CHAPTER 8

The Notion of Time as History in Kabbalistic Treatises from Renaissance Italy

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the declared tendency to refute any Greco-Arabic philosophical influence on the Jewish tradition, Italian Renaissance kabbalists followed in the footsteps of earlier thinkers—especially Spanish and Provencal—to postulate two modes of temporality: one that applies to corporeal beings, and one that may be attributed only to entities that are not subject to generation and corruption. This second category, albeit eternal, interacts with human time through God’s knowledge of particulars, and this may be thought of as the atemporal time of the Torah, whose ongoing revelation can thus be related to the changing nature of the reception of the kabbalistic doctrine according to the various periods of the history of Israel.

In Moshe Narboni’s Commentary on Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed,¹ the 14th century Provencal philosopher discusses the Maimonidean distinction between time and eternity² by referring to a short essay written by Averroes on the nature of time.³ In it, the Arabic philosopher affirms:


In his Commentary to the Averroan passage, Narboni explains:

1 Part ii, Premise 15.35.
2 See Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, 11, 16.
Time may be taken in two aspects: one, the true aspect, with respect to its perfect essence, which is with respect to time’s being consequent upon motion, and motion upon that which is moved [...] and the second aspect is the abstract form of time [in Hebrew: tzurat ha-zeman ha-mufsheter], which is the duration of the existence [in Hebrew: hemshekh ha-metz’ut] of a thing without regard to whether that duration is the duration of motion in a movable object or the duration of the existence of something in which motion is not of its nature, and [this second aspect of time] is an image, or likeness of time, not the reality of time [in Hebrew: demut zeman, lo amittat zeman], for time is of motion, and motion is of what is moved.

According to Narboni’s interpretation of Maimonides via Averroes, there is a difference between a time that can be defined (and measured), following the Aristotelian categories, and a time that is an abstract “continuum,” or a “duration” in thought (or in imagination), which is independent of the created world. This twofold time, which appears more or less in the same formulation in other late fourteenth or fifteenth-century Spanish sources (i.e., Hasdai Crescas and Joseph Albo,4 who mainly agree on this description), is also associated to the concept of a “time within the soul”5 (a concept which already appears, e.g., in Augustine).6

This double category of time was certainly not new in Jewish thought. What interests me here is that the Hebrew expression used to refer to the perception of divine time—or of time as related to God—is “hemshekh [or meshekh] hametz’ut” (“the duration of existence”). On the basis of the Spanish philosophical tradition based on Greek-Arabic speculation, numerous Hebrew writings which were composed in Italy between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century drew upon this formula.7

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4 On Albo’s discussion of time, see his Book of Roots, 3 Book 11, Chapter 18. The topic of Albo’s chapter is the principle of God’s independence of time. On Albo’s distinction between absolute time (unmeasured and imagined), and ordered time (measured and cognized by the intellect), see T. M. Rudavsky, Time Matters: Time, Creation, and Cosmology in Medieval Jewish Philosophy (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000), 50–51.

5 See The Light of the Lord, 1, 2, 1. On Crescas’ assessment that the second kind of time is “ba-nefesh,” see Harvey, Albo’s discussion of Time, 217.

6 On the issue as a whole, see Rudavsky, Time Matters: Time, Creation, and Cosmology.

7 It should be stressed that it was a period when Narboni’s, as well as Crescas’ and Albo’s systems of thought were especially cherished by Jewish scholars who were active in the major Renaissance centers of the Mediterranean peninsula.