academic study of religions, focusing instead upon the teachings of Jewish tradition only, and other scholars habitually impose the categories and structures of generic religious studies upon Judaism without regard to its unique qualities, Dan offers the best of both, maintaining an interdisciplinary openness while insisting upon fidelity to the original context of a given text. A prime example is his attitude toward the mystic approach to language: On the one hand, Dan is attentive to advances in linguistics, philosophy of language and artificial intelligence; on the other hand, he does not feel bound by them inasmuch as they fail to take into account the special status of Hebrew in the Kabala. While the new theories see language as a tool whose main purpose is human communication, the Kabala sees it primarily as a divine, cosmic tool, a means of creation, whose human, communicative role is only secondary. As Dan puts it, "Man is capable of building a wooden chair, but this does not mean that the forests bloom and grow so that people will have something to sit on. Man can use language to communicate, but this does not mean that that is its origin." Judaism assumes that the Hebrew language conceals within it infinite meanings, reflecting the divine wisdom. The current academic approach is suited to the study of Christianity, which from the beginning is faced with the problems arising from holy texts which are

translated yet at the same time impart fundamental religious tenets. Greek and Latin are languages of communication and no more; in Judaism, however, Hebrew is the holy tongue, the creation of God. This vast difference is expressed in, among other things, the intensity with which phrasings, words and even individual letters are interpreted. The effect this has on the overall character of the two religions is so profound as to lead Dan to the conclusion that "the main wall separating Judaism and Christianity is not the question of whether the Messiah has already come ... but that the Hebrew Scriptures are a source, while the Christian Scriptures are primarily translation."

As a result, errors and distortions naturally occur whenever Kabala is studied with blind reference to categories originating in the general study of mysticism or Christianity. Dan brings the example of the term "religion," a category native to the peculiarities of Christian history: Developing within the larger context of Roman culture, the Church distinguished between the corpus of a person's civil pursuits and the worship of God—"a distinction," writes Dan, "that has no meaning in either Judaism or Islam," which see the religious experience as all-inclusive. A similar problem surrounds the idea of "sanctity." In Christianity, the sacred is set off as a separate realm of human endeavor, independent from the religiously neutral secular realm. In Judaism, sanctity is an entirely different concept, placed in contrast with, and opposition to, various forms of impurity. Like Islam, Judaism makes no distinction between the sacred and the secular as far as human activity is concerned, nor do they recognize "holy" or "profane" areas of occupation. Both lack a secular law, and both emphasize the special standing of language in religious thought.

Similar problems surround the generic term "mysticism." In its original meaning, the term related to an inability to be grasped or expressed (that is, to *mystery*), a negative definition to which it is nearly impossible to add positive content. Mysticism emerged, again, as a Christian category, the product of religious philosophers who saw it as the highest level of spirituality. However, writes Dan, "*mysticism* is not a Hebrew concept, it has no Hebrew parallel, and any use of it in a Hebrew context is analogous and necessarily imprecise.... *Mysticism* is a term used in the typology of religious phenomena, while *Kabala* is a term which describes a genre, delineating a realm possessing unclear boundaries, dating to a certain period in the history of Jewish culture." The use of this term in relation to Judaism, as it has been used in the study of religion until now, misreads the spirit

of Kabala and imposes upon it the alien context of Christian theological study.

The area in which academic norms bring about the greatest distortion to the study of Kabala, however, has nothing to do with Christianity. This is the question of the relationship between the mystical text and the individual, personal image of the mystic. Positioning himself in opposition to the dominant trend among researchers of Kabala, who focus upon the schools of thought within the Kabala and upon certain circles of kabalists, Dan seeks to study the image of the individual mystic,with the aim of understanding his personality and his special contribution to the intellectual development of Kabala. Dan refers to the study of Sufism, Islamic mysticism, which he views as a model in this regard:

> The prominent individuals in the history of this movement [Sufism] were painted in personal colors, and Sufism as a general movement was always split into streams and substreams, and mainly into the creation of individuals. In striking contrast, the study of Kabala, especially in its nascent periods, ignores this element.... This disregard is highly damaging to a proper understanding of the topic, and certainly undermines any attempt to address the fundamental question in mysticism, which is essentially individual and experiential.

This is undoubtedly one of Dan's major accomplishments in *On Sanctity*: The insistence upon looking at the kabalistic work as the creation of an author with a unique, personal image.

Dan himself applies this approach in several contexts. For example, in place of the prevailing view which regards the *Bahir*—the first kabalistic book, from the twelfth century—as an anthology of sources collected by a mysterious, anonymous editor, Dan seeks to understand the author as an individual. "We are obligated," he writes, "to consider the special, singular personality of the author of this book." As an example, he cites the attitude of the author of the *Bahir* to the idea of *gilgul*, transmigration of the soul, a concept that was not accepted by Jewish thinkers before him: "The undertaking of the author of the *Bahir* on this subject is clearly personal: Most likely, he was the first to introduce this idea into the world of Judaism, and to make it one of the fundamental elements of his worldview." The importance of the author of the *Bahir* follows "from the new willingness to open the world of Judaism to mythic elements that had previously been barred from it."

Dan employs similar efforts in sketching the portraits of other Jewish thinkers, such as Moses Haim Luzzatto (the "Ramhal"). Luzzatto, although persecuted his entire life by

different circles who accused him of heresy, Sabbateanism and sorcery, "became a cornerstone of the spiritual world of Hasidim, *mitnagdim*, and *maskilim*," and is frequently referred to in the Jewish world today, especially in Israel. While most think of Luzzatto as the brilliant young man from Padua, author of *Path of the Just*, a highly gifted, good-natured individual, few are familiar with the more hidden sides to this personality, which contained the most profound passions of messianic fervor and mystical eroticism. He considered himself to be the Messiah ("the fervor of his own messianism was no less intense than that of Shabtai Tzvi"), wed to the Divine Presence itself in an erotic union that infused him with divine powers.

In his sensitivity to the unique nature of the Kabala and the fundamental differences between Jewish and Christian mysticism, Dan removes the yoke of theoretical frameworks unsuitable to his subject, and thereby paves the way to a new approach to the study of the Kabala, one that concentrates upon the kabalist as an individual and upon the unique significance of language in Jewish mysticism. In this regard, *On Sanctity* constitutes a lasting contribution to our efforts to understand a field whose essential elements remain, for the present, invisible to the eye.

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