CHAPTER ONE

METEMPSYCHOSIS, PHILOSOPHY AND KABBALAH:
THE DEBATE IN CANDIA

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

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

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¹ Moshe ha-Cohen Ashkenazi in his letter to Mestre and Jerusalem of 1467, Vatican ms. 254, fol. 84b.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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5 For more on the activities of the Balbo family in Candia, see Zvi Malachi, “From the Writings of the Balbo Family of Candia.”
7 Gottlieb, p. 372; Ravitzky, p. 120.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.