Recovering the Sanctity of the Galilee: the Veneration of Sacred Relics in Classical Kabbalah*

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Relics, the preserved remains or paraphernalia of a saint, are venerated in Christianity by being made the object of a chapel. Ideally, they serve as the catalyst for miracles. Peter Brown has documented the "translation" of relics in Christian piety, the phenomenon by which the presence of relics conferred sanctity on a particular locale. He observes that: "The graves of the saints — whether these were the solemn rock tombs of the Jewish patriarchs in the Holy Land or, in Christian circles, tombs, fragments of bodies, or even physical objects that had made contact with those bodies — were privileged places, where the contrasted poles of Heaven and Earth met."1 Lionel Rothkrug and Lewis Lancaster have studied the interplay of sacred relics, sanctified texts and the sanctification of images in post-reformation Christianity and classical Buddhism. Relic-based traditions promoted a phenomenon that Lancaster and Rothkrug call "fixed sanctity." In this phenomenon, the holiness of the relic is transferred to its locale. When removed from its locale, the relic loses its efficacy. The locale, in turn, confers sanctity on the nation as a whole and even on its monarchy.2

According to Rothkrug, in medieval Germany, supernatural powers were understood as emanating from a place, a "locus sanctus." Shrines which embody this fixed sanctity tend to be bastions of religious conservatism.

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Their “earth-bound” holiness is often a reaction to religious reform. By contrast, there are religious movements emphasizing a “portable sanctity,” based on the veneration of sacred texts.¹

In Judaism, portable spirituality is manifest in the history of the Diaspora and its movements of text veneration. The academies of the Diaspora were constantly relocated according to the upheavals of history. The resilient portability of text veneration, from its inception in the first Babylonian exile, was able to sustain Diaspora culture. Thus has traditional Judaism understood Yohanan ben Zakkai’s legendary request to Vespasian: “Give me (the academy at) Yavneh and its sages.”²

However, relic-veneration has always been present in Jewish practice. Even as it declined in some Diaspora cultures, it flourished upon return to the Holy Land. This phenomenon reached its doctrinal peak in the teachings of the Zohar, the classical work of Jewish mysticism, and in the application and refinement of the Zohar’s ideas among the Galilean mystics in sixteenth century Safed.

Scripture taught that ritual impurity would result from any contact with death. Jews of the first and second Temple periods buried their dead in caves, in order that this ritual impurity would not pollute the general community. Burial took place in two stages: an initial burial was followed by the bones of the deceased being re-buried in ossuaries.³ In order to contain the spread of ritual impurity generated by the corpse, the Jews of antiquity dug thousands of limestone burial tombs. These tombs dot the rocky hills and punctuate the weave of valleys and gullies that wind among the mountains of the Galilee. During the middle ages, gravesites associated with Biblical, Talmudic or mystical heroes came to serve as centers for prayer⁴ and the development of communities.

¹ In Rothkrug’s words, this portable sanctity gives rise to “an efflorescence of figurative expression, especially metaphor, (that) allowed people to imagine a world which they previously thought they had somehow embodied” (Rothkrug, “German Holiness and Western Sanctity . . . ”: 164). In the Europe of the Reformation, the contrast between fixed and portable sanctity was such that “regions with few, often no shrines to saints turned Protestant, whereas lands rich in saints’ shrines remained Catholic. There are no important exceptions; the correlation is virtually perfect.” (Ibid: 165). The Reformation was a text-based phenomenon, stressing the ideas of Luther and the soteric effects of reading the Bible. The Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation emphasized the sacred relic, while sanctifying many sites in connection with sacred events and objects. Many amulets, pilgrimage places where Jewish communities were massacred in blood libels and accusations of Host desecration, were designated and sanctified during this time. Lewis Lancaster has pointed out that in Hinayana Buddhism’s spread through Asia was limited by its requiring the presence of a sacred relic at the base of the stupa. Mahayana Buddhism placed sacred texts at the base of the stupa. Since these texts were replaceable, their portable sanctity lent itself to Mahayana Buddhism’s evolution into its various east Asian forms.

² Gittin 56a–b.
³ Rothkrug, “German Holiness and Western Sanctity . . . ”: 218–222.