CHAPTER 1

Introduction: That Which is Before
[And That Which is After]

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Time and eternity have long stood as fundamental elements of Jewish mystical discourse. This seems only natural, given the preoccupation with questions as to how the finite can come to understand the infinite, or how corporeal duration can possibly relate to incorporeal perpetuity. For these reasons, time, as related to space, is one of the fundamental pillars of Jewish mystical thought. Time stands alongside erotic ecstasy, notions of cosmogony, and experiential vision as a sanctioned pillar of traditional Jewish esoteric mysticism, and it may be of an even deeper esoteric level than the other pillars. Nevertheless, it is not as well studied by scholars of Jewish mysticism. This volume seeks to even the balance by offering a multitude of important voices in contemporary scholarship, including leading historians and phenomenologists of Jewish mysticism and kabbalah, philosophers, and comparativists, who all lend a voice here to a better understanding of the role that time has played in the Jewish mystical project. But before we enter into the heart of time, it is important to take time to provide a small map of traditional Jewish esoteric mysticism itself, in order to understand where the concept of time falls within the overall continuum.

In a famous passage that has long served as an emblem for forms of esoteric mysticism in rabbinic Judaism and its heirs, a tractate of the Mishnah known as Hagigah states:

One cannot expound upon the concept of forbidden sexual relations before three people, or upon the work of creation before two, or upon the chariot before one alone, unless he is wise and understands by way of his own knowledge.¹

Scholars have noted that this Mishnah, perhaps more than any other source, accorded rabbinic authority to the notion that secret elements exist within

¹ Mishnah Hagigah 2:3.
the very heart of the Jewish tradition.\textsuperscript{2} Such a notion served as a veritable Pandora’s Box, with far-ranging implications for the overall development of Jewish thought. Within the realm of kabbalah, for example, this tripartite passage came to represent ideas of divine Eros, cosmogony, and the experiential realm of visions and ascent, respectively, while philosophers sometimes related the emblems to gendered hylomorphism, physics, and metaphysics, respectively. According to esoteric thinkers of various stripes, if these secret elements legitimately exist but are restricted, either by authority or by their ontically secretive nature,\textsuperscript{3} then they must by nature be special. In such a case, they are worthy of exploration by those who are worthy. In this manner, explicitly stated limitations bred full branches of esoteric expositions, which formed the foundations of much kabbalistic and philosophical thought.

Yet the passage from tractate \textit{Hagigah} does not stop with the three secret elements outlined above, and there is an element that may be even more secretly guarded than all three. This element is the spatio-temporal dimension of existence, which is related to the glory of God. Indeed, the above passage from tractate \textit{Hagigah} continues:

\begin{quote}
Anyone who looks upon four things would be better off if he had not come into the world: that which is above, that which is below, that which is before, and that which is after. And anyone who does not consider the glory of his maker would be better off if he had not come into the world.\textsuperscript{4}
\end{quote}

With this passage, dimensionality and the glory of God are added to the picture of Jewish esotericism. Here I will not consider the glory of God, not out of


\textsuperscript{3} For the idea of esotericism as authoritative restriction, see: Gershom Scholem, \textit{Kabbalah} (New York: Meridian, 1978), 4. Scholem draws a distinction between mysticism and esotericism, claiming that mysticism cannot be communicated directly, while esotericism can, but is deliberately restricted. Elliot Wolfson questions Scholem’s distinction in many of his works. See, for example, Elliot Wolfson, \textit{Abraham Abulafia-Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy and Theurgy} (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), 11–15. Wolfson claims that for kabbalah, at least, there is an elitist posture that informs esotericism, but there is also much more to esotericism. In his characteristically chiastic manner, he writes: “The concealment of the secret is dialectically related to its disclosure. Simply put, the utterance of the mystery is possible because of the inherent impossibility of its being uttered.” In the case of time, there does indeed seem to be something ontically beyond human comprehension.

\textsuperscript{4} Mishnah \textit{Hagigah} 23.