

## אלה אזכרה: WHY RECITE A פיוט THAT IS HISTORICALLY INCORRECT

In last week's newsletter we presented Rabbinic sources that confirmed that the Ten Martyrs known as the עשרה הרוגי מלכות did not live in the same era and did not die as a result of the same decree. That the פיוטים which describe the death of the עשרה הרוגי מלכות fail to match historical fact has not deterred the recital of such פיוטים. Why not? To answer that question, we have to enter the field of Jewish Mysticism. We need to examine the mindset of mystics in particular those who wrote מעשה מרכבה, Stories of the Chariot, because the ספר היכלות present the first historical reference to the עשרה הרוגי מלכות.

In an article entitled: The Concept of History in Hekhalot and Merkabah Literature which begins on page 47 of the book: Studies in Jewish History, Joseph Dan, editor, Praeger Publishers 1989, Professor Dan deals with the issue of the historicity of mystical literature:

The study of history cannot be confined to an attempt by modern scholars to understand historical developments; it must also include the attempt to understand the various conceptions of history which prevailed in the past. It is not enough that we know how we see our predecessors; it is necessary to know how they saw themselves. Usually, mystics pay little attention to the history of the world, which they wish to transcend in order to reach the celestial realm where they find their fulfillment. The following study is dedicated to an attempt to describe the complex attitude toward history by the ancient Jewish mystics of the third to sixth centuries, known as the mystics of the hekhalot and merkabah.

### BACKGROUND

Scholars are divided regarding many enigmatic aspects of the Jewish mystical literature known as hekhalot and merkabah mysticism. Opinions regarding the date of composition and the chronological order of major treatises are not uniform, nor is there consensus regarding their provenance, with some scholars ascribing these works to Palestine of the talmudic period, and others assigning a later Babylonian origin. Furthermore, even the interpretation of basic motifs found in treatises like Shiur Komah, Hekhalot Rabbati, Hekhalot Zutрати, Sar shel Torah, Sefer Hekhalot(or III Enoch), Reuyyot Yehezkel, and others, is open to question. Despite this lack of clarity (with further discoveries perhaps necessitating changes in our view of the matter to be treated here), examination of the concept of history in hekhalot and merkabah mysticism has intrinsic interest, due to the extraordinary phenomena associated with it. Perhaps directing attention to this unique aspect will provide a new perspective that will be helpful in resolving the riddles surrounding the initial appearance of Hebrew mystical literature in Jewish culture.

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 THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICITY

The central mystical experience in hekhalot literature is the 'descent to the chariot' (yeridah la-merkabah). The well-known account of the 'four scholars who entered pardes' (a garden, or paradise), found in the Tosefta, apparently refers to this type of mystical experience; however, the story appears without explanation. The discussions of ma'aseh merkabah in rabbinic literature apparently did not involve actual mystical experiences, but rather refer to exegetical interpretations of the first chapter of Ezekiel with its vision of the Throne-Chariot. The most important extant sources describing the mystical experience itself are Hekhalot Zutrati and Hekhalot Rabbati (Small and Great Book of the Celestial Palaces, respectively). Hekhalot Zutrati contains an account of R. Akiva's ascent to the upper realms, his progress from 'palace' to 'palace' until reaching the presence of the 'King in His glory' in the seventh one, while Hekhalot Rabbati recounts the 'descent to the chariot' by R. Ishmael ben Elisha High Priest, and his mentor, R. Nehunya ben haKana. The treatise Shiur Komah does not present the mystical experience itself, but rather describes the 'appearance of the glory' of the Creator as revealed to one who achieves the descent. Sefer Hekhalot contains revelations concerning the biblical figure of Enoch and his transformation into the archangel Metraton, the 'Prince of the Presence' (sar ha-panim) in the uppermost palace.

In addition to the experiences of the 'descent to the chariot' and 'entering the chambers of the chariot' (hadrei merkabah), another outstanding element of this literature is a tradition of revealed divine esoteric knowledge which is applied in the lower, corporeal world. This knowledge has a purely magical aspect, endowing its possessor with supernatural abilities to influence terrestrial affairs. A further attribute of the mystic is perfect knowledge of the Torah, but it too is attained by supernatural revelation. The esoteric magical tradition, found in many treatises ranging from Sefer ha-Razim and Harba de-Moshe (essentially magic texts) to Sar shel Torah, is apparently of early appearance. Hekhalot Zutrati is the earliest source mentioning this tradition, as well as the experience of the 'descent to the chariot'; the book opens with the revelation of esoteric knowledge by R. Akiva, and then continues in a variety of directions.

However, none of the three major strata of merkabah mysticism -- the early exegetical aspect, the mystical experience, and the esoteric knowledge -- shows any direct connection to historical events. In fact, some compositions within this genre read as if completely divorced from any historical context. Although tannaitic narrators -- R. Ishmael, for example -- may be mentioned, they display no link to any particular historical reality. The use of names of tannaim, undoubtedly pseudepigraphical, cannot serve as a criterion for dating the work to a particular period. Nevertheless, some few works do contain historical references that are of so strange a nature that they hint at one of the most profound and interesting aspects of the Weltanschauung (world view) of these early Jewish mystics.

In light of the preceding comments, it is the treatise Hekhalot Rabbati that is of particular interest. Unlike R. Akiva's prototypical mystical journey to the celestial palaces, as described in Hekhalot Zutрати, R. Ishmael's 'descent to the chariot' in Hekhalot Rabbati occurs as the direct result of a request by his mentor, R. Nehunya ben ha-Kanah, in response to the events surrounding the deaths of the 'Ten Martyrs'.

The story of the Ten Martyrs is extant in several prose versions, but is perhaps best known in the poetic version, Eleh Ezkerah, included in the Day of Atonement liturgy. Various serious attempts have been made to unravel the historical background of this martyrology, which recounts the death under torture of ten prominent tannaim -- among them R. Akiva, R. Simeon ben Gamaliel, and R. Hanina (Hananiah) ben Teradyon -- by Roman imperial decree. The greater portion of these accounts is devoted to a description of the tortures endured by each of the sages; however, they all include variants of an opening story presenting the events leading up to the promulgation and execution of the imperial decree.

The significant common element in each story is the interpretation of the verse condemning to death one who sells his brother into slavery (see Exodus 21:16). The Roman emperor hears schoolchildren studying this verse in Rome, and makes an association between the verse and the unpunished sin of Joseph's brothers who sold him into slavery. He decides to execute ten prominent Jewish scholars as retribution for that sin. (Admittedly, this concept is difficult; medieval and Renaissance scholars questioned the historicity of the story, and its implied doctrine of the transmigration of souls.)

The story includes negotiations between Samael (Satan) and G-d regarding the death of the sages, and the apocalyptic element within it -- G-d's redressing the martyrdom of the ten sages through a divine decree ordaining the complete and crushing destruction of Rome. With regard to the subject we are now considering, it must be stressed that close examination by historians establishes unequivocally that this legend cannot possibly have a historical basis. Scholars attempting to ground the legend in the Hadrianic persecutions following the Bar Kokhba revolt were forced to change the names of the sages (who were not all contemporaries), at times leaving only two names from the original ten, and adding others not mentioned in any other version of the story. Clearly, the legend of the Ten Martyrs cannot reflect a particular historical reality without distortion of the sources and creation of a new version not found in the extant texts.

It was the historian Solomon Zeitlin who deserves credit for having established that the legend of the Ten Martyrs has no actual historical basis or relevance, and one must agree with him. However, he failed to explore the question of the

literary-historical context of the legend. Not only does the story not reflect historical reality but, more significantly, it ignores the basic facts depicted in talmudic and midrashic historical narratives. The account of R. Hanina ben Teradyon's death, in the legend of the Ten Martyrs, bears no relationship to the detailed martyrology of this sage as recounted in the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 18a). It is not in the nature of early or medieval Hebrew literature to ignore literary precedents; certainly it is hard to imagine that a late scholar would omit completely the dramatic details of the talmudic legend with its description of R. Hanina wrapped in a Torah scroll, the parchment burning, and letters soaring on high. Thus, one may suggest that the historical 'discrepancies' in the list of the ten martyrs are almost certainly not the result of ignorance, but rather are deliberate.

Certain basic elements appearing in Hekhalot Rabbati run as a common thread through all the versions. The decree is promulgated by the emperor upon hearing the verse, "He who kidnaps a man -- whether he has sold him or is still holding him -- shall be put to death," with the concomitant connection to the sale of Joseph into slavery by his brothers. An agreement between G-d and Satan (here called Samael) appears -- with Satan receiving permission to kill the ten sages and in return taking upon himself the future destruction of immoral Rome. The list of ten martyrs is historically impossible (the list differing only slightly from the names in the legend).

The core of Hekhalot Rabbati-- the descent of R. Ishmael to the chariot, his journey through the seven palaces, his encounters with angels and heavenly beings, the songs he hears, and the secrets revealed to him -- is intrinsically interwoven with the legend of the Ten Martyrs. News of the Roman decree having reached the sages, the mystics among them, headed by R. Nehunya ben ha-Kanah, are unable to determine whether this decree has divine sanction, in which case they must submit and accept it with love, or whether it is the result of an arbitrary impulse on the emperor's part, in which case the mystics, as possessors of marvelous magical powers, may be able to nullify it. (Chapter 6 of Hekhalot Rabbati contains a detailed account of R. Hananiah ben Teradyon's successful escape, by magical means, from a death sentence, and his subsequent execution of his antagonist, the emperor Lupinus.)

R. Nehunya decides to send his youngest disciple, R. Ishmael ben Elisha 'High Priest', to the heavenly halls, to Suriya, 'the Prince of the Presence', to determine the meaning of the decree. By implication, the personal experience described in this key work of early Jewish mysticism is based upon an actual event, namely, the decree to kill the ten sages, and around that event the mystic web of Hekhalot Rabbati was woven. In that case, the problems of historicity raised in relation to the legend of the Ten Martyrs are equally applicable to Hekhalot Rabbati. However, the farfetched claim that the narrator of the legend was unlearned in Talmud and Midrash, hence his 'mistakes', cannot be made regarding the author of Hekhalot

Rabbati, who demonstrates his talmudic erudition in several places. It is thereby difficult to believe that the blatant distortion and disregard of talmudic and midrashic literary tradition, the confusion in the tannaitic genealogy, and the disregard of well-known talmudic martyrologies, can be anything but intentional. The relationship between the legend of the Ten Martyrs and Hekhalot Rabbati accentuates the problem of the concept of history in both compositions, eliminating the possibility of laying the blame for mistakes at the door of later storytellers.

## p. 52-THE RESEARCHER'S GOAL

Our goal is not simply to establish that legendary material often has no basis in historical reality, but rather to uncover its own inner historical logic. Legendary chronology, which may reflect literary rather than actual history, nonetheless embodies a well-defined concept of history. This is the case with midrashic legends. Although they do not always conform to archaeological and epigraphic finds, they possess their own internal literary truth. It is precisely the blatant and unexplained rebellion of hekhalot literature against talmudic and midrashic literary history that is so striking. Whereas the Talmud can describe R. Akiva as prophesying the rebuilding of the Temple at the site of its destruction (Makkot 24a-b), it is absolutely incapable of placing R. Akiva, along with R. Ishmael and R. Simeon b. Gamaliel, in the third passageway in the Temple which was destroyed sixty years earlier.

The four singular points characterizing Hekhalot Rabbati -- (1) disregard of talmudic chronology, (2) disregard of talmudic martyrology, (3) the description of R. Ishmael as a High Priest, (4) the description of the assembly of the 'descenders to the chariot' in the Temple -- prove that our author consciously rejected the familiar structure of talmudic and midrashic literary historiography, based on the absolute conviction that his words were grounded in a deeper, more complex stratum of the truth.

It may be suggested that the profound belief in a superior truth that contradicts universally recognized truths could be inspired only by mystical knowledge. The author of a mystic work is unconstrained by the need for historical accuracy, nor need he adapt himself to the limited knowledge and views of ordinary mortals. His vision penetrates the inner sanctum, and that reality is expressed in his writings regardless of the lack of conformity with traditions found in other sources. The mystic felt no compulsion to justify or explain how the Great and Small Sanhedrins met in the Temple entrance two generations after its destruction, or R. Ishmael's role as High Priest in this Temple, just as he felt no need to explain why angel A guards the fifth palace and angel B the sixth. The reality of this inner, superior mystical truth requires no justification or accommodation to knowledge acquired through limited human perceptions.

What is the basis of the mystic state of mind? What hidden symbols nourish the vision? Lacking clear-cut answers, I can only indicate a possible line of inquiry.

Apparently the key in this case lies hidden in the manifold meanings of the concept 'Temple' (mikdash or beit ha-Shem in Hebrew). The abovementioned enigmas result from the identification of 'Temple' with the Second Temple constructed by Zerubbabel, restored by Herod, and destroyed by Titus. Perhaps, however, the mystic was referring to an entirely different Temple? Certainly many mysteries surround the Temple and its descriptions. Do we know with certainty which Temple was described in the concluding chapters of the Book of Ezekiel or in the Temple Scroll of the Dead Sea sect? Do both sources refer to the Second Temple built by Zerubbabel? Perhaps the Judean desert sectarians possessed an alternative image of the Temple that later found its way to the circles of 'descenders to the chariot'. Clearly the 'celestial Temple' is not meant, since R. Ishmael describes a terrestrial Temple, located in Jerusalem, not in the celestial palaces. Perhaps the mystics had some concept of the 'true Temple' which could not be destroyed by Titus or by any other enemy, and in whose purviews they operated, isolated from the storms of history.

p. 55-Thus, these mystics developed an idiosyncratic understanding of history, based on spiritual glorification of the latter Temple and ascription of superior mystical knowledge to the builders of the Second Temple (to the denigration of the prophets and scholars of the First Commonwealth). This remarkable attitude toward Moses, Solomon, and other prominent historical figures points to the existence of a Weltanschauung basically opposed to the accepted rabbinic view. Mystical truth, with the Temple at its nexus, blinds the members of this circle to talmudic and midrashic tradition, perhaps even to biblical tradition.

It is interesting to speculate on a possible connection between the mystics of the Sar shel Torah circle and the Temple Scroll sect of the Dead Sea. May we be so bold as to suggest that the Temple Scroll, that strange and wonderful version of Deuteronomy which makes no mention of Moses, is the Deuteronomy revealed by the Shekhinah to the builders of the Temple led by Zerubbabel? Lacking other confirmatory evidence regarding a connection between these two works that are separated by centuries, this suggestion must remain in the realm of hypothesis.

However, we can establish that the literary-historical content of talmudic and midrashic literature was not the sole source of inspiration for the Jewish mystics of the talmudic and geonic periods. An alternative metahistorical view, negating the validity of talmudic historiography as well as of historical reality, appears in a variety of hekhalot and merkabah works from different periods. This view may also be tied to material appearing in other types of Jewish literature from Second Temple and post-destruction times. The key to the strange inner world of Jewish mystics in antiquity lies in the exploration of their concept of history and their image of the Temple, as reflected in diverse mystical works.

# להבין את התפלה

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Perhaps we can resolve some of the issues raised by Professor Dan, particularly as to the question of the historical truth of the facts contained in merkavah literature which found their way into the **פיוטים** which describe the **עשרה הרוגי מלכות** by suggesting that mystics view time not from a human perspective but from a heavenly one. I would like to suggest that in the **עולם של רבונו של עולם**'s world all of time is happening all of the time. In other words, despite the fact that the **עשרה הרוגי מלכות** did not die in the same era and did not die as the result of one decree, their deaths can be viewed as happening in the same era in a realm in which all of time is happening all of the time.

Such a view of history can also serve to explain why events in Jewish history play such a large role in Jewish prayer. Let us begin with the following directive contained in the **הגדה**: **בכל־דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את־עצמו, כאלו הוא יצא ממצרים**, in each generation, every Jew must feel as if he too was rescued from Egypt. In the human mind, that instruction is interpreted as requiring a person to transport his mindset back three thousand years. That is not the case in the heavens. For G-d, the exodus from Egypt is occurring at the same moment as when we are sitting by our tables retelling that event. As a result, it is not necessary that we humans transport ourselves back three thousand years in history. Instead, we must change our view of history from an earthly view to a celestial one.

That further explains our illusions to our forefathers, **יצחק**, **אברהם** and **יעקב** in our prayers. We refer them as individuals who lived thousands of years ago. In the heavenly realm, they are still walking the earth. Our references to events in Jewish history in our **תפילות** are meant to draw G-d's attention to those events that remain in the present in the heavenly world.

Put simply, yesterdays and tomorrows are part of the human vision of history. In G-d's world only the present exists, no yesterdays and no tomorrows. That may be the most important lesson we learn from the historical misstatements contained in the **פיוט** of **אלה** **אזכרה**.