

JONATHAN GARB

## Moshe Idel's Contribution to the Study of Religion

### Abstract:

The article discusses the contribution of Moshe Idel's vast research to the field of religious studies. The terms which best capture his overall approach are "plurality" and "complexity". As a result, Idel rejects essentialist definitions of "Judaism", or any other religious tradition. The ensuing question is: to what extent does his approach allow for the characterization of Judaism as a singular phenomenon which can be differentiated from other religions? The answer seems to lie in Idel's definition of the "connectivity" between the human and the divine as a relationship which "underlies the basic notion of religion as such". Opposing Rudolph Otto's description of the holy as remote, Idel explains holiness in terms of closeness and connection. This reading of religion is supported by that of sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, who describes religious practice as constructing a "chain of memory" - a term which echoes with Idel's analysis of Jewish ritual as the construction of "enchanted chains" of connectivity. Hervieu-Léger's study points towards the possibility of regarding Judaism, as a family-centered tradition, as paradigmatic for traditional religion. Indeed, in recent studies, Idel describes the construction of memory through ritual practice as the most important means of shaping identity for all forms of traditional Judaism. The model of "chains of memory" can be located in classical Jewish texts, such as a much-quoted passage by Nahmanidies - the extremely important thirteenth-century Kabbalist and legal authority. This text describes Jewish rituals as maintaining continuity across generations. We see then that the notion of connectivity moves us closer to the concerns found in central Jewish texts, rather than imposing modern agenda on them. It can also be used to determine to what extent a given idea or practice is connected to the chain of connectivity constructed by a given tradition or is rather tangential to it. In this sense, it is a corrective to the danger of "dispersion" that is implicit in Idel's focus on plurality and complexity.

Jonathan Garb,  
Senior Lecturer, Ph.D., Department of  
Jewish Thought, Hebrew University  
of Jerusalem

Author of the books:

**Manifestations of Power in Jewish  
Mysticism from Rabbinic Literature  
to Safedian Kabbalah (2004) and  
Studies in Twentieth Century  
Kabbalah (forthcoming).**

E-mail: jgarb@huji.ac.il

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## Idel and Religious Studies: an Overview

Moshe Idel's vast oeuvre could have been described solely in terms of publication of a vast number of Kabbalistic and proto-Kabbalistic texts, many of which were previously extant only in manuscript form. These texts, often anonymous and mysterious in origin, were then dated, attributed to authors or at least to schools of thought, often translated from Hebrew and most importantly, analyzed in depth and in relation to other texts from diverse periods over the two millennia of Jewish mystical writing.

This project alone would have already provided an extremely distinguished contribution, however one may safely say that although Idel explicitly regards this work as the indispensable foundation of this research,<sup>1</sup> it is not his main concern. Rather, the trajectory of Idel's scholarly development can be described as an ongoing attempt to constantly rewrite the history of Kabbalah.<sup>2</sup>

This re-writing of the history (as well as pre-history) of Kabbalah is in turn part of a wider re-reading of the very nature and trajectories of Jewish religiosity.<sup>3</sup> This contribution is worthy of a study in itself, which I hope to essay elsewhere, but here I wish to focus on the manner in which Idel's readings of Kabbalah alongside with other varied forms of Jewish religiosity offer powerful enhancements of the study of religion as a discipline.<sup>4</sup>

In his ground-breaking *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (1988), which is surely his most quoted work,<sup>5</sup> Idel situated the phenomenological investigation of Kabbalah as a major alternative to the hitherto dominant historical-philological school of Gershom Scholem and several of his disciples. This book also contains a programmatic call for a far more massive incorporation of comparative religion, psychology, and "other branches of humanistic studies".<sup>6</sup> Particularly, Idel recommended a more intensive perusal of studies of other mystical systems, as well as the theory of mysticism as such, as part of an attempt to establish the independence of Kabbalah as a research domain, which can be set apart to some degree from the field of "Jewish Thought" (the name of Idel's home department), and from Jewish studies in a more general sense.

As a result of these two moves and their subsequent development, Idel can be regarded as one of the major proponents of the phenomenological study of religion, (alongside with scholars such as Lawrence Sullivan, Louis Dupré and Thomas Ryba). In addition, he can be seen as one of an emerging group of contemporary scholars who have established the study of mysticism as a separate, vibrant field within Religious Studies (other notable members of this group, to mention but a few, are J. B. Hollenback, Robert Forman, Steven Katz, William Parsons, Michael Sells). As such, he is joined with-in Jewish studies by Elliot R. Wolfson, who has also offered extensive phenomenological comparisons between Jewish mysticism and other mystical systems of East and West.<sup>7</sup> Idel's explicit theoretical concerns are reflected in a very large number of general methodological statements throughout his treatment of specific issues, many of which shall be adduced in the course of this article.

Idel's theoretical approach differentiates his work somewhat from the equally impressive oeuvre of Yehuda Liebes - his fellow Jerusalemite and ally in the critique of numerous components of the Scholemian paradigm. The latter's profound insights are markedly present in Idel's own writing.<sup>8</sup> Though Liebes shares (and in some cases pre-saged<sup>9</sup>) many of Idel's specific conclusions, he avoids theoretical generalizations and prefers to focus on incisive close textual readings. Furthermore, he regards his field as "Mystical Judaism"<sup>10</sup> as opposed to the phrase "Jewish Mysticism" often employed by Idel, and not coincidentally so.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Liebes explicitly situates Kabbalah more strongly within the context of the Jewish religion and thus within the academic field of Jewish studies as well as the traditional world of Torah study.

Finally, while Liebes investigates a staggering range of texts, personalities, and periods, he tends to relate his findings to a central canon, comprised of the "great books" of Jewish mysticism, such as *Sefer Yesira*, the *Zohar* and the Lurianic corpus, as well as uncovering recurring themes such as creativity and messianism.<sup>12</sup> This dual choice reinforces a sense of "Jewish continuity" within the tradition, while giving it a sense of cohesion, thus avoiding the gravitation of parts of Kabbalah away from the central texts, and potentially away from the Jewish world. In other words, Liebes exploits the phenomenon of intertextuality to construct a tighter sense of a tradition, in which diverse writers participate in a virtual discussion over the centuries. As we shall soon see, the alternative posed by the approach of Liebes, precisely in the light of his belong-

ing to the same “school” as Idel, is extremely useful for critiquing and evaluating the implications of the latter’s method.

At the same time, it is Idel’s very openness to a variety of theoretical tools which leads him to eschew the selective application of a single theoretical approach - a choice rather common in today’s over-specialized academic world, which is characterized at times by intense loyalty to a single framework. This pluralistic stance was recently expressed quite strongly in the introduction to Idel’s monograph *Ascensions on High* (2005), which presents the limitations of no less than eight such approaches, including historical, psychological, comparative, and phenomenological methods.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, plurality can be said to be Idel’s meta-method, as it is reflected in his “polychromatic” approach to the study of Messianism,<sup>14</sup> “panoramic” approach to the history of later Kabbalah,<sup>15</sup> and critique of the “binary” approach to early Kabbalah.<sup>16</sup> To recur to our opening remarks, fixation on a single tool or method, as well as construction of grand schemes, are seen by Idel as a move away from the ever-enriching possibilities latent in the texts themselves.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst advocating plurality, Idel certainly isolates recurring patterns in Kabbalistic practice. Thus, he is especially famous for applying the methodological tool of construction of models, common in the social sciences.<sup>18</sup> Most notably in his works on Hasidism, Messianism, Eros, he uses several such models, defined, significantly for the present discussion, as “a cluster of concepts that constitute a relatively consistent religious structure,”<sup>19</sup> to describe long-term tendencies in the history of Kabbalah, and thus to relate texts from different historical periods and geographical locales. By doing so, he challenges more atomistic approaches which threaten to reduce the history of Kabbalah to a set of random and localized occurrences.<sup>20</sup>

However, when considering the place of this method within Idel’s overall methodology, it is best to recall that according to Idel’s own strictures, it can be at best one tool amongst many. Therefore, models are means of describing connections but, at the same time, are in the service of plurality as they help with uncovering several discrete structures, often within the same school, corpus, or even text.<sup>21</sup>

## Complexity

“Complexity” is perhaps the most frequently recurring term in Idel’s writing during the last decade.<sup>22</sup> One should see this rhetorical emphasis as an intensification of Idel’s ongoing engagement with ‘generalist’ approaches to religion.<sup>23</sup> Idel’s rejection of essentialist approaches tallies well with his proclivity for a “technical constructivism” in the famous ongoing debate as to the nature of mysticism: essentialist or culturally constructed?<sup>24</sup> Thus, the innovative nature of Idel’s general approach to religion is best appreciated against the background of the profound influence of much more universal narratives in religious studies, especially those of Mircea Eliade, rather than within the more narrow framework of Jewish studies.

As Jonathan Z. Smith has shown in his incisive analysis of the meta-structure in Mircea Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, in the grand scheme created by the latter forms of complexity and the processes of variation and combination that ensue from complexity are bracketed through the stronger force of reversion to type, which maintains the primacy of the archetypal structure.<sup>25</sup> Idel’s varied response to Eliade’s reading of Judaism is telling, as it subsumes his ongoing critique of Scholem within a

broader response to the moves of the Romanian scholar, a key point which I shall reinforce later in this section. This background is explicitly presented in the following quote from Idel:

Eliade generally operates with strong phenomenologies, which are intended to cover extensive religious phenomena. In order to present his strong categories, he conceives of his literary corpora as homogenous writings. This is also true of Scholem's juxtaposition of rabbinism and Kabbalah ... Both scholars postulated the existence of puristic types of literature ... In place of these oversimplified phenomenologies the academic approach to rich and complicated types of literature posits more complex conceptualizations ... The combination of more than one model thus allows for a greater comprehension of the complexity of experiences and praxes of medieval and early modern Jewish mystics.<sup>26</sup>

In light of Idel's ever-increasing proclivity for multivocality and complexity,<sup>27</sup> one must ask if he ultimately allows for overall structures which characterize Judaism as a singular phenomenon and differentiate it from other religions? In other words, if what we find is in fact a multiplicity of traditions, texts, and practices, which can be only linked by complex combinatory strategies and organized ad hoc, as it were, round specific items of investigation, perhaps there is no Judaism as such? Does he not write: "the complexity of cosmopolitan religions is so great that I wonder to what extent general terms like Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism, used to denote religions that spread to so many regions and interacted with so many cultures, are viable. I wonder if it would not be better to parcel them into smaller segments, like geographical regions, historical periods or specific trends".<sup>28</sup> Could it not then be claimed that any religious phenomena, whether inside or outside the seeming boundaries of Jewish life, could be found to be a candidate for forming such a local interrelationship. These questions are only reinforced by a recent meta-theoretical article of Idel's, which moves up in levels of analysis from "models" to "forms of order" (responding here to Eric Voegelin's concepts of order). Here, Idel attacks generic terms such as "Jewish", "Arabic", or "Christian", and asks: "What, one may ask, is precisely Jewish in a Hebrew-written text on astrology that derives its material from a variety of Hindu and Arabic Sources"?.<sup>29</sup>

In the specific context of Jewish mysticism, could not the multiple "models" described by Idel be re-defined to include similar mystical phenomena from other cultures? One such example would be Idel's comparison of the "Mystical-magical" model which he places at the heart of Hasidism, to Shamanic phenomena.<sup>30</sup> Another would be Idel's numerous studies on the close interrelationship between Jewish and Christian Kabbalah, especially during the Renaissance.<sup>31</sup> Would not Liebes then be correct in arguing that the very term "Jewish mysticism" threatens to disjoin Kabbalistic phenomena from their anchoring in Jewish culture? Though Idel eschews grand comparative schemes,<sup>32</sup> and in general is cautious with regard to comparative moves,<sup>33</sup> does his method not enable a far more profound form of comparativism? If, as Smith puts it, every theoretical position entails consequences, so that it is a question of choosing "what set of costs one is willing to bear",<sup>34</sup> are these not then the costs of consequences of Idel's approach for the study of Judaism, and by implication, of any given religion?<sup>35</sup>

## Connectivity

The kingdom of the [divine] world of emanation has descended entirely to the world of creation, and there is no greater connection [kesher] than this (Prayer book of the Ari, introduction to the silent prayer).

In this second part, I would like to answer these questions to some extent by proposing one meta-theme, which seems to point towards Idel's ultimately reading Judaism as a discretely identifiable religion. As such, it may provide a focal point which can balance his emphasis on multiplicity.<sup>36</sup>

One of Idel's major critiques of Scholem's meta-narrative on Kabbalah was the latter's claim that Jewish mysticism assumed a gap between the divine and the human. This move expressed itself both in Idel's rebuttal of Scholem's famous denial of the possibility of Union Mystica in kabalistic literature, as well as his deconstruction of Scholem's argument as to the centrality of symbolism in Kabbalah, which follows from the assumption of an epistemological divide that can be bridged only by symbols.<sup>37</sup>

Most explicitly in his recent *Enchanted Chains* (2005), which is in many ways a summary of his existing research, Idel has opposed this set of assumptions with the description of Jewish mysticism as a set of practices<sup>38</sup> designed to enhance a series of "ontic continua", or "connecting metaphysical continua", which are in themselves embedded in the deep structures constructed by the kabalistic ontology. Here, Idel already comes close to providing a cohesive and centralizing approach to Judaism as a whole when he refers to the emphasis on technique and performance as "the deep structure of classical Judaism".<sup>39</sup> According to Idel, this overall framework holds true for the techniques of Ecstatic Kabbalah, which are oriented towards facilitating individual experience,<sup>40</sup> as well as for the theurgical rituals of theosophical Kabbalah and the magical practices found in other kabalistic texts (these being the three main components of kabalistic writing a la Idel).

However, more explicitly here than elsewhere, Idel's critique of Scholem is again part of a much wider debate with the classical approaches to religion which shaped the thought of the Jerusalemite scholar. In his introduction, Idel divides "the current generation of generalist scholars of religion" in two major schools of thought: The first group is that of the "Hegelians" who, later on, regards more abstract religious developments as more "spiritual" and advanced. These scholars, including Edward Caird, R. C. Zaehner, and to some extent Eric Voegelin, are "concerned with the content of abstract systems" and thus with theology.

The second group is that of the "archaists", most notably Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, and C. G. Jung. The latter see more archaic forms of religion as "genuine", and thus stress myth, symbol, ritual and other "basic" forms of religion, which are often collective in nature. According to Idel, the value-laden assumptions of both schools fail to regard Judaism in its own terms and, of course, do not accept the possibility of this religion being in any way paradigmatic for the study of religion as such – for it is either too belated or too early. Idel then proceeds to place the Scholemian positions mentioned above within a broader context, in which the theoretical assumptions of Scholem may be described as a synthesis of Hegelian and archaist assumptions.

Idel's alternate scheme posits the "connectivity" between the human and the divine not merely as an imaginaire permeating kabalistic literature but rather as a



“relationship that also underlies the basic notion of religion as such,” whilst characteristically stressing that he regards this principle as “more comprehensive, though not universal.”<sup>41</sup> True to his proclivity for complexity, Idel proceeds to set forth a variety of such forms of “continua”, found both within Jewish literature and its cultural surroundings, such as Neo-Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic writing. By doing so, he effectively critiques the more limited array of themes found in Arthur Lovejoy’s classical *The Great Chain of Being*.<sup>42</sup>

I regard *Enchanted Chains* not merely as a summary of Idel’s earlier writing, but also as denoting a shift into new domains, also apparent in other studies published at the same time. Predictably, “connective systems” also constitute a major theme in Idel’s recent *Kabbalah and Eros* (2005).<sup>43</sup> Likewise, Idel’s work on ascent and descent along vertical chains branched off into discussions of cosmic pillars as modes of ascending connection in his *Ascensions on High* (2005). Finally, in a recent critique of Rudolph Otto’s phenomenology of religion and especially of Judaism, Idel opposes the latter’s understanding of his key concept of “the Holy” in terms of separation and distance to an alternative rendering of holiness as closeness and connection, often effected by ritual performance.<sup>44</sup>

I wish to posit that this “connective hypothesis” should be re-formulated as a theory of religion, rather than Judaism per se.<sup>45</sup> As such, it may be said to connect, as it were, to theoretical formulations of Phillip Almond<sup>46</sup> as well as more specific work done by Bernard McGinn<sup>47</sup> and David Blumenthal.<sup>48</sup> In the following section, I shall show how this “meta-model”, conjoined with another of Idel’s wider observations on Jewish religiosity, not only embellishes an important recent theory of religion, but can be said to be found in one of the most formative texts ever composed by a Jewish writer, who was both a leading mystic and a halakhist.

## Chains of Memory

In *La Religion pour Mémoire*, recently (2000) published in English as *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, the prominent sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger offered a much-acclaimed reformulation of the social workings of religion, which has been supported by more recent studies.<sup>49</sup> Although the focus of this work is on the changes undergone by religion in the modern period, rather than the mostly pre-modern texts dealt with by Idel, its theoretical direction can be seen as convergent with that of our subject.

In general, Hervieu-Léger offers a working definition of religion, while – in a fashion reminiscent of Idel – stipulating that it is but one amongst several possibilities. Religion here is “an ideological, practical and symbolic system through which consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed, and controlled”. Hervieu-Léger emphasizes that “it is not the continuity itself that matters but the fact of its being a visible expression of a lineage that the believer expressly lays claim to and which confers membership of a spiritual community that gathers past, present and future believers.”<sup>50</sup>

This approach is especially useful for the study of Judaism, despite the fact that Hervieu-Léger’s formulations, influenced by her background in the study of Christianity, are weighted towards belief rather than practice.<sup>51</sup> Despite this tendency, Hervieu-Léger is well aware of the possibility that Judaism, as a family-centered reli-

gion, can be seen in some way paradigmatic for traditional religion: "To experience the real meaning of being part of a continuing tradition, one can hardly do better than to refer to the book in which Josef Erlich describes ... the celebration of the Sabbath in a Polish *shtetl*.<sup>52</sup> Every gesture expressed, every moment passed by the Jewish family ... is invested with a sense of immemorial continuity in which it is supposed to find its place".<sup>53</sup>

This "immemorial continuity" is, of course, heavily dependent on the ongoing maintenance of memory – "collective religious memory is subject to constantly recurring construction". In this context, Hervieu-Léger foregrounds ritual as a constant "recalling to memory of the past". Once again, "the cycle of Jewish feasts clearly provide a paradigm of the specific nature of religious ritual."<sup>54</sup>

The salience of memory in Jewish practice was the topic of a rather lengthy recent (2002) article by Idel, where he describes the process of "memorizing" by creating "an envelope of reminders" that "remained the single most important form of shaping identity for all the forms of traditional Judaism."<sup>55</sup> This uncharacteristically unqualified statement shows that Idel sees "memorizing" as a candidate for conceptualizing the core of Jewish identity. Indeed, this is a slightly uncommon example of a discussion of Idel's reaching from the Bible, through Philo and Rabbinic literature, till Hasidism.

While proposing the envelope of reminders as a generally "quintessential manner for understanding how traditional societies cope with dramatic changes affecting so much of their life without losing a sense of identity,"<sup>56</sup> Idel stresses the paramount importance of identity in minority cultures, such as Judaism. This study is clearly linked to Idel's connective hypothesis, as Idel stresses the role of acts of remembrance in enhancing connection with the divine.

The following text by the great 13th century Catalan halakhist and kabbalist, Nahmanidies perfectly illustrates the importance of "chains of memory" and the "envelope of reminders" within tradition, conjoined of course with a typically Jewish stress on ritual practice. It is not surprising that some of the Biblical examples that he adduces, such as the Tefilin and Mezuzot, are precisely those adduced by Idel:

And now I shall tell you a principle of the rationale of many of the commandments ... as God will not perform miracles and signs in every generation for the benefit of every wicked heretic, he commanded us to constantly create a memorial and a sign for that which our eyes have witnessed, and we shall transmit this matter to our sons, and their sons to their sons, and their sons to the last generation. And God was very strict on this matter ... and demanded that we write all that we have seen of the miracles and signs on our hands and between our eyes [the Tefillin] and place it further at the entrance of homes in Mezuzot, and recite it verbally morning and evening [the Shema prayer] ... and erect a Succah every year, and similarly many commandments to remember the Exodus from Egypt. And all this so that we shall possess in all generations signs that will not be forgotten and so that there shall be no opening for a heretic to deny faith in God, for one who purchases a Mezuzah for the price of one Zuz and places it on his entrance, with intention, has already admitted the creation of the world and the knowledge of God and his providence and prophecy and believes in all corners of the Torah, besides acknowledging the great grace of God towards those who perform his will and that he redeemed us from slavery to freedom and great honor to merit their ancestors ... and therefore they [the Sages] said (Avot 2, 1) be careful with a light commandment as with a severe one, for all are very dear and precious, for in every hour one

acknowledges God through them, for the intention of all the commandments is to believe in God and thank him for creating us, and this is the intention of the creation itself, for there is no other purpose for the first creation, and the High One does not desire the lower realms except for Man to know and acknowledge his creator."<sup>57</sup>

Here, our kabbalist (whose theurgical doctrine is evident in the last sentence) seamlessly weaves together the metaphysical issues of the purpose of creation, providence etc. with what he explicitly describes as a general theory of Jewish practice: The creation of a continuous chain of memory ("our sons, and their sons to their sons and their sons) not merely between generations but in "every hour", or as Idel would put it, in the "micro-cronos" as well.<sup>58</sup> The "signs"<sup>59</sup> or the semiotic network created by ritual re-create the sense of presence that was previously afforded by miracles. Thus, the commandments maintain the continuity of the contact with the divine.

I do not believe this move to be in any way an innovation of Nahmanidies. Rather, this thinker was very well attuned to what I would term "normal Judaism." This theme can be found in the most basic of Jewish ritual performances: To bring but one example, the prayer connecting the *shem'a* and the *'amida* – the two poles of daily prayer, prefaces the following declaration to a description of the exodus and its miracles: "His words are alive and firm, trustworthy and pleasant for all eternity, for our ancestors and ourselves, for our children and generations, and all of the generations of the seed of Israel your servants. For the first ones and the last ones, this is a good and firm thing... truly you are God our Lord and the Lord of our ancestors, our king and the king of our ancestors."

It is easily discernible that Nahmanidies is continuing the spirit of this liturgical text (one is also reminded of Hervieu-Léger's spiritual community that gathers past, present and future believers). The resonance between our text and deep structures of Jewish tradition ensured that Nahmanidies' formative text, itself found in an extremely widely read commentary on the Bible,<sup>60</sup> is frequently quoted in contemporary traditional discussions of Jewish ritual.<sup>61</sup>

Through the continuation of the Nahmanidean text we can discern yet a third theme closely related to connectivity: "And the intention of the raising of voice in prayers and the purpose of synagogues and the merit of public prayer is that people shall have a place to assemble and thank God for creating them ... and publish this." In other words, collective production of sound plays an important role in strengthening the chain of memory. This classical text admirably illustrates yet another general direction of investigation recently developed by Idel:

In a study dedicated to "sonorous communities,"<sup>62</sup> Idel opposes the Scholemian (as well as Voegelinian) description of the divine voice creating a feeling of distance between God and man, with an entirely different understanding which emerges from numerous texts – Torah qua divine voice as a means of adhering to God. Idel explicitly relates these texts to his broader reading of the kabbalistic variant of the "great chain of being". In other words, sound connects, as it were, the divine mouth with the human mouth, thus creating an "ontic link."<sup>63</sup> These observations echo and resonate, so to speak, in *Enchanted Chains*, where Idel defines vocal techniques as "linguistic-ontic cords."<sup>64</sup>

In the same year (2002) Idel published an extremely broad study of Jewish hermeneutics, which in turn crystallizes numerous studies he devoted to language in Kabbalah. Here Idel located "significant instances of linguocentric forms of mysticism"



in different forms of Kabbalah.<sup>65</sup> Idel's following statement, which itself constitutes an important contribution to religious studies, is that "This form of spirituality should be recognized as a category in itself". It is highly significant that Idel stresses here that "language and text-oriented experiences have a prominently connective social role,"<sup>66</sup> thus giving a more sociological focus to his earlier discussion of the "linguistic continuum."<sup>67</sup> Again, these insights reverberate in *Enchanted Chains*, where Idel points towards a more cohesive understanding of Judaism at least on the sociological level, by writing "Jews are united because they share the same semantic world."<sup>68</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

It is my own feeling that the connective hypothesis, anchored as it is in numerous central Jewish texts, can be seen as an important method for gaining a sense of the nature of Jewish religiosity as a whole, as well as a powerful tool for comparative research. Its advantage lies in that it brings us closer to the world-view of the authors of classical Jewish texts, rather than imposing modern agenda on them, or otherwise moving their readers away from the structures inherent in the texts. As Idel himself has suggested, this recent move of his can be said to bring together many strands found in dozens of books and many hundreds of articles written by him over the years, only a small sample of which was mentioned here.

The ramifications of this move may extend beyond those claimed by Idel himself: The chain of memory is not merely an oft-recurring theme in Jewish writing, but can be a device to determine the extent to which an idea or practice is itself connected to the chain of Jewish continuity or subsidiary or tangential to the main thrust of the tradition, and this tool may be useful for the study of other religions. If, as Hervieu-Léger put it, the "distinctive mark" of tradition is to restore to human lives the "living memory of an essential core,"<sup>69</sup> then religion's own self-awareness includes a sense of an essential core. Therefore, although scholarly investigation can readily show that this core is constructive rather than objective, nonetheless it would do well not to distance itself overly from the self-formulation of the tradition as study, whilst not of course being enchained by it. Therefore, Idel's "chain hypothesis" can be seen as a corrective to the centrifugal elements in his own analysis.

However, one can glimpse possibilities beyond the study of a specific tradition. Following Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory,<sup>70</sup> one could conjecture that the durability of religious practice lies not so much in the fostering of "spiritual intelligence"<sup>71</sup> but rather in enhancing a form of "social intelligence,"<sup>72</sup> through the bonds and networks created by the chain of memory, a trait which can become a "survival skill" in a diasporic religion such as Judaism.

Although Idel himself is an extremely complex thinker, whose current direction cannot be easily summarized,<sup>73</sup> I believe that the theme of connectivity allows us for more than a glimpse at an important "vector", to use a term favored by Idel, of his ongoing research project. In his *Enchanted Chains*, Idel repeatedly stresses that he is by no means exhausting the "varieties of connectivity", to coin a phrase. The surprising power of the theme of deep connection between God and the Jewish people will be the subject of his forthcoming voluminous study of the trope of "The Son of God".

## Notes:

1 We shall mention anon the frequent critiques that he levies at generalized statements lacking firm textual foundation. However, despite occasional assertions to the contrary in reviews, polemics are subsidiary to Idel's main project and can be regarded as attempts to steer the course of scholarship away from moves which distance its readers from the texts themselves.

2 One simile that Idel sometimes employs for this process is that of an ever-shifting puzzle, whose boundaries and components change as one seemingly fills it in. Compare to the term "dynamic net" in *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles, 2005), p. 32.

3 Both of these moves can be also described as forms of what Jonathan Z. Smith has termed "redescription", in turn as "rectification" of scholarly categories (In his *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago, 2004), pp. 29, 57). Following on Idel's terms "new perspectives," one could also describe this process as "revisioning", as in James Hillman, *Revisioning Psychology* (New York, 1975).

4 To date the potential of Idel's work for theorizing religion has been appreciated mainly by Philip Wexler, as in his *Holy Sparks: Social Theory, Education and Religion* (New York, 1996), as well as of course playing an important role in the tragically curtailed dialogue between Idel and the late Ion Couliano (see e. g. *Out of this World* (Boston and London, 1991, pp. 165, 181, 184).

5 This book crystallized numerous insights and studies that were contained in numerous articles published earlier, as well as Idel's trilogy on Abraham Abulafia's ecstatic Kabbalah, which was published roughly at the same time. However, for the purposes of the present article, I shall focus on the works published in non-Hebrew languages in the last two decades, which are more obviously part of Idel's international impact. On the development of Idel's thought, see Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power In Jewish Mysticism From Rabbinic Literature to Safedian Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 2004), p. 60-61 (Hebrew). For Idel's own history of Kabbalah scholarship, which does not include the important developments of the last decade, see his "Academic Studies of Kabbalah in Israel 1923-1998: A Short Survey," *Studia Judaica* 8 (1999), pp. 91-114.

6 Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah - New Perspectives* (New Haven and London, 1988), pp. 22-25. These "other branches" presumably include sociology, anthropology, and literary theory, which play an important role in Idel's later works. Compare to *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven and London, 1998), pp. 331, n. 44, 413, n. 8.

7 As is evident in his recent works: *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York, 2005) and *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford, 2006).

8 Liebes' programmatic "New Directions in the Study of the Kabbalah," *Pe'amim* 50 (1992), pp. 150-170 (Hebrew) was published shortly after Idel's *New Perspectives*, and partly defending it from its critics, whilst his earlier work on Jewish myth presaged both the "reconstruction" offered in Idel's magnum opus, as well exemplifying the comparative direction suggested there (although Liebes usually restricts his rich comparisons to the adjacent classical, European and Islamic cultures, and avoids the comparisons with Far Eastern and Shamanic phenomena (on the latter see below) found throughout *New Perspectives* as well as in Idel's more recent writing, as in *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 290-291; *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven and London, 2005), p. 220. I hope to address Liebes' con-

tribution to the study of Jewish religiosity elsewhere.

9 See Idel's own statements in *Messianic Mystics*, pp. X, 293.

10 See Yehuda Liebes, "Some Thoughts about the Religious Significance of Kabbalah Research", in *The Path of the Spirit: The Eliezer Schweid Jubilee Volume*, ed. Y. Amir I (Jerusalem, 2005), pp. 197-208, and especially pp. 203-204.

11 See also Boaz Huss, "The mystification of Kabbalah and the myth of 'Jewish Mysticism', *Pe'amim* 110 (1997), pp. 9-30 (Hebrew), for a nominalistic critique of the very use of the term "Mysticism" for the study of Kabbalah.

12 As stated explicitly in Liebes' public lecture "Spirituality and Spirit", at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, May 2006 (forthcoming in a collection on Jewish Spirituality, for now online in his website: <http://pluto.huji.ac.il/~liebes/zohar/ruahaniut.doc> (Hebrew)).

13 Compare to earlier formulations in *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 257, 329, n. 18.

14 Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 17, 272-273. Compare to the term "polymorphous" in E. R. Wolfson, *Along the Path: Essays in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics, Myth and Symbolism* (Albany, 1995), p. 69.

15 See idem *ibid*, pp. 23, 242-244, 262; idem, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, 1995), pp. 9-15; *Ascensions on High In Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* (Budapest and New York, 2005), p. 153.

16 Moshe Idel, "On Binary 'Beginnings in Kabbalah Scholarship", in *Historicization – Historisierung*, ed. G. W. Most (Göttingen, 2001), pp. 313-337.

17 See e.g. *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 180, 251-254, 285, 329, n. 14, 390, n. 96, 401, n.3; *Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 15, 99, 149, 280, n. 140.

18 See especially the programmatic discussion in Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 45-102. For a treatment of the application of this tool in the study of Kabbalah, see Garb, *Manifestations of Power*, pp. 60-64.

19 Idel, *opt cit.* p. 49. See also *Messianic Mystics*, p. 17, for the broader, yet telling, terms "unified categories", "unified diachronic conceptual schemes", and see p. 335, n.77. for a comparison to the term "deep structures", as well as *Ascensions On High*, p. 27 on "consonant" structures.

20 See e.g. *Ascensions on High*, p. 1, as well as his earlier critique of the related fallacy of "proximism" in *Hasidism*, pp. 6-9.

21 See *Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 13, 222.

22 I believe that Idel's rhetoric of complexity first became obvious in his *Hasidism*. It is interesting to speculate as to what extent Idel here betrays the influence of the current Zeitgeist, a manifested in the so-called "Science of Complexity".

23 See especially *Enchanted Chains*, p. 65. Idel does not address Maurice Gauchet's work, yet one presumes would have a similar reservation vis-à-vis his grand historical schemata.

24 However see the rather Eliadian early formulation on this topic in *Kabbalah – New Perspectives*, p. 37.

25 Smith, *Relating Religion*, pp. 89-94.

26 P. 159 in Moshe Idel, "Some Concepts of Time and History in Kabbalah", in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, eds. E. Carlebach, J. Efron, D. Myers (Hannover and London, 1998), pp. 153-188, and compare to *Ascensions on High*, pp. 216 ff. For Eliade's influence on Gershom Scholem, see S. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, 1999), esp. pp. 60, 163-164, as well as Idel, *opt cit.* p. 225; *Enchanted*

*Chains*, p. 11. For Scholem's limited influence on Eliade, see *ibid*, p. 6, as well as his afterword to the Hebrew edition (Jerusalem, 2000) of Eliade's *The Myth of Eternal Return*, p. 146. In other words, while Wasserstrom (opt cit.) generally describes Scholem and Eliade as partaking in a shared development of ideas, or "conversation" (see p. 166, 248) at the Eranos meetings (see e.g. p. 97), in Idel's opinion, the direction of influence is clearly from Eliade's grand scheme to Scholem's more specific views on Judaism.

27 On complexity as a clue for understanding the theme of Eros in Kabbalah, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 5, and see there on Judaism as a complex and diversified culture, as well as the reiteration on p. 12. See also p. 100 on exploring complexities as the main task of the critical scholar, as well as the earlier statements in *Messianic Mystics*, p. 262, 265.

28 *Ascensions on High*, p. 3 (compare to the critique of the notion of "Judaism" in the singular, in p. 237, n. 67, and also to *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 14). Though in the former book (pp. 229-231) Idel rejects the option of assuming that cohesion within a religion is entirely artificial, the quote cited above veers in that direction.

29 Moshe Idel, "On Some Forms of Order in Kabbalah", *Daat* 50-52 (2003), pp. XXXIII-XXXIV.

30 Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 214, 218, 225; *Ascensions on High*, pp. 148-150, 153-154, 159, 164, n. 40, 208.

31 See e.g. *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 142-144; *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven and London, 2002), pp. 464-465; *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 191-196; "Jewish Mystical Thought in The Florence of Lorenzo Il Magnifico," in *La Cultura Ebraica All'Epoca Di Lorenzo Il Magnifico* (Firenze, 1998), pp. 17-42. See however Idel's cautions against conflation of Christian and Jewish Kabbalah in his earlier *Kabbalah - New Perspectives*, pp. 262-263. Compare also to *idem*, "Kabbalah and Hermeticism in Dame Frances A. Yates' Renaissance", in *Esoterisme, Gnoses & Imaginaire Symbolique: Melanges offerts a Antoine Faivre*, eds. R. Caron, J. Godwin, W.J. Hanegraaf, J-L. Vieillard-Baron, (Louvain, 2001), pp. 71-90.

32 See *Messianic Mystics*, p. 283, as well as below,

33 See e.g. *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 290-292, *Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 237-238,

34 *Relating Religion*, p. 99.

35 Compare to Idel's own self-critique in *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 222.

36 See also Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 24, for the need to focus on the most "recurring and influential themes", rather than on the rarer transgressive elements, as contemporary scholars often do (compare to *Messianic Mystics*, p. 277). In general, Idel's rhetoric betrays a certain ambivalence surrounding this topic: In *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 240, he immediately balances a speculation as to "the importance of eroticism in the context of the entire structure of Judaism" with the more qualified "some forms of Judaism may be described as a culture of Eros." As we shall see, once the theme of Eros is re-inscribed within the wider trope of connection, the first formulation would seem to prevail.

37 See respectively, *Kabbalah - New Perspectives*, pp. 59-73, 200-219, as well as *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 21-24,

38 As Idel writes, "kabbalistic literature resembles halakhic literature" as its main purpose is to guide "as precisely as possible in the performance of ritual", rather than describing subjective experiences (*Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 242, and compare to pp. 25, 213-214). This meta-description of Kabbalah, and indeed Jewish religiosity in general in terms of practice, rather than theology, is another hallmark of Idel's writing, and

explains his reluctance to write the history of Kabbalah in the “history of ideas” mode (which he has in fact characterized as “simplistic” (Moshe Idel, “‘Unio Mystica: ‘Hegelian’ Phenomenologies of Jewish Mysticism,” in *Doors of Understanding: Conversations in Global Spirituality in Honor of Ewert Cousins*, ed. S. Chase (Quincy (IL), 1997), p. 326). See also *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 24-25, 32-41, 215-220; Moshe Idel, “On the Theologization of Kabbalah in Modern Scholarship,” in *Religious Apologetics – Philosophical Argumentation*, eds. Y. Schwartz and V. Krech (Tuebingen, 2004), pp. 123-174. For Idel’s debate with Eliade (and the latter’s influence on Scholem) on the role of ritual in Judaism see his “Some Concepts of Time”; “Memento Dei”, p. 169.

39 *Enchanted Chains*, p. 34, and compare to p. 224-227.

40 See also *Messianic Mystics*, p. 247, 255-259, on connection as the goal of experience. See also “On Some Forms of Order”, p. XXXVI on “more intense forms of connectiveness”, rather than freedom, as the goal of experiences such as unio mystica.

41 *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 25 and 75 respectively.

42 See *ibid*, p. 53.

43 See especially p. 241 and see also p. 212 on “the correlative mode of religious thought”, again a term with wider theoretical potential, and see p. 245 on the relationship between these two “main lines” of kabbalistic thought.

44 Moshe Idel, “Ganz Andere: On Rudolph Otto and Concepts of Holiness in Jewish Mysticism“, *Daat* 57-59 (2006), pp. XV-XLIV.

45 See also *Enchanted Chains*, p. 123, 133-144, for the term “meso-cosmos” for mediating and connective mythical realms, which provides a powerful tool for the study of myth. Likewise, his discussion of the “luminous continuum” can help reinforce and further conceptualize recent discussions of the centrality of light imagery in mystical experience (see E. R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, 1994); J. B. Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response and Empowerment* (Philadelphia, 1996), pp. 56-74).

46 Phillip Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin, 1982), pp. 158-159; Compare also to the emphasis on the theme of “relation” in Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge (Mass.), 2006). Indeed the term “correlational”, as a theoretical construct recurs in Idel’s recent writing (“On the Theologization of Kabbalah”, p. 171; *idem*, “Panim – on facial Re-Presentations in Jewish Thought: Some Correlational Instances”, in *On Interpretation in the Arts*, ed. N. Yaari (Tel Aviv, 2000), pp. 21-56).

47 Bernard McGinn, *The Golden Chain* (Washington, 1972).

48 David Blumenthal, “Lovejoy’s Great Chain of Being and the Jewish Tradition,” reprinted in *Jacob’s Ladder and the Tree of Life: Concepts of Hierarchy and the Great Chain of Being*, eds. M. Learth Kuntz, and P. Grimley (New York, 1987), pp. 179-190.

49 See e.g. Harvey Whitehouse, “Toward a Comparative Anthropology of religion,” in *Ritual and Memory: Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Religion*, eds. Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw (Walnut Creek (CA), 2004), pp. 187-203.

50 Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. S. Lee (New Brunswick (N. J.), 2000), pp. 81-82.

51 See especially Hervieu-Léger, *ibid*, pp. 101.

52 J. Erlich, *La Flamme du Shabbath* (Paris, 1978).

53 Hervieu-Léger, *opt cit.*, p. 86.

54 *Ibid*, pp. 124-125. Here Hervieu-Léger builds on the earlier work of Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire Collective* (Paris, 1950).



55 See p. 144 in Moshe Idel, "Memento Dei – Remarks on Remembering in Judaism," *Il Senso della Memoria* (Roma, 2002), pp. 143-192.

56 Ibid, and see further, p. 146 for the centrality of memory in understanding the psychology of religion.

57 Nahmanidies, commentary on Exodus, 13, 16 (my translation). For discussions of various parts of this text within two recent magisterial treatments of this figure, see Haviva Pedaya: *Nahmanidies: Cyclical Time and Holy Text* (Tel Aviv, 2003), pp. 306, n. 47, 410, n. 36 (Hebrew); Moshe Halbertal, *By Way of Truth: Nahmanidies and the Creation of Tradition* (Jerusalem, 2006), pp. 281 (Hebrew).

58 See Idel, "Some Concepts of Time".

59 For semiotic aspects of memorizing, see Idel, "Memento Dei," especially p. 188.

60 On the necessity for every "true Jew" to master this commentary, see the important lately departed Mussar (ethics) teacher, R. Shlomo Wolbe, 'Ali Shur, I (Beer Yaakov, 1978), p. 29.

61 See e.g. R. Moshe Shapira (a foremost Ultra-Orthodox thinker and the teacher of the French Jewish ultra-orthodox philosopher Benny Levy), *Afiqei Mayim: Be-Inyanei Pesach* (Jerusalem, 2004), p. 58.

62 This article draws on earlier comments, which were not formulated and organized from a theoretical and sociological point of view, in *Hasidism*, e.g. pp. 165-168, 205, 216.

63 Moshe Idel, "Die Laut Gelsen Tora, Stimmengemeinschaft in der Juedischen Mystik", *Zwischen Rauschen und Offenbarung, zur Kultur-und Mediengeschichte Der Stimme*, eds. Th. Macho und s. Weigel (Berlin, 2002), pp. 19-53.

64 See especially ibid, pp. 27, 53-64, 205-212.

65 Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 410. Compare to *Hasidism*, p. 215; *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 98; *Ascensions On High*, p. 232; *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 25-26, as well as an earlier formulation in *Messianic Mystics*, p. 355, n. 72.

66 *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 411.

67 *Hasidism*, p. 217. On the concept of the continuum, which can be seen as a further theoretical tool, see also *Messianic Mystics*, p. 113; *Ascensions on High*, p. 216.

68 Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, p. 221.

69 *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, p. 88.

70 See Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (New York, 2006).

71 See e.g. Tony Buzan, *The Power of Spiritual Intelligence: Ten Ways to Tap into your Spiritual Genius* (London, 2002).

72 See Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York, 2006).

73 Especially as Idel continues to balance the theoretical focus that I emphasized here with ongoing textual and historical studies of a far more specific nature, such as his work on the Ashkenazi proto-Kabbalist, R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo ha-Navi.