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Edenic Paradise And Paradisaal Eden Moshe Idel's Reading Of The Talmudic Legend Of The Four Sages Who Entered The Pardes

Abstract:

Of the stories describing the adventures full of deep significances of the various rabbis from the glorious Talmudic era, the most famous but also the most exploited is undoubtedly that of the "four sages who entered the Pardes". If in the Talmudic-Midrashic literature it was used to point out the dangers and achievements that were related to speculations, rather than experiences, and in the mystical literature it was used to point out the dangers that could befall the mystic on his way to God, to the kabbalists, Pardes was an unexplained parable for an unrevealed secret, a generalized metaphor for the danger zones of religious experience, seen as something which was good for the few, but pernicious for others. This article traces the manner in which Moshe Idel analyzes, in his books and lectures, the meanings of this legend, taking the reader on a fascinating journey in time and space, throughout various types of kabbalistic thinking and even maimonidean philosophy.

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Motto:

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."
T.S.Eliot, *Little Gidding*

PARDES in Jewish mysticism in Moshe Idel's works

Of the stories describing the adventures full of deep significances of the various rabbis from the glorious Talmudic era, the most famous but also the most exploited is undoubtedly that of the "four sages who entered the Pardes". Like most such stories, although backed by the Talmud's authority, this account is not, and must not be, by any means, mistaken for a historical truth, even though the four characters did exist at approximately the same time and their esoteric preoccupations were real, thus provid-

ing the basis of the story. It is rather a collection of rabbinical traditions about the effects of taking the mystical path, describing types of experiences and possible outcomes, which give the text an exemplary character.

So Rabbi Akiva, Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma and Elisha ben Abuyah (Aher) entered the Pardes. One peeked and died, another peeked and was injured, the third peeked and chopped down the plants [i.e. he became mad and allured the youth]. Only Rabbi Akiva went up and came down safely. The text appears in *Tosefta Hagigah* 2:3-4 and is completed by another parable: it may be considered that the four travel on a main thoroughfare that passes between two paths: one of fire and one of snow. If one of them leans to one side, he will be burned by the fire, if he leans to the other side, he will be burned by the snow; the fire symbolism is thus extended, paradoxically, to the snow, which may therefore “burn”. To safely reach the destination they only need to keep the straight road and not let themselves be drawn to any other direction. The adventure had two positive outcomes. Ben Azzai peeked and died remaining loyal and Rabbi Akiva peeked and came out safely. It also had two negative outcomes: Ben Zoma peeked and lost his mind and Elisha peeked and became a heretic.

As Moshe Idel showed in a lecture held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1991 under the title *Primordial Wisdom: The Philosopher's Quest* (available online at <http://www.kheper.net/topics/Kabbalah/Idel/lecture1.htm>) in time the text was used to reveal the most varied significances, its interpretation depending largely on the context. If in the Talmudic-Midrashic literature it was used to point out the dangers and achievements that were related to speculations, rather than experiences, and in the mystical literature it was used to point out the dangers that could befall the mystic on his way to God, to the kabbalists Pardes was an unexplained parable for an unrevealed secret. The freedom of maneuver in the interpretation process that this outlook allows is evident. Pardes thus became a generalized metaphor for the danger zones of religious experience, seen as something which was good for the few, but pernicious for others.

To better understand the significances found by the kabbalists in this parable we must first refer to the pun behind the name of Pardes. In Hebrew “pardes” means orchard, while the notion of Heaven is rendered by the phrase Gan Eden (Garden of Eden). However, when the Tanach was translated into Greek, the translators used the word Paradise (deriving from the Persian *Paradesha*), from which there was a backward linkage to the Hebrew word “pardes”. Thus, the notions of Pardes and Gan Eden, originally different, came to explain or amplify each other. The dangers associated with Gan Eden [the angel with the flaming sword] were transferred upon the Pardes and the dangers associated with the Pardes were transferred upon Gan Eden: both came to represent dangerous ideals and idea dangers. The Pardes story thus became the story of Paradise. It became a common effort of medieval commentators to explain what happened in Paradise by means of the Pardes story. But the connection operated in the opposite sense as well. Entering the Pardes became one and the same thing with entering Paradise, i.e. returning to the primordial place and implicitly to the original state. At this point we should recall the kabbalists' preoccupation to restore the initial order, to complete the *Tikkun Olam* and also the *Tikkun Nephesh*.

Not surprisingly the pun between Pardes with the literal meaning of Paradise (in the sense of both orchard and heaven) and PaRDeS as the collection of the initials of the words *Peshat* (literal meaning), *Remes* (allegorical meaning), *Derash* (homiletic meaning) and *Sod* (mystical meaning), designating the four level reading of the sacred text, so dear to Rabbi Moses de Leon, an important figure of the Kabbalah, with a big finger in the

Zoharic pie (according to Gershom Scholem, it seems that Moses de Leon was the first to provide a kabbalistic analysis of the text, in a book with this very title – *Pardes* – written before 1290, later to be lost [Scholem 1996, 67]), gave birth to a long tradition of interpretations in Jewish mysticism and not only.

The pun is important because, as Moshe Idel shows (Idel, Polirom 2004, 451), in Judaism hermeneutics is a crucial component of the mystical experience. Of the many types of exegeses of the sacred text available, PaRDeS was the dearest to the kabbalists, as it gave their teachings the privileged status of a higher type of knowledge. Furthermore, it must be noted that PaRDeS was not a random combination of four different methods but a coherent system which made integrated use of all their elements. At the same time, even this “improved” type of exegesis had a relatively conservative nature, as it preserved the traditional interpretations, which it regarded as “inferior” but still integrated into what kabbalists considered to be the bigger picture.

Another pun worth mentioning in this context, quoted by Moshe Idel in his book “Absorbing Perfections” (Idel, Polirom 2004, 454), refers to the explanation given by Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azulay (who lived between 1724-1806 in Eretz Israel) that he who believes in the literal sense of the Bible only is a fool, as proven by the very permutation of the consonants of the word *peshat*: *tipesht*. Moreover, without the last letter, (s), *pardes* becomes *pered*, stupid. Not by chance from the four sages who entered the Pardes only Rabbi Akiva, who corresponds to the kabbalistic (sod) level of interpretation, came out safely. This seems to imply that for the kabbalists this was the least dangerous type of exegesis, while the other three involved various perils. Still, it must not be inferred that this was a recommendation for the mass use of kabbalistic methods, but on the contrary, a warning in regard to their elitist nature. The kabbalistic way may have been the most secure, but getting there implied dangers that should not have been overlooked. As Moshe Idel puts it (in *Primordial Wisdom: The Philosopher’s Quest*), “there is danger, but Judaism is seen as trying to cope with the problem of the dangerous ideal. The ideal may be dangerous, but it is to be cultivated. This formulation becomes a way of balancing ritualistic approaches against the explosion of metaphysical speculations that might endanger the observance of the ritual”.

An additional significance of Pardes is related to the correspondence established between the four levels of interpretation and the four worlds of the creation process in Lurianic kabbalah. According to this outlook, *peshat* corresponds to Asiyah, the world of action, *remes* to Yetsirah, the world of formation, *derash* to Beriyah, the world of creation and *sod* to Atzilut, the world of emanation. Naturally, the omission of one of Torah’s senses leads to a failure or malfunction at the corresponding cosmic level. This shows once again how important it was for the kabbalist to go through ALL the four levels of interpretation, which means that the Pardes system of exegesis was conceived like a ladder, or, as Idel calls it, a *scala mentis ad Deum* (Idel, Polirom 2004, 455). In this outlook, the hermeneutical reading of the Torah was the way to the divine: by progressively immersing in the depths of the sacred text, at the core of which laid one of God’s manifestations, the mystic thought he could understand the dynamics of the celestial realm and thus literally experience the divine. Such exegesis was not just a method to find new significances in the Torah but sometimes the very aim of the kabbalist’s endeavor: to meet the ultimate reality.

Interpretations of the Pardes legend in Moshe Idel's works

In his lecture on *Primordial Wisdom: The Philosopher's Quest* Idel underlines that to Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon, Rambam, 1135-1204, who lived in Spain, Morocco, Eretz Israel and Egypt) the wisdom of Adam was perfect philosophy, which was lost but could be retrieved under certain circumstances by some outstanding masters, like Rabbi Akiva. In this outlook, to be in Paradise is to be a philosopher. Philosophy is seen as perfection in the present; Paradise as perfection in the past and in the future. The ideal of philosophy is therefore to exist in continuous contemplation and as a result the Fall is interpreted as man's inability to stay in the state of perfect philosophy. The Pardes story, however, seems to point out a path of return, and to suggest a view of Judaism as a project of return to perfect philosophy, showing both techniques and possible problems. As such the Pardes is linked to speculation: it is something to be known, something that must be grasped clearly, rather than a mystical experience. Maimonides even states that it is not proper to walk in the Pardes without being filled with bread and meat, i.e., without having had a solid Rabbinic education which implies knowledge of what is permitted and forbidden, because this gives composure to the mind. In Maimonides' view, Jewish law is a way of achieving certain stability, a mastery of lust and imagination.

Starting from Maimonides' philosophical interpretation, Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291, born in Spain), the best known representative of ecstatic Kabbalah, who actually devised not four, but seven levels of reading the sacred text (Idel, Polirom 2004, 453), developed the thesis that the state of the Primordial Man is always accessible to us, always available at any time – as, too, is the sin of Adam. From this perspective it may be stated that we all are constantly in Paradise, whether we realize it or not. Neither the Expulsion nor the Paradisal state are seen as historical events but rather as structures of experience open to each of us. By studying and obeying Torah, these typical experiences and states may be actualized at any moment. History becomes irrelevant. Nevertheless, this does not mean that anyone can undertake such enterprise. This outlook does not rule out danger, which continues to lurk, like in all the other approaches. It is rather an attempt to balance ritualistic approaches against the explosion of metaphysical speculations that might endanger the observance of the ritual in rabbinic Judaism. (Incidentally it should be noted that, as Moshe Idel shows [Idel 2000, 272-300], Abraham Abulafia thought that the curse in the literal sense was blessing in the hidden sense and the curse in the hidden sense was blessing in the literal one, granting negative, even demonic, connotations to the latter. To him (and others like him), the literal meaning remained the patrimony of the many and the esoteric one the patrimony of the chosen few).

The kabbalistic interpretation of the Pardes did not stop here. As Moshe Idel argues (in a second lecture held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1991 under the title *Primordial Light: The Ecstatic's Quest*, available online at <http://www.kheper.net/topics/Kabbalah/Idel/lecture2.htm>), the kabbalists were less interested in establishing a unified theology than they were in finding secret interpretations that would attract many different kinds of people. Their intention was not so much to involve the masses in mystical speculations, but to allow for diversity among the elite. That is why, at the beginning of the 13th century, an interesting shift occurred in the view of a number of kabbalists, for whom the central figure of the parable was no longer Rabbi Akiva but Ben Azzai, the Talmudic master who died. This outlook was based on perceiving the Pardes not as a matter (game?) of intellect, but as an experience of the supreme light. The inter-

pretation does not refer to an intellectual or conceptual light, but to an experiential light and it starts from the Midrashic texts in which Adam is described as an entity of Light and as having garments of Light, which were lost after his expulsion from Eden. In this tradition, Adam's basic activity in Heaven was to contemplate the Light, the *Shekhinah*. "The Light of the Shekhinah" is a key term in these texts, for both Paradise and Pardes are seen as full of light. The essential element that Adam loses with the Fall is the possibility to contemplate (experience) this Light. Therefore the restoration of the Adamic state through the ability to contemplate the Light becomes the very purpose of the mystic's experience.

Evidently, this outlook is particularly applicable to ecstatic – *Merkabah* – mysticism. Read from this perspective the text would sound like this: "*Ben Azzai peeked and died. He gazed at the radiance of the Divine Presence like a man with weak eyes who gazes at the full light of the sun and becomes blinded by the intensity of the light that overwhelms him... He did no wish to be separated, he remained hidden in it, his soul was covered and adorned... he remained where he had cleaved, in the Light to which no one may cling and yet live*" (approximate quotation from a manuscript of an unknown author analyzed by Moshe Idel in the above-mentioned lecture). Obviously, this portrays a radical change in the reference point. The mystic no longer contemplates the Divine Chariot or Throne but the radiance of God (*Tzvi ha-Shekhinah*), a light so strong that no one can bear it and whose vision is therefore fatal. The term "overwhelming" is crucial to this reading of the text. If in ancient literature the mystic's aim was to contemplate the divine aspects from a distance, now, for the first time, appears expounded in indubitable terms the desire to cleave to the Radiance of the Shekhinah by entering and becoming a part of the Divine realm, in order to enjoy the divine without interruption (Moshe Idel underlines the fact that since in the union process with the *Shekhinah* we are dealing with the female aspect of God, the language of desire ("sweet radiance", etc.) gives the experience erotic overtones [Idel Hasefer 2004, 8]).

In this context, the death of Ben Azzai, translated by his not coming back and being "hidden away in the place of his cleaving", like all the pious ones whose souls are separated by death from all concerns with the mundane world, turns from an accident into an achievement. Idel identifies here a threefold structure: via purgativa (separation from all concerns of the lowly world), via illuminativa and via unitiva and notes (in his lecture on *The Primordial Light: The Ecstatic's Quest*) the presence of the influence of a Neoplatonic Christian or even pagan mysticism. This reading of the text is backed up by another writing of an unknown author of the 13th century, which emphasizes its mystical nuance: Ben Azzai died because of the cleaving of his soul out of a great love, his soul didn't return because he reached a great attainment – complete union. His soul and the Light became one, the abyss between man and God disappeared through *unio mystica*. This interpretation is just another proof of the Neo-platonic influence on Jewish thought: many kabbalists used the metaphor of "death by kiss" to express the ultimate union with the divine through *devekut*, which resulted in a cataleptic state of the body (Idel, Polirom 2004, 76). Here it is interesting to note what one of Abraham Abulafia's anonymous disciples wrote in his book *Sefer Ner Elohim*: "He commanded us to keep silent and not speak too much about them [the Sefirot], and put an intellectual limit to our thoughts and balance our desire of love for God, so that our soul should not get separated from our body in its great desire, and seek His lips, which pour wisdom and love" (quoted by Idel, Polirom 2004, 208).

But the importance of the text is not reduced to these speculative aspects. The Talmudic

Pardes is also used as a model to which medieval mystics compare their own experiences, thus acquiring the values of a practical recipe. In another anonymous text written in Galilee around the year 1290, the author describes in a magnetic metaphor the manner in which the Divine Light attracts the Light of the Soul, "Which is weak in relation to the Divine Light". As Moshe Idel shows, the kabbalist has this vision as a result of letter combination techniques and seeks in the Pardes explanations to clarify his own experience. The death of Ben Azzai thus becomes an example worth following or even a desideratum. Here we find once again the concept of initiatory death regarded as the ultimate and supreme experience. The kabbalists tried to develop special techniques designed to help them reach the pre-fall state of the Primordial Man, enter again the radiance of the *Shekhinah* and even a certain erotic relationship with the Divine Presence. By letter combinations, unifications and reversals of letters they invoke the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the 10 *Sefirot* and they meditate together so that they may watch each other and see to what extent the encounter with the divine radiance makes them radiate, in their turn, the light (the image can be found in the Torah [Exodus 34:35] where it is written: "*And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone*"). This expectation of a corporeally observable radiance best evidences the difference between philosophy and mysticism: for Maimonides the experience of the Pardes was mental, with no outward sign, for the kabbalists it was corporeal and visible; for Maimonides God was an intellect, for the kabbalists God was radiance; for Maimonides Adam was a perfect intellect, for the kabbalists Adam was a creature of Light; for Maimonides Paradise and Pardes were intellectual (cerebral) states, for the kabbalists they were corporeal, sensuous, erotic, sexual and an object for practical striving; Maimonides had no clear method, the kabbalists developed an entire series of techniques. All these prove that far from being a tradition of mystical speculations, Kabbalah was actually one of the purest forms of mysticism, in which extreme types of experience were sought out and considered positive.

In its turn, the theosophical and theurgical Kabbalah proposes a different approach. If in ecstatic mysticism the mystical experience takes place in the mystic's inner self and does not affect the divine realm, in the theosophical and in the theurgical one the effect on the non-human realms is deep. In the theosophical paradigm, the Divine is not a simple entity, but a system of divine powers, and the mystic's entry into the Pardes influences the relationships between these divine powers. In the theurgical paradigm, this interaction involves a struggle with the demonic realm. Although seemingly different, the demonic and the divine share a common anthropomorphic structure. The *Sefirot* are prototypes for both realms. Therefore the mystic's intervention aims either at inducing harmony in the Divine world or at combating some aspect of the demonic world. From this perspective, too, the Pardes represents a danger zone, an aspect of these realms that is too strong for most mortals. Here, however, the accent falls on what happened to Elisha ben Abuyah, the heretical character who "peeked and chopped the plants". The explanation in this case would be that he was unable to understand appropriately either the divine or the demonic world.

This view is based on a kabbalistic thesis developed around the beginning of the 13th century, which claimed that the knowledge of the structure of the demonic is the most profound form of Kabbalah, the most recondite. The adepts of this line wrote long lists of evil angels and described the relationships between the demonic and the divine. This tradition, whose representative were, among others, the Kohen brothers (Isaac and Jacob) and later Moses of Leon, held that it was a religious duty to know, and pursue

knowledge of, the demonic world so that one would not be immersed in it. Only by knowing the evil and distinguishing it from the good can one keep it away and truly worship God. Not by chance the parable recorded the figure of Elisha ben Abuyah under the name of Aher (the other), as a direct reference to *Sitra Ahra* (the other side), the realm of evil. As relevant is the sexual implication of the experience's result for Elisha – the sin of being attracted to the demonic realm is translated, in Idel's opinion, by his sexual relation with its figures (the long line of such sins includes Adam's seduction by Lilith, Solomon's 1000 wives, seen as manifestations of the demonic powers used in the King's occult experiences, and Balaam's physical relation with his ass). Sexual attraction, then, becomes an explanation of the power of the Pardes, which the mystic must understand but not be seduced by, and immersed in. Here we should recall that the real (historical) Rabbi Akiva was convinced that the perfect union between husband and wife, when carried out in keeping with the Jewish ritual, was charged with theurgic significance (Idel, Hasefer 2004, 72) while the real (historical) Ben Azzai refused to get married in order to be able to dedicate himself exclusively to the study of the Torah, thus failing, even though he remained loyal (Idel, Hasefer 2004, 73).

Evidently, the sexual explanation of Elisha's mishap is not the only one possible. Based on his own research on certain quotations from the Talmud, Ioan Petru Culianu concludes, in his turn, that a possible interpretation of Elisha's adventure is related to the legend of Enoch. Turned into God's scribe and registrar under the name of Metatron, Enoch preserves a human quality that is not to be found with the other angels – having joints, he can sit. In this capacity, he may be seen by any mystic on his way to the Throne of Glory, in the sixth *heikhal*.

Thus, in Culianu's view, when Elisha raises to the heavens and sees Metatron sitting on a brilliant throne he mistakes him for God Himself and becomes a dietist saying "perhaps – may God forgive me! – there are two Powers" (Culianu 1998, 75). On the other hand, however, the same Culianu, concludes (in both Culianu 1998, 165, and Culianu 1994, 164) that all the three mystics to whom entry into Paradise was ill-fated (and it is strange to see that Culianu applies this explanation to all the THREE mystics, since Elisha is thus in the position to have actually been allowed TWO mistakes) actually came across the "water danger", which the *Hekhalot Rabbati* places in the sixth "palace" (as Culianu underlines [in Culianu 1996, 164], water and fire are the two constant great dangers awaiting the mystic on his way to the Throne of Glory). They mistake for water the "pure marble floors" of the heavenly *heikhal*, which look like waves, thus attracting upon themselves God's anger, for He does not tolerate lies and/or false judgment before Him (Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 14 b). Quoting Johann Maier, Culianu identifies here an allusion to the Temple in Jerusalem, whose walls built of colored marble looked like "sea waves" (Culianu 1998, 162). (The circle thus closed becomes vicious – the mystical image is taken over from the physical reality, which it confirms on the rebound). The attempt to descend into Hell to perform a rite has in most cases a negative end – the man who descends can no longer surface. In a typological approach, the case of Rabbi Akiva, who came out safely from this enterprise because he did not allow himself to be attracted (or distracted from the straight path), becomes a prototype that reflects Abraham's "descent into Egypt", (in mystical literature Egypt is often considered a prototype of the demonic realm), and safe return thereof, Noah's being saved from the flood and all the other (few) such happy-ending stories from Adam onwards. But this interpretation operates on the rebound as well. Thus, Samson's biblical adventure with Delilah is quoted as an entry into the Pardes (the two meet in a vineyard) and turned

into an example for the cases with dramatic ending. Moshe Idel quotes a treatise wrote in early 16th century by Rabbi Joseph Al-Ashqar of Tlemsen, Tzfanat Pa'aneah, in which Samson is described as a savior, who has to enter the realm of evil, symbolized by Delilah, in order to operate on the divine realm, represented by the Shekhinah (Idel, Hasefer 2004, 324).

On the other hand, for the kabbalists who regarded the Pardes from a theosophical perspective, the essential aim of the mystical experience was to induce or re-induce the harmony in the Divine spheres that had been disturbed by the Adamic sin. They had two metaphors for the Divine: that of the Tree, and (to simplify) the anthropomorphic one of the couple in which the first nine *Sefirot* were the male side and the tenth *Sefira* the female side. From this perspective the basic sin of Aher was to break the connection between the two aspects of the Divine (with the plants representing the last *Sefira*). Applying this symbolism backwards and considering the Pardes in the terms of Garden, it becomes obvious that in Paradise the transgression was not eating the apple, but separating it from the Tree. By separating the fruit from the Tree, Aher (like Adam) separated aspects of the Divine from each other thus disturbing the balance of the Divine realm in an action of the referred to as “the devastation of the plantations”. Moreover, by affecting the Divine realm in this manner one may be inclined to conclude that there are two different powers and come to believe in a Duality, instead of Unity (just like Culianu underlined). The challenge, then, of the mystical experience is to heal this rupture of the primordial times, to restore the lost unity of the divine powers by using the Jewish ritual seen as a theurgical technique, able to influence God. The mystical project is thus transposed into another key, being turned into an attempt to repair the rupture in the Divine (rather than between man and God) induced by human transgression. From this perspective Rabbi Akiva is seen as one who is able to restore the relationship between the last two *Sefirot* (the ninth and the tenth) through ritualistic acts. This, in Moshe Idel's view, projected a certain type of sacramental value onto Jewish ritual which was absent in other forms of Kabbalah or in Maimonides (Idel, *Pardes: From Sefirot to Demonology*, third lecture held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1991, available online at <http://www.kheper.net/topics/Kabbalah/Idel/lecture3.htm>). Unlike in other traditions, where the individual was the center, in these demonic or *Sefirotic* pursuits the focus is on repairing the cosmos by inducing a harmonious state in all levels.

Instead of conclusion

Moshe Idel's analysis of the Pardes story takes the reader through the most diverse types of kabbalistic thinking but also through Maimonidean philosophy. Showing that Maimonides' aim was not merely to propose philosophy but to use Aristotelian psychology and metaphysics to point to meditations on secret Judaism, and to introduce a new paradigm for understanding it, Idel underlines that the great thinker was able to begin a tradition of interpretation (which lasted from about the 14th to the 18th centuries) which took ritual as a means of introduction to philosophy, and which was at the same time very close to mysticism. This interpretation fortified the place of ritual, yet put it in its place, showing that it was not final. “It is needed, but in a way to be transcended – by the few, for whom a higher ideal is needed, that of the Pardes” (Idel, *Primordial Wisdom: The Philosopher's Quest*).

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