Professor Idel, you were born in Romania in 1947 and settled in Israel in 1963. I would like to begin this interview by exploring your intellectual biography. What was it like to grow up as a Jew in Communist Romania during the postwar years? How did you experience the early years in Israel as a “newcomer” (oleh hadash)? How did you find your way to the study of Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism?

I was born into a traditional Jewish family and I grew up in a small shtetl where some Jews survived the war. Like other boys in traditional Jewish families, I started my schooling at the age of three in the traditional heder. Romania was now under the Communist government and one could not remain in a Jewish school for long. I had to enroll in a secular grammar school when I was about six. This meant a very sharp move from a Yiddish-speaking environment of Jews only to Romanian-speaking secular school with non-Jews, who were totally different people from the Jews I knew as a young child. The shift entailed broadening my linguistic and cultural horizons and exposing me to Communist ideology and propaganda. So, in a Communist society, I was like everyone else: I believed in all the mythology of the Communists, including the cult of Stalin. I remember even now the moment I learned that Stalin died; I experienced it as a catastrophe. But after a while, it changed because I began to be skeptical and could no longer plug into the propaganda. So, I had a period, let’s say, between roughly speaking, the age of twelve to the age of sixteen when I left Romania, during which I was reading a lot but not exactly what I was supposed to read, including material of religion which was not, shall we say, the cup of tea of the Communists. I started to read philosophy and also got interested in Hinduism, which was a big discovery for me. Until the age of fifteen I didn’t know anything about it. Externally, at least, I continued to be a part of the high school, because it was impossible not to be there, but I experienced the school like a prison. I attempted to establish my intellectual independence by reading, and it was up to me to decide what I would like to read and whether or not to read what
I was supposed to. How to seem to be reading official literature while reading something else actually was a big intellectual effort because I had to escape the watchful eyes of the authorities.

Growing up I knew that my family wanted all the time to come to Israel. When I say “all the time” I really mean it; from the moment I was born my parents and the rest of the family wanted to leave Romania, but the Communist comrades didn’t allow us. Half of the family did manage to leave in 1949–1950, but the other half had to wait for another fourteen years or so before it could depart. So, growing up meant a life in suspense, I think. We knew that we were going to leave, but the problem is, when? Obviously such a stance is not conducive to integration from many points of view. Not only because I was thinking about this Israel, even though I had no idea what was there, and I did not know the Zionistic story at all. Yet, as a young person I knew that part of the family was in Israel and that I would like to be with the family. Needless to say, that created a certain tension with the Romanian environment. Even more so because everyone in school knew that we wanted to leave, which was taken as an insult by the Communists. As a result, I could not receive various prizes or awards in school, simply because it was known that my family wanted to leave Romania. This was not a secret conspiracy against Jews, but simply the rule of the game. I did not experience a crisis as a result of this awareness, but there was a certain form of alienation. In postwar Romania, even though we were Jews, we were very much part of the culture. We had to study Russian and I knew Russian well enough, despite the fact I didn’t want to know it at all. The pressure to conform was great. During my adolescent years, when I started to read material that was not part of the curriculum while attempting to graduate like everyone else, I experienced a kind of alienation from the surrounding culture. Remember that we were traditional Jews, in fact, Orthodox Jews, even though Orthodoxy in Romania at that time was something totally different from Orthodoxy in Israel today. I must confess, though, that while I was a traditional Jew, personally, I was not religious; I didn’t believe in almost anything, you know.

Even as a child?

As a child I assumed that I was like everyone else, but when I became a teenager, it was over. I did not espouse the traditional beliefs of Judaism and I assume that the Communist propaganda had an influence on me, even if I did not believe the propaganda either.