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Reasons for the Commandments (Kabbalah)

Leore Sachs-Shmueli

This article delves into Kabbalistic rationales for the commandments, tracing their theological constructs since their origin in the late twelfth century. It highlights the four aspects of these rationales: theurgic, magical, mystical, and eschatological, showcasing their unique approach to divine worship and the interpretation of Jewish Law and rituals. Moreover, it explores how Kabbalists not only emphasize the efficacy of adhering to the commandments but also underscore the negative consequences of transgression and sin, and the blemish they create above and below. Additionally, the entry discusses the complex relationship between philosophical rationalist reasoning for the commandments and the Kabbalists, and the imprint of Maimonides on the evolution of Kabbalistic engagement with reasoning for the commandments. Overall, it offers insights into the multifaceted and evolving nature of Kabbalistic rationales for the commandments.

Keywords: Law, Commandments, Kabbalah, Interpretation, Halakhah (Jewish Law), Maimonides, Eschatology, Piety

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1 Introduction

The obligation of Jewish individuals to fulfil the commandments, as prescribed by Jewish Law, finds its origin in the divine word revealed in the Bible. Although this obligation transcends rational explanation, the scriptures themselves provide a range of rationales for different commandments, encompassing ethical, social, educational, and historical dimensions (Heinemann 2008: 5–14). Rabbinical literature has extensively debated this issue, emphasizing the heteronomic obligation to carry out divine decrees. The performance of these commandments is seen as an emulation of God's own enactment of them – with the promise of favourable retribution in the afterlife – and as a means for refining human personality and behaviour (Urbach 1975: 315–399; Heinemann 2008: 15–33). The deliberation over the underlying reasons for the commandments (mitzvot) featured significantly in the Jewish philosophical texts of the Middle Ages, but the interpretation and approach taken by the Kabbalists were distinctive.

This systematic quest for understanding the underlying purpose of the commandments originated with Jewish philosophers who applied rational criteria to the laws of the Torah (Matt 1986). Both philosophers and mystics shared a common dissatisfaction with a superficial and unquestioning observance of the commandments. For both groups of thinkers, it was no longer sufficient to simply obey God’s word because it was commanded. They were motivated to uncover the underlying rationale or mystical secrets embedded within the divine law.

The Kabbalists’ mythic perspective also emerged as a refined response to medieval Jewish theology, driven by challenges from Islamic philosophy and later Christian scholasticism (Faierstein 1982: 45–46). Central to Jewish philosophers’ exploration was the process of refining the concept of God, removing anthropomorphic and mythic elements present in Jewish literature (Faierstein 1982: 45–46). The removal of anthropomorphism and mythic imagery left them with a concept of God that was intellectually rigorous but lacked the dynamism and personal connection that one might associate with a God of prayer. Kabbalistic development of rationales for the commandment reflects a rigorous attempt to engage with the theological challenges posed by Jewish philosophers and their religious endeavour to enhance a dynamic understanding of the divine and human beings as constituting a reciprocal relationship.

The central foundation of Kabbalistic rationales for the commandments lies in the belief that the commandments reflect laws governing the interaction between the lower and higher worlds, and that human actions can influence the Divine itself (Tishby and Lachower 1989: 1155–1171; Mopsik 1993). This perspective is referred to in Kabbalah research, and in this entry, as the ‘theurgical stance’ (Idel 1988: 112–199). Kabbalists dealt with the reasons for the commandments in their writings in various forms, including in their

commentaries to the Bible, but the highlight of their engagement with the rationales for the commandments was expressed in a particular literature: Kabbalistic literature of the rationales for the commandments. This literary genre, which blossomed in Castile in the thirteenth century, continued to influence as a literary genre until the modern era, in which Kabbalistic literature on the rationales for the commandments continued to be written.

2 Historical background of the development of the genre

Kabbalistic literature of the rationales for the commandments began with a relatively condensed theurgical perspective in the book Bahir (Provence, twelfth century; Meier 1974: 10–16) and was systematically solidified in Rabbi Ezra of Gerona's commentary on the Song of Songs, which dedicated a whole section to reasoning for the commandments. Inspired by this, the Castilian Kabbalist Rabbi Moses de Leon composed the *Book of the Pomegranate* (*Sefer ha-Rimon*) in 1287, marking another step in the expansion and deepening of the genre of rationales for the commandments. Simultaneously, several anonymously-authored works can be identified, such as the zoharic treatise 'the *Piqudin*' (commandments in Aramaic; Gottlieb 1976: 215–230), and slightly later the *Book of Rationales of the Commandments* by Joseph of Hamadan, the *Raya Meheimna* (Faithful Shephard), the book of the *Qanah*, R. Menahem Recanati's *Rationale of the Commandments*, and R. Joseph Hamadan's *Rationale of the Commandments*. Later generations continued to compose works belonging to this genre. Important examples are: *Metzudat David* by R. David ben Zimra of sixteenth-century Egypt, one of the longest Kabbalistic work on the commandments; somewhat later, Haim Vital composed a work of rationales for the commandments fashioned in a Lurianic key: *Shaar Hamizvot*. Hassidic masters of the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe also authored works on the commandments, such as *Derekh Pikudekha* by R. Zvi Elimelekh Shapira, and *Derekh Mitzvotekha* by R. Menahem Mendel (Zemah Zedek) of Habad (Sachs-Shmueli and Goldschmidt 2024).

Various factors can be described as encouraging the flourishing of the genre of rationales for the commandments in the thirteenth century (Idel 1988: xiii–xv, 28–29, 157–191). Such rationales include: cultural and religious challenges of Jews living as a minority community in a changing historical reality (the wars and political struggles in Spain); the threat of destruction and Christian temptation (Lachter 2008; 2014: 104–113); and an inter-literary response to rationalists' reasonings for the commandments, forwarded by prominent figures such as Maimonides.

The ongoing endeavours of Jewish thinkers to create new works of this nature underscore the enduring significance of this engagement in Jewish life and the commitment to Jewish Law. This commitment necessitates a recurrent process of adapting language and

explanations for each new generation. Given that Jewish life entails a multitude of daily obligations, including repeated rituals and the avoidance of various prohibited actions, these rationales play a crucial role in bolstering personal motivations and devotion in the performance of these duties.

3 Key features in Kabbalistic rationales for the commandments

3.1 Commandments as theurgic actions causing positive effect in the divine world

Emerging in the thirteenth century and onwards, the Kabbalistic interpretation of the commandments distinguishes itself from earlier Jewish traditions with its unique perspective that bestows upon humans significant power to shape and influence the divine (Matt 1986; Brody 1993). Indeed, many scholars have highlighted the radical change that occurred during the thirteenth century when Kabbalists developed systematic literary treatments of the commandments, attributing them the theurgic power to repair higher spheres and fulfil 'the Divine need' (*tzorekh gavoah*). In this context, Gershom Scholem highlighted the contrast between the rationalization of the commandments in the Bible and the Talmud, which connects them to the cycle of nature, and in exile, once this connection had been severed (Scholem 1965: 118–123). Scholem viewed myth and mysticism as internal forces that revitalized rituals. He linked the magical approach to the commandments as tools creating blessings to all worlds with the mythical perception of the worlds, according to which everything is interconnected and exists within a web of reciprocal relations, and within which man can strengthen the system of the world and the cosmos. This reciprocal influence is based on Scholem's perceptions of the Kabbalistic language as a symbolic system, tying between the upper and lower worlds (Scholem 2007). According to Scholem, Kabbalistic views of ritual enable humanity to assume an active role and to rouse the divine, or in other words to participate in the arena of divine events. This is understood as theurgic power, and in this framework the commandments are directed towards the divine and its repair. Such a perception of ritual was further developed by other scholars of Kabbalah, while highlighting distinctions between various Kabbalists and examining a variety of angles and dimensions.

Castilian Kabbalah literature – including notable works like the Zohar, writings of Moses de Leon, Ibn Faro's *Sefer ha-Yihud* (*The Book of Unification*), and Rabbi Joseph of Hamadan's *Book of Rationales for the Commandments' Reasons* – portray the Deity as an organic structure (Tishby and Lachower 1989: 1155–1167). Kabbalists developed a perception of God as primordial man and the commandments as a system of human limbs parallel to the *sefirot*-limbs of the chariot, as one zoharic phrase puts it: 'A man's limbs allude to those above […] every limb strengthens [supports, empowers] a limb' (Zohar

I:170b). In other words, the human body supports and sustains the divine body through the performance of the commandments (Sachs-Shmueli 2024). This interpretation views the commandments as the sustainers of unity, strength, and the flow of divine energy throughout the ten sefirot (emanations). The 613 commandments are seen not merely as analogues to the 613 human limbs and sinews, as suggested by ancient sages, but as embodiments of 613 divine limbs and sinews (Felix 2005: 37–144; Idel 2009; Morlok 2011: 251–275). Each commandment (mitzvah) interacts with this divine structure, reinforcing and invigorating it, just as the human limbs are maintained through actions. Conversely, transgressions result in the weakening and blemishing of the divine structure. As stated succinctly in *Sefer ha-yihud* of the late thirteenth century:

> the lower man [the human being] will add strength, attraction, abundance, and blessing, like the Supernal Man [the Divine], for everything follows after him. But if, God forbid, one of his limbs becomes defiled or tarnishes his form, then the same blemish ascends on the ascending path to the House of God, and it also impairs the Upper Form. Now, understand that when the lower man is flawed in one of his limbs, that limb is blemished from below, and it is as if he cuts that limb above. (*Sefer ha-Yichud*, 2)

The theological implication of such an interpretation underscores a unique symbiotic relationship, wherein adherence to the commandments directly influences the Divine Being. Commandments, in this context, serve both as a means to imitate God and to shape the divine realm (Matt 1986: 381).

Additionally, the commandments are conceptualized within a mythological framework, centred around the ideal of the *hieros gamos*, representing the intensification of the (sexual) union between the male deity (*Kudsha brich hu*) and his bride, the female deity (*Shekhinah*) (Mopsik 2005: 128–149; Idel 2005b: 1–2, 59–77, 214–217; Wolfson 2007: 145–184). This perception lies in the Kabbalistic formula, which became widespread and popular in many prayer books, said before the performance of many commandments: ‘For the sake of the union of the Holy Blessed Be He in His Counterpart, Shekhinah’ (Abrams 2004: 29–44). Observance of commandments fosters their unity, while transgressions drive them apart, potentially leading to a ‘divorce’ as Joseph of Hamadan in his book of rationales of the commandments phrases it: ‘it is as if he creates a divorce between the Bride and Groom’ (*Book of Rationales of Negative Commandments*, commandment 46). Furthermore, according to Hamadan, transgressions create the unification of the male deity with a demonic female entity, his concubine, and the female deity with a demonic male entity, the serpent: ‘he causes the Supreme Circumcision [*Berit*, male organ] to bestow upon the Upper Concubine, and he unites between the Groom and the Concubine’ (commandment 3), or ‘he impregnates the Concubine’ (commandment 70). As well as the Kabbalistic perception of these rules as of higher necessity and sustainers of the world, they also operate as separators of good from evil (Wolfson 1988). Within the

dualistic view which acknowledges evil as a real demonic entity, the commandments hold an ethical purpose contained in the theurgical system – fighting the evil powers.

While Gershom Scholem saw the theurgic understanding of the commandments as a mythic-Gnostic outbreak, Moshe Idel sought to demonstrate the continuity of Kabbalah with Midrashic-Rabbinic thought in the theurgic understanding of the commandments and its integration with the theosophical theory of the sefirot, which was absent from the Rabbinic legend (Idel 1988: 30, 47–52, 172–182). Nevertheless, he emphasized that while the sages saw God mainly as a persona who chooses to perform commandments, in Kabbalah God manifests Himself through the commandments (Idel 2005a: 217–219). Jonathan Garb strengthened these claims by identifying links between models of power in Kabbalistic literature and those in Rabbinic texts (Garb 2004a: 28–46). However, unlike Rabbinic literature, the Kabbalists not only fundamentally asserted that commandments strengthen or 'weaken' the power of God, they also offered a variety of images and 'models' to explain the activation of human power through commandments (Garb 2004b). These images include metaphors of abundant pipes, isomorphic influence (strengthening or weakening of the upper divine limbs), erotic images of coupling between feminine and masculine aspects in divinity, and more.

3.2 Commandments as 'magical' tools drawing divine affluence to the cosmos

Another central category for understanding the reasons for the commandments is magic, in the sense that the commandments operate as tools for protecting and bestowing blessings on the practitioners. Within this framework, magic is not an esoteric preoccupation of limited circles with amulets or a-nomian practices. Rather, magic defines the human space from the creation of harmony in the divine world – in drawing abundance to the world and to the person. The commandments draw 'magical' abundance and promise physical success, as well as protecting the person and the entire cosmos from evil forces, and even serve as a weapon against demonic forces, an appeasement of the Demonic Other (*Sitra Achra*; Tishby and Lachower 1989: 890–895). While such ideas have root in Rabbinic literature, Kabbalists further developed them into fully-fledged mechanisms. For example, the magical function of the mezuzah as an amulet was described by Joseph Gikatilla:

> [W]hen a man goes out the door of his house, those camps of sanctity and purity that are attached to these two passages – namely, Shema and Vehaya Im Shamoa – they all go with the man who has a mezuzah in his doorway, and when he goes out the door of his house, they protect him from the harmful spirits and from all the external forces of impurity until he returns home. The mezuzah therefore protects a person when he enters his home, when he goes out. (Yisraeli 2015: 150)

3.3 Commandments as a ‘mystical’ medium for cleaving with the divine and the process of internalization

Beyond the implications of commandments centred on God (theurgy-centred), the commandments have ramifications on humans. Alongside the establishment of theurgical aims as the central explanation for Kabbalistic ritual, several researchers have also highlighted the mystical aspects of the unification or adhesion of the human soul with God, which is at the heart of the reasons for the commandments. The commandments facilitate the connection between the soul and its origin, whereas sins create a disruption in this connection.

Various researchers have emphasized the ultimate aim of the commandments in achieving the cleaving of the soul with God and its relationship to *unio-mystica* (Idel 1988: 59–73; Afterman 2016). Different commandments were understood as ritual ceremonies that serve as ‘sacramental’ tools, symbolizing and embodying the various sefirot in the individual, in their limbs, in their location, and in their possessions (Tishby and Lachower 1989: 1164–1165). Moreover, the commandments enable the inspiration of the divine presence in the limbs of humans and the presence of God in the limbs of humans. This function, proposed by Ron Margolin, is part of the ‘internalization’ process in religious life, in which religious concepts that were previously ‘externalized’ and understood as cosmic or divine processes in a mythical construction are ‘internalized’ and identified as processes within the human body and soul (Margolin 2021). Through this concept, he explained the interpretations found in the Zohar and the Tikkunei Zohar of the concept of the repair of the limbs of God by the ritual, as a process of the presence of God in the human in the aspect of ‘human sanctuary’.

The performance of prayer, a ritualized practice within Jewish Halakhic obligations, was conceived as a powerful mystical vehicle creating a union between the human soul and thought with its supernal source, alongside its magical and theurgical function. As delineated, for example, by the fifteenth century Kabbalist, Meir Ibn Gabbay:

> It is known to those with true wisdom that a person's thought originates from the source of his soul, which comes from there. It has the power to ascend and reach its source, and when it reaches the source, it cleaves to the supernal light drawn from it, and they become one. When thought returns from above to below, everything becomes like a straight line. The supernal light then descends below through the power of the drawn thought, and it is found that the Divine Presence is below. The bright light then spreads in that place where the person's thought is seated, and just as the early pious ones, when they cleaved their thought to the upper realms, drew the upper light below, and as a result, things multiplied and were blessed […] Know that a proper thought has the power to arouse the upper things and to open the place for their adhesion, provided that one does not separate his sins between himself and his God. As for the rest of the matter, there is no need for an explanation for those who understand. (*Tola’at Yaakov*, sod Qedusha, fol. 17d–18a)

In Ibn Gabbai's commentary a merging of the two primary currents is visible: the first, the contemplative and mystical orientation, aspiring towards *devequt* or communion with God, and perhaps even a mystical union (*unio mystica*); and the second, the theurgical path, focusing on perfecting and unifying the divine sefirot, with the eventual goal of causing emanations to flow down into the lower realms, especially within the human sphere. From a theological perspective, the fusion of these two rationales serves to strengthen the dedication to ritual practice while also empowering the individual in their connection with the divine. Firstly, the mystical dimension of this combination establishes a union with the divine, elevating and even divinizing the human being. Secondly, it fosters a sense of empowerment and responsibility in the human's relationship with the deity, as they possess the ability to both empower and rectify through positive commandments and, conversely, to harm and transgress through sinful actions.

3.4 Eschatological purposes – commandments as vehicles for the afterlife

Apart from the theurgical and mystical purpose of the commandments, the research literature has addressed eschatological aspects in the fulfilment of the commandments: they grant the person fulfilling them eternal personal benefit – they build the limbs of his eternal body, known as 'the garment of the soul' or 'the cloak of the Rabbis', a kind of astral body through which the person continues to exist after their death in the Garden of Eden. As the Zohar claims:

> Happy is the share of one who attains this garment of which we have spoken, in which the righteous are clothed in the Garden of Eden! They are fashioned out of good deeds performed by a person in this world through the commandments of Torah, by which the soul abides in the Garden of Eden and is clothed in these glorious garments. (Zohar II: 210a–210b; translation *Zohar: Pritzker Edition* 6: 198)

The zohar establishes the relationship between the commandemnts and the soul's garment, an idea reiterated by several kabbalistic texts from the thirteenth century onwards. Furthermore, their place and rank in paradise or hell is a derivative of their virtues in life (Bar-Asher 2019: 156–172), and a central component of this is the fulfilment of the commandments.

In addition, according to Kabbalists from the late thirteenth century onwards, the full performance of the commandments ensures that a person is released from reincarnation, while violating them may result in reincarnation of sinners in degraded living forms, even in animal bodies (Sachs-Shmueli 2023). This theory is encapsulated in Hayim Vital's *Shaar ha-Gilgulim* (sixteenth century), one of the most comprehensive and influential

Kabbalistic works developing a systematic theory of reincarnation and its relationship to the performance of the totality of the commandments:

> And know that a person needs to fulfil all 613 commandments. If one is lacking, their soul is still incomplete, just as the number of mitzvot that are lacking from them. The commandments that a person can readily fulfil, like tzitzit and tefillin, if they have not observed them, they must necessarily go through many cycles of reincarnation until they complete them all. (*Shaar ha-Gilgulim*; Vital 1988: 38)

These Kabbalistic conceptualizations extend the Rabbinical concepts of deferring retribution and redirecting the focus away from immediate material benefits associated with the commandments, in contrast to the biblical narrative that promises to practitioners worldly benefits like land, rain, and long life. Instead, Kabbalah underscores the importance of performing the commandments to secure an eternal afterlife for the soul. Furthermore, these ideas lead to a reinterpretation of the human soul and its relationship with the body. In this view, the material bodily limb that engages in the commandments serves as a tool for preparing and generating a spiritual limb necessary for eternal existence in paradise.

4 The limit of the conceptual framework of ritual and the category of prohibitions for understanding the rationales for negative commandments

Scholars primarily dealt with the reasons for the commandments as encouraging the performance of the ritual, and with the interpretations given by Kabbalists in order to motivate the fulfilment of practical practice. The focus on the ritual aspect is expressed in the researchers' choice to focus and analyse ceremonial commandments, which the individual must perform at set times such as Sabbath, tefillin, tzitzit, priestly blessing; or commandments with a pronounced physical-performance aspect such as the setting of a mezuzah, the commandment of marital intimacy, and many other positive performance commandments.

Despite the substantial advantage inherent in the theoretical framework of the ritual, Sachs-Shmueli posited that the Kabbalistic interpretations of commandments should be examined not only as a system explaining positive actions, but also as deterrents from forbidden actions (Sachs-Shmueli 2018). In essence, the system of Kabbalistic reasoning of Jewish Law constitutes a deliberate attempt by Kabbalists to describe in writing those secret and invisible processes that they believe to occur as a result of adherence to Jewish Law, which includes but is not limited to ritual aspects. Moreover, Kabbalistic rituals include prescribed voluntary actions which do not count as commandments and are not considered laws. Therefore, the terms 'ritual' and 'commandments' overlap but are not

identical. Additionally, unlike Halakhic dictates, the interpretations of commandments engage not only in execution but also in providing meaning to the execution. The system of the interpretations of commandments is not an 'essence' disconnected from their execution and does not only consist of phenomenological aspects of the religious experience shaped by the actions. Instead, it involves a complex system of explanations as to how adherence to Halakhic Law directly influences divinity, nature, reward, and the human soul.

Discerning and categorically distinguishing between positive and negative commandments is not only a sociological tool employed by scholars of religion, but rather can be traced back to ancient Jewish sources. Rabbinical writings categorically distinguish between the negative and the positive commandments, as coined in *Bavli Makkot* 23b:

> Rabbi Simlai taught: There were 613 mitzvot stated to Moses in the Torah, consisting of 365 prohibitions corresponding to the number of days in the solar year, and 248 positive mitzvot corresponding to the number of a person's limbs. (Shemesh 2003)

In the Middle Ages, beginning with Maimonides' *Book of the Commandments*, (*Sefer ha-Mitzvot*), this distinction was reinforced by the literary structure employed in codifications of Jewish Law: they divide the commandments into two groups – 'positive' and 'negative' (Herman 2016: 1–32).

The category of 'prohibitions' often serves as a facet of the ritual, when instructions on how not to perform a certain ritual are given. However, there are other types of prohibitions, falling under the 'sit and do not act' category, which do not serve as components of a ritualistic complex, but rather as objects or actions strictly forbidden to human beings. In these cases, it is the very abstention, restraint, and overcoming of temptation that create a positive theurgical effect.

The system of Kabbalistic reasoning of the negative commandments is complex and deals with boundaries, transgressions, forbidden actions, and justification for their prevention, tying the law and actions in human experience to a dynamic relationship between higher and lower realms. The reasoning for negative commandments demonstrates that justification for prohibition emphasizes the aggregate damage of negative actions, as opposed to the system of justification of positive commandments that emphasizes the positive benefits of commandment execution. Among the Castilian Kabbalists, the damages caused by transgressions of prohibitions are primarily theurgical and anthropocentric, focusing on the damage and hurt inflicted on divinity automatically as a result of the sin. These damages lead to cosmic damages, which in turn result in human punishment and harm according to the laws of reward, inflicted upon the sinner. These

damages are outlined in various Kabbalistic texts using a range of demonological images, post-mortem punishments depicted in an illustrative and concrete manner.

The evil of transgressing a prohibition and committing a sin is tied to a system of impure forces lying in wait for the individual, in the temptation of the sin, and in the punishment following it. The damage inflicted on divinity includes a tangible and real harm to the superior divine entity, a weakening of the masculine potency, a schism and separation in the holy union between the superior Bride and Groom, and the creation of a foul and lower coupling that strengthens the rule of impurity and evil in this world. The damage inflicted on a person as a result of this is created according to the principles of 'measure for measure', 'kind for kind', and 'the reward for sin is sin'. The system of reward includes damage to the person's soul's organs, the garment of the soul, dragging the punishing angels to harm him after his death, preventing his attachment to God in the afterlife, and – when dealing with severe sins – inflicting upon the person the punishment of reincarnation, which constitutes one of the severest threats in this text. Through graphic depictions of the damage to God and the concrete images of punishment, Kabbalists created a system of fear intended to deter individuals from transgressing prohibitions.

5 The relationship between Kabbalists and Maimonidean rationales for the commandments

Exploring the reasons for the commandments can be traced back to the biblical texts, the early sages, and various medieval scholars such as Saadia Gaon, Rabbi Judah Halevi, and Ibn Ezra (Heinemann 2008). However, it was Maimonides who left a profound mark in this field. His engagement with the rationale of the commandments, both in *Guide for the Perplexed* and in the organization and enumeration of commandments in *The Book of Commandments* (Katz 1979), played a pivotal role in shaping the genre. Maimonides left a lasting imprint on this area of study, either through the continuation of his interpretations or opposition to his views.

Generally speaking, a common thread in philosophical interpretations of commandments was the assertion that these actions do not have a cosmic impact; they do not result in any supernatural effects stemming from the performance of these deeds (Faierstein 1982: 47). Building upon this fundamental idea, which establishes an unbridgeable gap between the realms of humans and the divine, Jewish philosophers each put forth their own systems to explain the rationale behind commandments. In contrast to the philosophers, the Kabbalists approached the concept of mitzvot within a mythic framework. They viewed mitzvot as the means through which the divine and human realms are interconnected. According to the Kabbalistic mythos, the performance of mitzvot is seamlessly integrated into their understanding of the divine realm. They conceived that through the performance

of mitzvot humans have a tangible impact on the divine realm, specifically the sefirotic world.

There has been a scholarly debate concerning Maimonides' contribution to the historical development of Kabbalah (Mottolese 2007: 247–282). Heinrich Gertz saw Kabbalah as a counter-response to Maimonidean rationalism. Conversely, Gershom Scholem aimed to minimize Maimonides' influence during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by emphasizing Kabbalah's ancient Gnostic and Neoplatonic roots (Idel 1990: 31–33; Tirosh-Samuelson 2003). Isaiah Tishby suggested that the Kabbalistic interpretations of commandments are distinctly different from the rationalist approach of Maimonides and his followers (Tishby and Lachower 1989: 1155–1171). Morris Fairestein explained the Kabbalistic reasons for the commandments as opposed to rationalist philosophy. Jewish Philosophers presented the reasons for the commandments as serving various human and social interests, but not as bringing about cosmic changes. In the eyes of the Kabbalists, the commandments were perceived as a 'high necessity' of a deity perceived as Adam Kadmon ('Primordial Man'; Faierstein 1982). Moshe Idel synthesized these views and suggested viewing the Kabbalistic literature in general, and the literature on the reasons for the commandments in particular, as a confrontation of thirteenth-century Kabbalists with the challenge of Maimonidean rationalism through the development of older traditions (Idel 1990: 46–50). That is, according to his approach, the theurgic concepts found in Kabbalistic literature from the time of the Bahir onward are not the result of their invention, but should be seen as a polemical response to the authority of the Great Eagle (Maimonides).

Continuing the understanding of Kabbalah as a mythical trend and as a counter-movement to the rationalist philosophy that purified God from all his anthropomorphic descriptions, as formulated by Scholem.

In contrast, Elliot Wolfson argued that not only did ecstatic Kabbalah draw and base itself on Maimonidean theories in a positive way, but also in the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah it is possible to identify a variety of direct influences that attest to a positive reception of Maimonides' teachings (Wolfson 2004; Fishbane 2002). Jonathan Dauber continued in this direction and emphasized the continuity of the early Kabbalists with the philosophers who preceded them, expressed in a shared 'worldview' (Dauber 2012). The term 'worldview', borrowed from Clifford Geertz, represents more than just a system of ideas, and is a shared perception of the order of things, of reality, of nature, the self, and society, and includes aspects of ethics and aesthetics (Geertz 1973). According to Dauber, on the one hand the Kabbalists share the ethos of 'knowing God', shaped by the philosophers, as an end achieved from a deliberate, purposeful, and shaping intellectual effort of religious life (as expressed in the commandment to know God). On the other hand, even within Kabbalah it is necessary to distinguish between different schools, and

the differences between them are no less than the differences between the Kabbalists and the philosophers.

According to both sides of the debate, Maimonides should be seen as a stimulus and a central factor in the creative development of the Kabbalistic genre of reasoning for commandments' literature in the thirteenth century. The primary (explicit) purpose of the commandments and prohibitions in Maimonides' teachings is the purification of the body and the rectification of the soul, as a necessary preparation for the ultimate goal of man, which is the attainment of the intelligibles, the ultimate goal of which (the esoteric) is anthropocentric (Rynhold 2005: 6–48). This principle of body purification is also a dominant and shared principle among the Kabbalists (Wolfson 2006: 190–191), upon which they added another dimension, which is the theurgical influence of the commandments and their purpose as a 'high necessity' and not just for the sake of man's rectification. While Kabbalistic literature about the reasons for the commandments relied on Maimonides, it also constituted a response to the anti-nomistic core inherent in the perception of the commandments expressed as a means of self-purification, by attributing to the commandment's actions inherent in their essence and constituting the perfection of the entire existence (Wolfson 2006: 186–192).

A considerable body of scholarly work has been dedicated to examining the importance of rituals from the perspective of Kabbalists. These studies suggest a key distinction between the reasons for commandments in Kabbalah and those in Jewish philosophy, by focusing on a 'higher necessity' – the notion that the rectification of the upper world is achieved through theurgical action, rather than seeking rational reasons that prioritize societal benefit and personal improvement, or viewing the commandments as a heteronomous system that does not require justification other than God's will (Heinemann 2008: 47–175).

Kabbalists including Todros Abulafia, Moses de Leon, Isaac of Acre, Joseph Ashkenazi, and Jacob ben Sheshet have expressed reservations towards a rationalistic approach in understanding the rationale behind the commandments, such as in the *Guide for the Perplexed* and its derivatives (Matt 1986: 372–376). They contend that such an approach risks diminishing the sanctity of the commandments and inadvertently places Hellenistic philosophies in a position of preferential consideration. According to their view, utilitarian reasons that prioritize human health and society, or the elimination of mistaken beliefs, risk the exclusive obedience to the commandments, opening the door to antinomian tendencies, i.e. achieving their purposes without actual and practical performance.

Despite the differences between a rationalistic approach to the reasons for the commandments and the Kabbalists, there is a strong common ground in their desire to find a meaningful internal rationale for the commandment system. Kabbalists, like philosophers, as Daniel Matt emphasized, seek an internal motivation for the fulfilment

of the commandments and criticize the non-reflective observance of the commandments (Matt 1986: 367). Yet most Kabbalists did not distinguish between *mishpatim* (rulings which their reasons are apparent to human rationality), *hukim* (those commandments with no apparent reasoning), or between 'intellectual' and 'auditory' commandments, i.e. those with an intuitive social rationale (like murder, theft, robbery, and rape) and those that humans would not legislate without divine commandment (like the red heifer and more). They assigned theurgical, magical, mystical, and eschatological meanings to all of them, even to the details of the commandments for which Maimonides argued that there is no point in seeking explanations.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, Kabbalistic reasoning for the commandments, both positive and prohibitive, reveals a complex framework. This framework is not limited to the regulation of positive actions but also extends to the deterrence from prohibited deeds. The Kabbalists' writings create a layered system of justifications, connecting human compliance with the Halakhic Law to a dynamic interrelation between the divine, the natural world, retribution, and the human soul. The effects of observing the commandments include theurgical, mystical, eschatological, and magical aspects, benefiting both the practitioner and the divinity itself. This compliance or noncompliance manifests in both spiritual and tangible consequences in different realms, affecting not only the human being but the divine entity as well. The Castilian Kabbalists, in particular, emphasize the metaphysical damage caused by transgressing prohibitive commandments, effectively illustrating the destructive potential of negative actions. Such vivid depictions of the aftermath of transgression and sin serve as potent deterrents, aimed at encouraging adherence to the prohibitions. This concept of damage continued to shape the modern theological landscape, through its adoption and adaptation by modern Kabbalists and Hasidic thinkers. Therefore, the understanding and interpretation of commandment rationales in Kabbalistic thought constitute an integral part of not just religious practice but also the broader discourse on ethics, spirituality, and the interconnectedness of the divine and human actions.

Attributions

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