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Between Concealment and Revelation
Mystical Motifs in Selected Yiddish Works of
Isaac Bashevis Singer and Their Sources in
Kabbalistic Literature

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Degree: Ph.D.

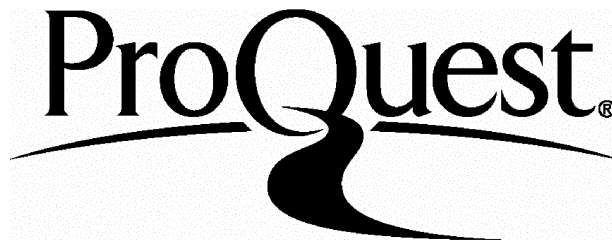
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Abstract of Thesis

Between Concealment and Revelation – Mystical Motifs in Selected Yiddish Works of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Their Sources in Kabbalistic Literature

The subject of this study is an exploration of Jewish mystical motifs in the works of Yitskhok Bashevis Zinger (Isaac Bashevis Singer). The study is based on a close reading of the Yiddish original of all of Bashevis's works investigated here. Changes or omissions in the English translations are mentioned and commented upon, wherever it is appropriate.

This study consists of three major parts, apart from an introduction (Chapter 1) and a conclusion (Chapter 9). The first major part (Chapter 2) investigates the kabbalistic and ḥasidic influences on Bashevis's life and the sources which inform the mystical aspects of his works. This part explores Bashevis's family background, the conflicting influences of mysticism and rationalism on the author during his childhood in Warsaw, and the significance of Bilgoraj for Bashevis's writings. Furthermore it investigates the sources, informing Bashevis's treatment of Jewish mysticism and mystical messianism.

The second part (Chapter 3) provides a thematic overview of Jewish mystical concepts and motifs employed in Bashevis's works and explains the theoretical background of these mystical ideas. The themes investigated after a brief introduction (Chapter 3.1) are: Jewish mysticism and magic (Chapter 3.2); creation and language, the central idea of *ספר יצירה* (*Sefer Yezirah*) and its implications for Bashevis's writings (Chapter 3.3); the doctrine of creation in Lurianic Kabbalah and its interpretations in Bashevis's works (Chapter 3.4); and the interpretation of Lurianic concepts in Shabbateanism, as it is depicted by Bashevis (Chapter 3.5).

The third part is an investigation of Jewish mystical motifs in selected works by Bashevis. Four of his major novels are discussed in detail. These are: *דער שטן אין גאָרײַ* (*Satan in Goray*) – (Chapter 4); *די פאמיליע מושקאט* (*The Family Moskat*) – (Chapter 5); *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* (*The Magician of Lublin*) – (Chapter 6); and *דער קנעכט* (*The Slave*) – (Chapter 7). A further chapter indicates the use of mystical references and motifs in Bashevis's short fiction (Chapter 8). *any change*

Bashevis's works vacillate between two extreme experiences of the Divine by his various characters, the experience of concealment and mystery on one hand, closely connected to the Lurianic idea of *Zimzum*, and the experience of revelation in creation on the other hand. On a different level these two extreme experiences of concealment and revelation also apply to the artist or writer in relation to his or her literary creation. In Bashevis's literary creation there are countless references to Jewish mystical ideas, some of them obvious and overt, others more concealed. This study endeavours to elucidate these mystical references, images and allusions, their origins in kabbalistic doctrines and the role they play in Bashevis's works.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people, who have contributed in many different ways to the completion of my Ph.D., who have been my teachers, colleagues and friends in the world of Yiddish and the world of Hebrew & Jewish Studies:

Prof. Irene Zwiep (Amsterdam) for her Kabbalah class at Leo Baeck College (London), which inspired me to start my research on Jewish mysticism in Bashevis's works; all the teachers at Leo Baeck College, where I completed both my BA and MA in Hebrew & Jewish Studies, for providing me with such a broad and in-depth background in Hebrew & Jewish Studies; all the teachers at the Oxford Yiddish summer programmes, who inspired me with their teaching of Yiddish literature and Yiddish culture, in particular Pascual (Pesakh) Fiszman (New York); Prof. Dan Miron (Columbia, New York) for his useful comments on *דער שטן אין גאָר*; Prof. John Klier (Department of Hebrew & Jewish Studies, UCL, London) for all his practical help and advice throughout the four years of my research programme at UCL; Dr. Ada Rapoport-Albert (HJS, UCL, London) for her teaching of Ḥasidism, her useful comments on one of my chapters and her help with a difficult Hebrew article; my supervisor Hugh Denman (HJS, UCL, London) for his classes on Bashevis, for his bibliography of secondary literature on Bashevis, for his diligent corrections of all my chapters (including English grammar and the spelling of Polish place names!) and for his confidence in me and respect for my work; Dr. Helen (Chayele) Beer (HJS, UCL, London) for her teaching of Yiddish literature, for her encouragement and for her energy and tireless work *לִטוֹבֵת יִידיש*; my fellow Ph.D.- students, Eva Grabherr (Vienna & HJS, UCL, London) and César Merchan Hamann (LBC, London, formerly: HJS, UCL) for being such friendly and helpful colleagues; my colleague Gerben Zaagsma (Groningen, formerly: Yiddish MA, SOAS, London) for his invaluable help with Yiddish word processing and other computer problems; my colleague Dr. Andrzej Piotr Kluczynski (Warsaw & Białystok) for his help with Polish spelling and for his kindness; Prof. Simon (Shimen) Neuberg (Trier) for a "vision", which led to the discovery of an important article by Prof. Chava Turniansky; Prof. Chava Turniansky (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) for this article and for her inspiring teaching during the "First International Research Seminar in Yiddish Culture" (Tel Aviv / Jerusalem, 1999); all the teachers at the three "International Research Seminars in Yiddish Culture" (Israel: 1999, New York: 2001 and New York: 2002), especially Prof. David Roskies (JTS, New York) for his exciting Yiddish literature teaching and his useful comments on *דער שטן אין גאָר*; Prof. Yitskhok Niborski (מַעדָעם-בִּיבְלִיאָטֶעק, Paris) for his inspiration and encouragement; all my friends in the world of Yiddish and the world of Hebrew & Jewish Studies, in particular Natalia Krynicka and Rubye Monet (מַעדָעם-בִּיבְלִיאָטֶעק, Paris), Eve Jochnowitz (NYU, New York), Ruth Boguslawski (עגמת-נפש אָנסאַמבל, Saarbrücken), Simo Muir (Helsinki, formerly: Yiddish MA, SOAS, London), Aya Hanna Broman (London, formerly: HJS, UCL), Rada Ristić (London, formerly: SSEES & HJS, UCL), Eva Neumann (Stockholm, formerly: LBC, London), Rabbi Elina Bykova (Montreal, formerly: LBC, London), Arkady Gegel (LBC, London), Jenny Buitelaar (Utrecht & LBC, London), Rabbi Janet Burden (London, formerly: LBC), Rabbi Kathleen Middleton-de Magtige (London, formerly: LBC) and Rabbi Michael Pertz (London, formerly: LBC), for their friendship and care and their interest in my work; and last, but not least: My dear parents (*זיי צו לאַנגע יאָרן*) for their generous and unquestioning support for my studies and my life in London!

אַ האַרציקן דאַנק אייך אַלעמען! יישר-כווח!

London,
March 2003

Haike Beruriah Wiegand

Between Concealment and Revelation – Mystical Motifs in Selected Yiddish Works of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Their Sources in Kabbalistic Literature

1. Introduction

דער טאטע האָט נאָך לאַנג מיט מיר גערעדט. ער האָט מיר געזאָגט, אַז אַלץ איז אלקות, געטלעכקייט. אפילו אין דער בלאַטע זענען דאָ הייליקע פונקען, ווען נישט, וואָלט קיין שום זאָך נישט געהאַט קיין האַפּט.¹

Father spoke to me for a long time. He told me that there is a particle of the Divine in everything. Even the mud in the gutter contains Divine sparks, for without them nothing could continue to exist.²

These few words are taken from Isaac Bashevis Singer's collection of memoirs, entitled *מײַן טאַטנס בית-דין-שטוב*. This collection of memoirs, as well as its sequel *המשכים-זאמלונג*, provides us with Bashevis Singer's autobiographical account of his childhood and youth and is thus an important source of information concerning the background of Bashevis's interest in Jewish mysticism, which permeates his whole work.³ The subject of this study is an account of Jewish mystical motifs in Bashevis's works, with particular reference to his published novels in Yiddish. It is intended primarily as a reference work, identifying the major kabbalistic and ḥasidic sources of these mystical motifs. As a work of reference this study confines itself to an internal account of Bashevis Singer, his Jewish mystical sources and their invocation in his fiction, without attempting to place him or his writings in any literary-historical context.

¹ יצחק באַשעוויס-זינגער, *מײַן טאַטנס בית-דין-שטוב*, Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1979 (a reprint of the first edition, New York: Der Kval, 1956, but without the author's introduction), 62.

² Isaac Bashevis Singer, *In My Father's Court*, tr. Channah Kleinerman-Goldstein, Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966, 78. This is, however, an abridged translation. Several episodes of the Yiddish original are omitted altogether in the English.

³ *המשכים-זאמלונג* (English title: *My Father's Court [Sequel-Collection]*), selection and introduction by Chone Shmeruk, Jerusalem: Magnes & Hebrew University Press, 1996. This work has recently appeared in English as *More Stories from My Father's Court*, tr. Curt Leviant, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000.

The study consists of three major parts, framed by the introduction (Chapter 1) and a conclusion (Chapter 9). The first major part (Chapter 2) investigates the kabbalistic and hasidic influences on Bashevis's life and the sources which inform the mystical aspects of his work. It includes discussions of relevant passages in Bashevis's two published collections of memoirs in Yiddish, *מיין טאָטנס בית-דין שטוב* and *מיין טאָטנס בית-דין שטוב* [המשכים-זאמלונג]. The second part (Chapter 3) provides a thematic overview of Jewish mystical concepts and motifs employed in Bashevis's works and explains the theoretical background of these mystical ideas. The themes investigated after a brief introduction (Chapter 3.1) are: Jewish mysticism and magic (Chapter 3.2); creation and language, the central idea of *ספר יצירה* (*Sefer Yezirah* – Book of Creation) and its implications for Bashevis's writings (Chapter 3.3); the doctrine of creation in Lurianic Kabbalah and its interpretations in Bashevis's works (Chapter 3.4); and the interpretation of Lurianic concepts in Shabbateanism, as it is depicted by Bashevis (Chapter 3.5). The third part documents the use of Jewish mystical sources in selected works by Bashevis. Four of his major novels are discussed in detail. These are: *דער שטן אין גאָרײ* (*Satan in Goray*) – (Chapter 4); *די פאמיליע מושקאט* (*The Family Moskat*) – (Chapter 5); *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* (*The Magician of Lublin*) – (Chapter 6); and *דער קנעכט* (*The Slave*) – (Chapter 7).⁴ The study concentrates primarily on these four novels, all of them written in the period between 1933 and 1961, since they are replete with Jewish mystical references, motifs and images to such a degree that they demonstrate Bashevis's use of his Jewish mystical

⁴ *דער שטן אין גאָרײ*, originally serialized in *גלאַבוס* (Warsaw), January - September 1933, published in book form by the Warsaw Yiddish Pen Club, 1935, thereafter in a revised edition with additional stories, New York: Matones, 1943, reprinted in Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1983, 1992; translated as *Satan in Goray* by Jacob Sloan, first published in New York: Farrar & Straus, 1958; *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, originally serialized in *פאָרווערטס* (New York), November 1945 - May 1948, published in book form in New York: M.Sh. Sklarski, 1950, thereafter in Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1977; translated as *The Family Moskat* by A.H. Gross (completed by Maurice Samuels, Lyon Mearson and Nancy Gross), first published in New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950; *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, originally serialized in *פאָרווערטס* (New York), 1959, published in book form in Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1971; translated as *The Magician of Lublin* by Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer, first published in New York: Noonday Press, 1960; *דער קנעכט*, first serialized in *פאָרווערטס* (New York), 1960 - 1961, published in book form in New York: Tsiko, 1967, thereafter in Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1980; translated as *The Slave* by the author and Cecil Hemley, first published in New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1962.

sources particularly well. A further chapter briefly indicates the use of Jewish mystical references and motifs in Bashevis's later fiction and particularly in his short fiction (Chapter 8). Several examples of significant references and allusions to Jewish mysticism in his short stories will be shown.

In Bashevis's writings a variety of Jewish mystical works is mentioned explicitly. During the course of this study all the mystical works, referred to in the novels that are analyzed here, will be identified. In addition to this, the two above-mentioned Yiddish volumes of memoirs will be examined for further information on the Jewish mystical sources (that is kabbalistic literature, earlier Jewish mystical works and ḥasidic literature), which inform Bashevis's writings. In his Yiddish writings Bashevis generously supplies his readers with what amounts to a reading list of Jewish religious works, including mystical literature. The titles mentioned in Bashevis's works are a reflection of his own reading, although they hardly constitute a comprehensive overview of his sources.

The present study confines itself throughout to those of Bashevis's writings which have been published in Yiddish book form, since the references to Jewish mystical works in his Yiddish writings are not always rendered faithfully in the English translations of his works. Frequently these references are omitted altogether in the English. Apart from references to specific mystical works, various other kabbalistic allusions in Bashevis's Yiddish writings are also either misrepresented in the English translations or are completely omitted. Thus in *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, for example, two passages from the Yiddish original, which contain kabbalistic references, are omitted in the English translation.⁵ In the English translation of *די פאמיליע מושקאט* several sections, as well as entire chapters of the Yiddish original, are omitted altogether.⁶ Therefore it is completely untenable for a

⁵ *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, 72, 74. Cf. *The Magician of Lublin*, 58 f., 60, where these passages are omitted.

⁶ *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, e.g. chapter 9, sections 1 and 2 (128-137), chapter 33 (430-434), chapter 45 (555-562) and chapter 65 (749-760). Cf. *The Family Moskat*, 132, 370, 477 and 636 respectively, where these entire sections and chapters are omitted.

scholarly account of the uses of Bashevis's mystical references to rely on the existing English translations. Translations into other languages are, as a rule, made from the English, and are normally even less reliable. An important exception to this rule is the German translation of *פון לובלין דער קונצנמאכער*, which is much more faithful to the Yiddish original than the English translation.⁷

In his later years Bashevis became more involved in the process of translating and editing his works for an English-speaking public and he collaborated closely with his translators. However, many of his so-called "translators" had little or no knowledge of Yiddish and the process of "translating" actually consisted of Bashevis dictating his own rough translations of his Yiddish works, which in turn were put into more grammatical or more idiomatic English by one of his "translators".⁸ During this process many subtleties of the Yiddish originals were lost in the English translations. On the other hand, during the process of translating and editing Bashevis was also able to see some of the shortcomings of his weekly installments in the Yiddish *פארווערטס* and to "polish" his writings for their publication in English.⁹

Of Bashevis's four novels, which are analyzed here, the author is only cited as a co-translator together with Cecil Hemley in the English version of *דער קנעכט* (*The Slave*). However, the author is cited as a co-translator, or in some cases even as the only translator, of many of his short stories and of three of his later novels, which have never been published in Yiddish book form.¹⁰

⁷ *Der Zauberer von Lublin*, tr. Susanna Rademacher, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1967. Additional paragraphs, omitted in the English, are translated from the Yiddish by Otto F. Best and worked into the text of the German translation.

⁸ Cf. Lester Goran, *The Bright Streets of Surfside: The Memoir of a Friendship with Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994, 4 f.; Dvorah Telushkin, *Master of Dreams: A Memoir of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, New York: William Morrow, 1997, 33.

⁹ Cf. Israel Zamir, *Journey to My Father, Isaac Bashevis Singer*, New York: Arcade, 1995, 44-47.

¹⁰ As far as Bashevis Singer's novels are concerned, apart from *The Slave* (Cf. footnote 4), the author was involved in the translation of *גשמה-עקספערדיציעס*, originally serialized in *פארווערטס* (New York), 1974, translated as *Shosha*, partly by Joseph Singer and partly by the author in collaboration with his wife Alma Singer and his secretary Dvorah Menashe, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978, as well as in the translation of *משוגע*, originally serialized in *פארווערטס* (New York), 1981-1983, translated as *Meshugah* by the

This study is based on a close reading of the Yiddish original of all of Bashevis's works investigated here. Changes or omissions in the English translations will be mentioned and commented upon, wherever it is appropriate. The Yiddish will be quoted, as it is found in Bashevis's published works, even though the spelling may differ slightly from modern standardized Yiddish. Wherever Yiddish words and names require transcription, the standard YIVO-transcription will be employed, which is summarized in Uriel Weinreich's dictionary.¹¹ In transcribing Hebrew and Aramaic, except for terms such as Kabbalah and familiar festivals, as well as Biblical names, which have become anglicised, the following transcription system will be employed: א – ' , ב – b, ב – v, ג – g, ד – d, ה – h, ו – v, ז – z, ח – h, ט – t, י – y, כ – k, כ – kh, ל – l, מ – m, נ – n, ס – s, ע – ' , פ – p, פ – f, צ – z, ק – k, ר – r, ש – s, ש – sh, ת – t.¹² Polish proper names and place names in Poland will be spelled as in Polish in most cases, but occasionally the Yiddish toponym will also be given.

The quotation at the beginning of this study introduces an important kabbalistic idea, which can be found frequently throughout Bashevis's works, namely the idea of the "הייליקע פֿונקען" or "holy sparks". These are sparks of Divine light, which according to the teachings of Lurianic Kabbalah are scattered throughout the universe.¹³ The concept has its

author and Nili Wachtel, published posthumously in New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994. Bashevis's novel *דער קעניג פֿון די פֿעלדער*, originally serialized in *פֿאַרווערטס* (New York), 1980, was translated entirely by the author, as *The King of the Fields*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988. In addition to this the author was involved in the translation of many of his short stories. For example from his volume of short stories, entitled *Short Friday and Other Stories*, New York: Fawcett Crest, 1964, he translated the stories 'Blood', 'Esther Kreindel the Second', 'Jachid and Jechidah' together with Elizabeth Pollet and 'Cunegunde' together with Elaine Gottlieb. From the short stories in *The Death of Methuselah and Other Stories*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988, Bashevis Singer translated 'The Housefriend', 'The Accuser and the Accused', 'The Trap', 'The Smuggler', 'Logarithms' and 'Runners to Nowhere' together with Lester Goran, 'A Peephole in the Gate' together with Ruth Schachmer Finkel and 'The Impresario', 'The Missing Line', 'The Hotel', 'Sabbath in Gehenna' and 'The Death of Methuselah' on his own. Many additional examples from other collections of short stories could be cited as well.

¹¹ Cf. Uriel Weinreich, *Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary*, New York: YIVO, 1968, xx-xxv.

¹² Since the titles of Hebrew works will be given in Hebrew characters, when they are mentioned for the first time, I have opted for readability, rather than full reversibility.

¹³ Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, New York: Meridian, 1978 (first ed. Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 138 f.; Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press / Jerusalem: Magnes & Hebrew University Press, 1993, 361 f.

origins in the Lurianic doctrine of creation which will be discussed in detail in the course of this study, since numerous motifs connected with this Lurianic doctrine play an important role in Bashevis's writings.

In the few lines quoted above it is Bashevis's father, a fervent חסיד (*hasid*), who expresses the view that everything is Godliness and that even the mud in the gutter contains sparks of Divine light. Such expressions of the idea of God's immanence in the world can be found frequently in kabbalistic and ḥasidic writings.¹⁴ In Bashevis's works, however, there are also a considerable number of secular Jewish characters, such as Yasha Mazur in *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, who express the idea of Divine immanence or of God's revelation in nature, God's creation.¹⁵

In Bashevis's works there are countless references to Jewish mystical ideas, some of them obvious and overt, others alluded to more or less obliquely. This study endeavours to identify the sources of the mystical references, images and allusions in Bashevis's works and their origins in kabbalistic doctrines. It will further document Singer's early biographical encounters with these doctrines in his parental home, employing his own autobiographical writings as well as biographical works.

There is a vast secondary literature on Isaac Bashevis Singer, his life, his works and various particular aspects of his writing. But, as far as I am aware, this is the first full-scale scholarly study, entirely devoted to documenting Jewish mystical motifs and their sources as invoked in Bashevis's original Yiddish writings.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid. Cf. also G. Scholem's chapter on 'The Kabbalah and Pantheism', in: G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 144-152.

¹⁵ *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, 65, 256.

¹⁶ There are a few scholarly articles, which have touched this topic, in particular: Bilhah Rubinshteyn, 'הפיאות גלגולים של מאנים', in: *מאנים* 65:9-10 (July-August 1991), 55-58; 'יצחק בשביס-זינגר' ארכיטיפים: גיבורי יצחק בשביס-זינגער לאור הקבלה', in: *מאנים* 67:1 (November 1992), 44-47.

2. Kabbalistic and Hasidic Influences on Isaac Bashevis Singer's Life and the Sources

Informing the Mystical Aspects of His Works

2.1. Introduction – “A Kabbalist, a foolish boy...”

איך בין געווען אלץ מיט אַ מאָל: אַ מקובל, אַ באַריש יינגל, אַ טרוימער און אַ
קאַנדידאַט פֿאַר אַ ראַבינער-סעמינאַר.¹

I was everything at the same time: A Kabbalist, a foolish boy, a dreamer
and a candidate for a rabbinical seminary.²

Isaac Bashevis Singer was born as Yitskhok Zinger in the small Polish town of Leoncin on 21 November 1904 (although the date of birth listed in his passport, used for entry into the United States, is the 14 July).³ Yitskhok's father, Pinkhes-Mendl Zinger, was descended from an illustrious line of rabbis, scholars, Kabbalists and *hasidim*.⁴ At the time, when Yitskhok was born, his father worked as an unofficial rabbi in Leoncin and was already a follower of the Radzymin *rebe*.⁵ He was a fervent *hasid*, characterized by his “חסיד'ישע באַגייסטערונג” (love of people) and his “ליבשאַפט צו מענטשן” (hasidic enthusiasm).⁶

Yitskhok's mother, Basheve Zinger, née Zilberman, was the youngest daughter of the much-respected rabbi of Biłgoraj, who was the undisputed authority of his town, an outstanding scholar and a *mitnaged* (an opponent of *Hasidism*).⁷ Basheve herself was a rationalist, intellectual and sceptical by nature.⁸ She was also much more scholarly

¹ *המשכים-זאמלונג*, 227. Hereafter cited as: *המשכים-זאמלונג*.

² My own translation.

³ Cf. for example: Grace Farrell (ed.), *Isaac Bashevis Singer: Conversations*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992, xix.

⁴ *המשכים-זאמלונג*, 140 f. Hereafter cited as *שטוב בית-דין שטוב* – Cf. *In My Father's Court*, 43 f.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Yiddish: 149 f.; English: 52 f.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Yiddish: 158; English: 151.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Yiddish: 143 f. and 19; English: 45 f. and 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Yiddish: 16, 18 f.; English: 12, 15 f.

“than other women of similar background and standing”.⁹ The diametrically opposed characters and temperaments of Yitskhok’s parents, his father’s ḥasidic enthusiasm and love and trust of people and his mother’s rationalism and scepticism, were the source of constant friction in the Zinger household. Both Pinkhes-Mendl’s mysticism and Basheve’s rationalism were formative influences on the young Yitskhok or Itshele, and the tension between them found its way into his writings, as Itshele developed into the Yiddish writer Yitskhok Bashevis.

In this chapter the influences of Yitskhok’s ḥasidic father and mitnagdic mother will be investigated. The influences of his two older siblings, Hinde-Ester and Yisroel-Yehoshue, were also considerable and have to be taken into account. According to Yitskhok Bashevis’s memoirs, Hinde-Ester was the first of the three siblings, who demonstrated any talent for writing.¹⁰ This demonstration of her literary talent occurred in the months before her marriage. Many years later she published Yiddish fiction under her married name Ester Kraytman (Esther Kreitman in the English translations of her writings). Yisroel-Yehoshue Zinger (or Israel Joshua Singer, as he is known in English), who became a respected Yiddish writer long before his younger brother, was Yitskhok Bashevis’s acknowledged literary role model. Bashevis referred to him as “דער גרויסער” (the great Yiddish writer Y.Y. Zinger) in the Yiddish and as his “spiritual father and master” in the English dedication of *פאמיליע מושקאט* (*The Family Moskat*).¹¹

Yitskhok was only about three years old, when his family moved from Leoncin to Radzymin, where his father became the head of the newly-founded *yeshivah*. He was barely five years old, when the Zinger family moved to Warsaw, where Pinkhes-Mendl became the unofficial rabbi of Krochmalna Street. Yitskhok was too young to recall much

⁹ Janet Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 19.

¹⁰ בית-דין שטוב, 161 f.

¹¹ די פאמיליע מושקאט, 3. Cf. *The Family Moskat*, 5.

of his family's life in Leoncin and Radzymin (although in his fictional autobiography *Love and Exile* he emphasizes how extraordinary his memory was for a child of his age).¹² Therefore this chapter will focus on Yitskhok's childhood in Warsaw and the events he witnessed in his father's שטוב בית-דין (rabbinical court), which are recorded in his collection of memoirs מיין טאטנס בית-דין שטוב (*In My Father's Court*) and in the first eighteen chapters of the sequel-collection [המשכים-זאמלונג] מיין טאטנס בית-דין-שטוב (*My Father's Court [Sequel-Collection]*). Many of these episodes, particularly from the first collection of memoirs, shed some light on Yitskhok's growing interest in mysticism and the kabbalistic and ḥasidic influences on his life.

Another formative period of Yitskhok's life was the time he spend in Biłgoraj, where his mother's family lived. Yitskhok Bashevis describes his life in Biłgoraj in the last seven chapters of מיין טאטנס בית-דין שטוב and in the second part of the sequel-collection of his memoirs, מיין טאטנס בית-דין-שטוב [המשכים-זאמלונג]. In 1917, when he moved to Biłgoraj with his mother and his younger brother Moyshe, his awe-inspiring grandfather was no longer alive.¹³ The modern secular Jewish movements and various forms of secular learning, which Yitskhok's grandfather had suppressed during his lifetime, found their way into Biłgoraj relatively late.¹⁴ In Biłgoraj Yitskhok experienced the traditional Jewish life of a *shtetl*, as it had been hundreds of years earlier. For him this was a “גייסטיקער אוצר” (“spiritual treasure trove”), which inspired many of his writings.¹⁵ In this chapter the kabbalistic and ḥasidic influences on Yitskhok's life, both during his childhood in Warsaw and his youth in Biłgoraj, will be explored, and the sources, informing the mystical aspects of Yitskhok Bashevis's works, will be investigated.

When Yitskhok moved back to Warsaw, initially to study at the Takhkemoynei Rabbinical

¹² I.B. Singer, *Love and Exile*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986, xi. – *Love and Exile* is translated from the author's Yiddish autobiography, published in פארווערטס in New York in 1974 -75 under the title גלייב און צווייפל (Belief and Doubt).

¹³ Ibid., Yiddish: 354; English: 302.

¹⁴ Ibid., Yiddish: 337, 340; English: 287, 290.

Seminary, he had read a considerable amount of kabbalistic works, as well as modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature, world literature in Yiddish and Polish translation and books on science and philosophy, of which Spinoza's philosophy in particular captured his interest.¹⁶ At this time in his life he considered himself both a Kabbalist and a foolish boy, both a dreamer and a candidate for a rabbinical seminary, as the quotation at the beginning of this chapter shows. As Yitskhok Zinger developed into the Yiddish writer Yitskhok Bashevis, all the different parts of his personality and all his various interests and influences, both mystical and rational, both kabbalistic and philosophical, found their way into his writings.

2.2. Yitskhok Bashevis Zinger's Family Background

In *מײַן טאָטנס בית-דין שטוב*, in a chapter entitled 'צו זיידעס און באַבעס' ('The Family Tree' in the English *In My Father's Court*), Yitskhok Bashevis Zinger presents his family background to his readers. His father's father, R. Shmuel, was a rabbi in Tomaszów. Initially R. Shmuel did not intend to become a rabbi. He spent his time praying, studying Torah, fasting and occupying himself with Kabbalah, while his wife, Yitskhok's grandmother Temerl, was trading in jewelry and supporting her husband.¹⁷ Temerl's mother Hinde-Ester, after whom Yitskhok's sister was named, had commanded such respect that even the *rebe* of Belz, R. Sholem, had offered a chair to her, when she had come to visit him. She was also reported to have worn a *טלית-קטן* (ritual garment with fringes), just like a man.¹⁸ R. Shmuel's father, R. Yeshaye Kintsker, was a *hasid* and a scholar. His father had been the sharp-minded R. Moyshe from Warsaw, the author of *אגרת הקדוש* ("The Sacred Letter"). R. Moyshe's father had been R. Tuvye, the rabbi of Szczekotciny, and R. Tuvye's father, R. Moyshe, had been the rabbi of גייפערלד.

¹⁶ E.g.: *בית-דין שטוב*, 336, 351, 356-358. Cf. *In My Father's Court*, 286, 287, 299, 304-305. – *המשכים-זאמלונג*, 151 f., 163.

¹⁷ *בית-דין שטוב*, 140 f. Cf. *In My Father's Court*, 43 f.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Yiddish: 125, 141; English: 141, 44.

(presumably Nowe Pole, near Elblag) and a student of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Ḥasidism.¹⁹ This goes to show that Yitskhok's father, Pinkhes-Mendl, was descended from generations of rabbis, scholars, Kabbalists and *ḥasidim*.

Pinkhes-Mendl himself had wanted to become a ḥasidic *rebe* since his childhood. He wanted to rise “פון מדרגה צו מדרגה” (from level to level), until he was sufficiently purified to become a “גוטער ייד” (ḥasidic *rebe*). Apart from the Talmud and halakhic works, he studied ḥasidic literature and at times also a “קבלה-ספר” (kabbalistic work).²⁰ In the end Pinkhes-Mendl did not succeed in becoming a ḥasidic *rebe* or even in marrying the daughter of a *rebe*. Instead of this he was offered a match with Basheve, the youngest daughter of R. Mordkhe-Yankev, the well-known rabbi of Biłgoraj, who was a renowned halakhic scholar with strong mitnagdic tendencies.²¹

Basheve was already known for her intelligence, and since Pinkhes-Mendl was more scholarly than another young man, who had been proposed to her, she agreed to the match. At the time of the wedding Basheve was sixteen years old, and Pinkhes-Mendl was twenty-one, although he looked more like a “מחותן” (father-in-law) than a bridegroom. At that time he neither knew Russian, nor Polish, nor anything about worldly matters. His world was the Torah, the prayers and the מצוות (commandments). For him everything else belonged to the domaine of the “יצר הרע” (evil inclination), the “שדים” (demons) and “רוחות” (evil spirits).²²

After the wedding the couple stayed in Biłgoraj with Basheve's family for eight years. During this time Hinde-Ester and Yisroel-Yehoshue were born. Pinkhes-Mendl realized very soon that the household of the severe and awe-inspiring rabbi of Biłgoraj was not for him. In order to be officially recognized as a rabbi, an examination in Russian was required in addition to the rabbinical studies. But Pinkhes-Mendl refused to take this

¹⁹ Ibid., Yiddish: 140 f.; English: 43 f.

²⁰ Ibid., Yiddish: 141 f.; English: 44 f.

²¹ Ibid., Yiddish: 143; English: 45 f.

²² Ibid., Yiddish: 144 ; English: 47.

Russian exam and was therefore only able to obtain an unofficial rabbinate in the small *shtetl* of Leoncin, where he lived with his family for ten years. In Leoncin Yitskhok and his younger brother Moyshe were born, although they were registered in Radzymin.²³ The life of the rabbinical household in Leoncin is described in great detail by Bashevis's older brother Y.Y. Zinger in his autobiographical work *פון אַ וועלט וואָס איז נישטאָ מער*.²⁴ During the family's time of residence in Leoncin Pinkhes-Mendl was already deeply involved with the *rebe* of Radzymin, who offered him the position as head of the newly-founded *yeshivah* in the town. But when Yitskhok's father moved to Radzymin with his family and began to teach students at the *yeshivah*, the *rebe* failed to pay him the salary, which he had promised him earlier. The family's experiences with the Radzymin *rebe* are described in detail by Bashevis's sister Ester Kraytman in her fictionalized autobiography *דער שדלים-טאַנץ*.²⁵ When the *yeshivah* burned down, Pinkhes-Mendl was forced to seek employment elsewhere and finally secured an unofficial rabbinate on Krochmalna Street in Warsaw. In 1908 the Zinger family arrived in Warsaw and moved into No.10 Krochmalna Street, where Pinkhes-Mendl set up his "בית-דין שטוב" (rabbinical court).

2.3. Mysticism versus Rationalism – Conflicting Influences on Yitskhok Bashevis Zinger during His Childhood in Warsaw

All of the three siblings who became Yiddish writers, describe their parents' conflicting personalities and the resulting tensions in the household. Yisroel-Yehoshue devoted an entire chapter of his autobiography to the mismatch between his parents: אַ טראַגעדיע 'צוליב דעם, וואָס מען האָט אין הימל פאַרביטן די יוצרות' (A tragedy on account of the fact that

²³ Ibid., Yiddish: 148 f.; English: 51 f.

²⁴ *פון אַ וועלט וואָס איז נישטאָ מער*, י. י. זינגער, New York: Matones, 1946; translated as: I.J. Singer, *Of a World That Is No More* (tr. Joseph Singer), New York: Vanguard, 1970.

²⁵ *דער שדלים-טאַנץ*, אסתר קרייטמאַן, Warsaw: Ch. Brzoza, 1936; translated as: Esther Kreitman, *Deborah* (tr. Maurice Carr), London: Foyles, 1946, reissued with a new introduction by Clive Sinclair, London: Virago, 1983.

matters were confounded in Heaven). He states that his parents would have been a suitable couple, if his father had been his mother and his mother his father. Even externally each of them seemed to be better suited for the role of the other. He describes his father as short, round, soft, with warm blue eyes, his mother as tall, with a sharp bony face and cold grey eyes. These physical signs were external symptoms of deep divisions within their characters. Although his father was a “למדן” (scholar), he was not exactly a “חריף” (sharp-minded person). Pinkhes-Mendl was “מער מענטש פון הארץ ווי פון מוח” (more a person of the heart than of the mind). He was good-natured, did not like to overexert himself, and he believed in people, and even more in God.²⁶ Basheve, on the other hand, was – just like her father, the rabbi of Biłgoraj – a “בעל-תכליתניצע” (person solicitous about the outcome of things), always worrying, fretting, doubting, thinking, and probing. She was a complete “קאפ-מענטש” (brain-worker) and “אינטעלעקטואל” (intellectual).²⁷

Ester Kraytman describes her parents’ appearance and characters in similar terms. She remarks, for example, that her mother looked like a “תלמיד-חכם” (Talmudic scholar), who sits for days and nights, studying.²⁸ Ester Kraytman also describes her mother’s doubts concerning the intentions of the Radzymin *rebe* and her father’s response, calling her mother a “ליטוואַק” (*litvak*, implying a *mitnaged*), who is “מוציא שם רע אויף אַ צדיק” (spreading an evil report about a ḥasidic *rebe*), and who is not better than her father in that respect.²⁹

In one chapter of his memoirs, entitled ‘פאַרוואָס די גענזן האָבן געשריגן’ (‘Why the Geese Shrieked’) Bashevis “turned the dispute between his parents into a parable about growing up”.³⁰

²⁶ 33, ג. י. זינגער, פון אַ וועלט וואָס איז נישטאָ מער.

²⁷ Ibid., 34.

²⁸ 32, אסתר קרייטמאן, דער שדים-טאנץ.

²⁹ Ibid., 20 f.

³⁰ Clive Sinclair, *The Brothers Singer*, London: Allison & Busby, 1983, 15.

He informs his readers that his father liked to speak about “דיבוקים” (dybbuks), “גלגולים” (transmigrated souls) and “נישט-גוטע” (demons) and that he believed in “פאַרבאָרגענע כוחות” (hidden powers).³¹ Thus when a woman brought two decapitated geese to the rabbi, which shrieked when they were hurled together, Pinkhes-Mendl expressed a mixture of fear and vindication, and was convinced that “צייכנס פון הימל” (signs from Heaven) were sent to him. The shrieking geese seemed to confirm Pinkhes-Mendl’s mysticism and question Basheve’s rationalism. Basheve, however, אַ מתנגד־ישע טאָכטער און אַ “סקעפטיקערין פון דער נאַטור” (a mitnagdic daughter and a sceptic by nature), found a rational explanation for the apparent mystery. She removed the windpipes of the geese and asked the woman to hurl the birds together again. Although the young Yitskhok was afraid and ran to his mother for protection, he sided with his father, hoping the geese would shriek again. But they did not, and Yitskhok had an opportunity to observe the powerlessness of his father’s mystical faith, when faced with his mother’s rationalism. After his mother had left the room, Pinkhes-Mendl spoke to his son, as if he were an adult, saying, that Yitskhok’s mother took after her father, the rabbi of Biłgoraj, who was a “גאון” (great scholar), but a “קאַלטער מתנגד” (literally: cold *mitnaged*; in the English translation: “cold-blooded rationalist”). He even told Yitskhok that he had been warned, but that it was already too late to call off the wedding.³²

This incident is only one example of the conflict between Pinkhes-Mendl’s mysticism and Basheve’s rationalism, experienced by their son Yitskhok, and although Yitskhok has to acknowledge that his mother’s rational explanations and arguments are usually correct, he is fascinated by his father’s mysticism, and various motifs connected to his father’s mystical world view can be traced in his works as a mature Yiddish writer.

In his memoirs Yitskhok Bashevis describes the Shabat afternoons and evenings, when hasidic Jews would come to his parents’ home for “שלוש-סעודות” (the third meal on

³¹ בית-דין שטוב, 15. Cf. *In My Father’s Court*, 11.

³² Ibid., Yiddish: 16-19; English: 11-16.

Shabat), and his father would preach to his followers like a ḥasidic *rebe*. He derided all the pleasures of this world and spoke with great enthusiasm about the pleasures of the “צדיקים” (righteous people) in the world-to-come, who were sitting with crowns on their heads and listening to the “סודות פון דער תורה” (secrets of the Torah), which were revealed to them. Pinkhes-Mendl also spoke about the soul and the “כסא הכבוד” (“Throne of Glory”), which thereafter were always associated in Yitskhok’s mind with the light of the stars and the face of the moon in the nocturnal sky at the closing of Shabat.³³

Throughout Bashevis’s works one can frequently find descriptions of the nocturnal sky connected with mystical images of the higher spheres, which appear to be influenced by his childhood experiences in his father’s rabbinical court.³⁴

For Yitskhok’s father the world is “טריף” (*treyf*, impure). Bashevis, on the one hand, adds to this observation that it took him many years to discover how much truth there is in his father’s world view.³⁵ But on the other hand he was always fascinated by the wonders of the world.

Throughout his memoirs the balcony serves as a “way station” between his father’s rabbinical court, a place filled with sacred scriptures and constant talk of God and His Torah, and the world outside with all its uncertainties and all its secrets.³⁶ It is out on the balcony, where Yitskhok reflects on the vastness of the world, the strange behaviour of human beings and the place of God in the world.³⁷ His father almost never went out on the balcony. For him the balcony was already “די גאס, דער המון, די גוים, די ווילדקייט” (the street, the rabble, the non-Jews, the wildness).³⁸

Yitskhok Bashevis retained many aspects of his father’s world view, which he had

³³ בית-דין שטוב, 25. Cf. *In My Father’s Court*, 23.

³⁴ Cf.: די פאמיליע מושקאט, 241 f., 350 f., 541; and: דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין, 21, 29, 69.

³⁵ בית-דין שטוב, 48.

³⁶ Cf. Steven David Lavine, ‘Rhetoric for the Spirit. Repetition and Renovation in “*In My Father’s Court*”’, in: David Neal Miller (ed.), *Recovering the Canon, Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986, 123.

³⁷ בית-דין שטוב, 51. Cf. *In My Father’s Court*, 72.

³⁸ Ibid., Yiddish: 60; English: 77.

absorbed as a child, but as he moved away from his parents' traditional Jewish way of life, he developed his own "personal mysticism", shaped to some extent by his childhood experiences.³⁹

When traditional Jewish faith and "מוסר" (ethical instructions) did not seem enough to cope with the turmoil of the outside world entering his rabbinical home on Krochmalna Street, Pinkhes-Mendl sometimes turned to the Kabbalah to provide an explanation of God's mysterious ways. One episode in Bashevis's memoirs entitled 'קבורת חמור' (translated as 'The Suicide') deals with the suicide of a young shoemaker on Krochmalna Street on account of an unhappy love affair. The shoemaker's mother disturbs the peace of Shabat in the home of the Zinger family, asking the rabbi to intervene on her behalf, so that her son should have a decent funeral. During her visit to the rabbi's home she wails, curses and questions God's justice. After she has left, Pinkhes-Mendl has a serious conversation with Yitskhok, telling him that according to the Kabbalah, there is a purpose in everything that happens. In everything there are "רזין דרזין" (mysteries upon mysteries). Every letter of the Torah contains "מילי מיליאסן סודות" (thousands upon thousands of secrets). Human beings are created "בצלם אלוקים" (in God's image), and the human soul comes from the "כסא הכבוד" ("Throne of Glory").⁴⁰ He also says that everything is "אלקות" (Godliness) and that even the mud in the gutter contains "הייליקע פונקען" (holy sparks).

Outside in the courtyard Yitskhok reflects on his father's words and suddenly feels that there is a "הייליקע נשמה" (holy soul) inside him, "א שטיק געטלעכקייט" (a particle of the Divine). In the darkness he sees the image of a fiery flower in front of his eyes, luminous as the sun, opening up and shining forth in many colours, as if in a dream.⁴¹

While Yitskhok's father "traced all things back to God" and favoured a withdrawal from

³⁹ Cf. S.D. Lavine, 'Rhetoric for the Spirit', in: D.N. Miller (ed.), *Recovering the Canon*, 123.

⁴⁰ בית-דין שטוב, 61. Cf. *In My Father's Court*, 77 f.

⁴¹ Ibid., Yiddish: 62; English: 78 f.

the outside world, Yitskhok finds a particle of the Divine within himself and imagines an “outpouring into the world”. He is influenced by his father’s mystical ideas, but transforms them into his own “personal mysticism”, shaped by his own “immediate experience”.⁴²

One of his father’s kabbalistic ideas introduced here, which had a profound influence on the young Yitskhok and is frequently employed in the writings of the mature Yitskhok Bashevis, is the concept of the “הייליקע פונקען” (holy sparks). The concept of sparks of Divine light scattered throughout the universe is derived from the doctrine of creation in Lurianic Kabbalah. The theoretical background of this Lurianic doctrine will be illuminated in the next chapter of this study. In this context it is sufficient to say that this Lurianic motif of “holy sparks”, which are present even in the mud of the gutter, as Yitskhok’s father explains, is frequently employed in Bashevis’s works to express the idea of redemptive good in an otherwise dark or evil context. Many examples of this motif of sparks of light in contexts of darkness could be cited, which will be discussed in the detailed analysis of Bashevis’s major novels.⁴³

Another aspect of his father’s mystical faith, which Yitskhok Bashevis retained, is the idea of the power and holiness inherent in Hebrew scriptures and in the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. An example of this can be found in an untranslated story in Bashevis’s memoirs, entitled ‘איינ חתן און צוויי כלות’ (One bridegroom and two brides).⁴⁴ In this episode Bashevis introduces a scribe, who was regarded as a “צדיק” (righteous person) by his father, because he was a God-fearing Jew, who always seemed to have the “שם הויה” (God’s name) in front of his eyes. He went to the “מקווה” (ritual bath) to purify himself, every time he had to write God’s name, and he seemed to be surrounded by an air reminiscent of Jewish mystical works like the *Zohar*, the “ראשית-חכמה” (*Reshit*

⁴² Cf. S.D. Lavine, ‘Rhetoric for the Spirit’, in: D.N. Miller (ed.), *Recovering the Canon*, 127.

⁴³ See for example: דער שטן אין גאריי, 143; די פאמיליע מושקאט, 8, 306, 316, 541, 559; דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין, 111, 125, 158, 221; דער קנעכט, 62, 272.

⁴⁴ בית-דין שטוב, 52-56.

Hokhmah, Beginning of Wisdom), by Eliyah de Vidas, an ethical work, written under kabbalistic influence (Venice, 1579), and the “של”יה הקדוש” (the holy *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit*, Two Tablets of the Covenant), by Isaiah Horowitz, another ethical work, written under kabbalistic influence, Amsterdam, 1648).⁴⁵ When Yitskhok had his bar mitzvah and received a pair of *tfilin* written by this scribe, he could feel the “קדושה” (holiness) inherent in the “פרשיות” (sections of the Torah).⁴⁶

In fact, throughout Bashevis’s works the motif of a certain holiness or power inherent in the Hebrew script can be found frequently.⁴⁷ It is connected with the idea, expressed in *Sefer Yezirah*, that the world was created by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.⁴⁸

Apart from his father’s occasional lectures on lofty kabbalistic matters and the kabbalistic literature found in his father’s rabbinical court, Yitskhok Bashevis mentions a childhood friend, called Borekh-Dovid, who was interested in practical Kabbalah, and who pretended to be a “מקובל” (Kabbalist), to be well-versed in the *Zohar* and to be able to tap wine from the wall and to create doves, employing “הייליקע שמות” (holy names). This information is given in an untranslated episode of Bashevis’s memoirs, entitled ‘ר’ יעקל סאפיר’ (R. Yekl Safir).⁴⁹ This particular combination of tapping wine from the wall and creating living doves, as examples of “קבלה מעשית” or “practical Kabbalah”, appears in various places throughout Bashevis’s works.⁵⁰

In another untranslated episode, entitled ‘בטלנים’ (Idlers) Bashevis mentions a young man, who came to his father and asked him to teach him Kabbalah.⁵¹ Pinkhes-Mendl answered that he was not a “מקובל” (Kabbalist), but that he had kabbalistic literature,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 52 f.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁷ See for example: די פאמיליע מושקאט, 68, 298, 320, 351, 541; דער קנעכט, 189; ‘מעשה טישעוויץ’, in: דער שפיגל און אנדערע דערציילונגען, Jerusalem: Magnes & Hebrew University Press, 1979 (first ed. 1975), 21 f.

⁴⁸ *Sefer Yezirah*, chapter 1, section 1-2, chapter 2, section 2.

⁴⁹ בית-דין שטוב, 164-176, in particular: 167 f.

⁵⁰ See for example: די פאמיליע מושקאט, 136; דער קונעמאכער פון לובלין, 74.

⁵¹ בית-דין שטוב, 247-253.

which he could lend him. In exchange for staying with the rabbi's family and studying Pinkhes-Mendl's kabbalistic works, the young man agreed to become Yitskhok's Talmud teacher. Apart from studying Talmud with Yitskhok, the young teacher told him about Jerusalem and Safed, where "מקובלים" (Kabbalists) could still be found, and he tried to convince Yitskhok to travel to the land of Israel with him. Yitskhok knew that he was not going to run away from home with his teacher, but the young man's words fascinated him and he dreamt of becoming "אַ צווייטער אַר"י הקדוש, אָדער אַ ר' חיים וויטאַל" (a second holy Rabbi Isaac Luria or Ḥayim Vital). When his teacher departed, Yitskhok was left with a longing for faraway places, "פאַרבאָרגענע צדיקים" (concealed righteous men) and caves, where Kabbalists were sitting, dressed in white silk robes, studying the "סודות התורה" (secrets of the Torah).⁵²

2.4. The Significance of Bilgoraj for Yitskhok Bashevis's Writings

During the First World War the family Zinger was suffering from hunger and deprivation in German-occupied Warsaw, and Basheve eventually decided to take her children to the safety and relative prosperity of her own family's home in Austrian-occupied Bilgoraj. In 1917 Yisroel-Yehoshue succeeded in obtaining visas for his mother and his two younger brothers to travel to Bilgoraj. Yisroel-Yehoshue himself did not want to leave Warsaw, where he was working for the Hebrew publication "הזמיר". Pinkhes-Mendl intended to go back to Radzymin to stay with his *rebe*. Thus it was only Basheve with her two younger children, the thirteen-year old Yitskhok and his little brother Moyshe, who travelled to Bilgoraj in the summer of 1917.⁵³ By the time Yitskhok arrived in Bilgoraj, his grandfather, R. Yankev-Mordkhe, the awe-inspiring rabbi of the town, was no longer alive, and his uncle Yoysef had become the new rabbi. But the influence of the "deceased

⁵² Ibid., 252 f.

⁵³ Ibid., Yiddish: 308-313; English: 260-265.

sage” could still be felt in Biłgoraj.⁵⁴ During the years of R. Yankev-Mordkhe’s strong rabbinical presence in the town, he had succeeded in suppressing all modern Jewish, enlightened ideas, which only very slowly found their way into Biłgoraj under his much weaker successor, Basheve’s brother Yoysef.⁵⁵

Although at first Yitskhok was frustrated by the fact that he did not have easy access to modern secular literature or learning, as he had had in Warsaw, his experience of the old-fashioned Jewish life of a *shtetl*, far-removed from the “corrosive influences of modernity”, provided him with an “imaginative and spiritual nourishment”, which sustained him in his later life and in his writings.⁵⁶

In his memoirs Yitskhok Bashevis states that in his early days in Biłgoraj he could not find any secular books. Sitting in the ḥasidic *shtibl* in Biłgoraj, Yitskhok did not want to confine his studies to the Talmud and turned to Jewish philosophical works, like Maimonides’ *מורה נבוכים* (*The Guide of the Perplexed*) and Judah Halevi’s *כוזרי* (*Kuzari*), and to the “קבלה-ספרים” (kabbalistic works), which could be found on the shelves in the *shtibl*.⁵⁷

In Biłgoraj Yitskhok experienced an ancient form of Jewishness and the unchanged traditional Jewish life of a *shtetl*, with all its customs, superstitions and solemn celebrations of the festivals, as it had been centuries ago. Even the language spoken there seemed to him to be an older, uncorrupted form of Polish-Yiddish than he was used to. In this world of “אַלט יידישקייט” (“old Jewishness”) Yitskhok found a “גייסטיקער אוצר” (“spiritual treasure trove”), and for the benefit of his Yiddish reader Yitskhok Bashevis adds: “אַלץ אין מיר האָט געזאָגט: דאָס מוז מען באַשרייבן...” (Everything inside me said: This

⁵⁴ Cf. C. Sinclair, *The Brothers Singer*, 23.

⁵⁵ *בית-דין שטוב*, 326, 337, 354. Cf. *In My Father's Court*, 277, 287, 302.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Yiddish: 336-340; English: 286-290. Cf. also: Edward Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Boston: Twayne, 1980, 17.

⁵⁷ *בית-דין שטוב*, 336. Cf. *In My Father's Court*, 286 f. Cf. also: *המשכים-ואמלוג*, 151 f., where several kabbalistic works are mentioned.

must be described...).⁵⁸

Thus Bashevis described Bilgoraj in his memoirs, and thus it served as a model for the town of Goraj in his first novel *דער שטן אין גאָרײַ* (*Satan in Goray*), which, in fact, was an actual town in the vicinity of Bilgoraj. In one of his interviews he stated that he could have written *The Family Moskat* “without having lived in Bilgoraj”, but that he could never have written *Satan in Goray* or some of his other stories “without having been there”.⁵⁹

His severe grandfather may have served as the model for the “Orthodox patriarch” Rabbi Beynesh Ashkenazi in *דער שטן אין גאָרײַ*.⁶⁰ The conflicts within Rabbi Beynesh’s household probably reflect the conflicts within the household of Yitskhok’s grandfather, the constant tensions between his two uncles Yoysef and Itshe and their families.⁶¹

Yitskhok’s aunt Rokhele, Itshe’s wife, who believed in magic, in ghosts and in the Evil Eye and whose spirit seemed to live in medieval times, might have influenced Bashevis’s portrait of Rekhele in the novel, together with his sister’s colourful personality and psychological make-up. Yitskhok’s study of the Kabbalah in the atmosphere of Bilgoraj’s old Jewishness manifested itself in the “special apocalyptic and messianic world” of *דער שטן אין גאָרײַ*, saturated with ideas and images from Lurianic Kabbalah.⁶²

Yitskhok Bashevis states in the second volume of his memoirs that modern Yiddish literature has focused on the Jewish life of the *shtetl* in the last decades of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, but that the *shtetl* life of earlier centuries has

⁵⁸ *בית-דין שטוב*, 337, 340. Cf. *In My Father’s Court*, 287, 290. The last sentence from the Yiddish text is omitted in the English translation.

⁵⁹ Cf. Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, ‘An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer’, in: *Commentary* 36 (November 1963), reprinted in: G. Farrell (ed.), *Conversations*, 13.

⁶⁰ Cf. Irving H. Buchen, *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past*, New York: NYU Press, 1968, 9. – In the second volume of his memoirs Bashevis devotes an entire chapter to his grandfather: *המשכים-זאמלונג*, 125-131. On his grandfather’s influence in Bilgoraj, see: *בית-דין שטוב*, 326, 336 f., 354; *In My Father’s Court*, 277, 286 f., 302.

⁶¹ On these conflicts in the household of the Bilgoraj rabbi, see: *בית-דין שטוב*, 264 f.; *In My Father’s Court*, 217 f.

⁶² Cf. I. H. Buchen, *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past*, 9. On Yitskhok’s aunt Rokhele, see: *בית-דין שטוב*, 329; *In My Father’s Court*, 279.

been completely neglected. He reminds his readers of the influence of the Shabbatai Zvi movement and the movement around Jacob Frank in the small Jewish *shtetlekh*. The ḥasidic movement likewise exerted a considerable influence, and the “זיילן פֿון חסידות” (pillars of Ḥasidism) lived mainly in the small *shtetlekh*.⁶³ For Yitskhok Bashevis the Jewish life of earlier centuries in the small *shtetlekh* of Poland, with all its ancient customs and superstitions, and the influence of mystical mass movements, like Shabbateanism and Frankism, as well as Ḥasidism, on Jewish *shtetl* life, became a major interest of his literary work. Thus he devoted his first novel, *דער שטן אין גאָר*, entirely to the subject of Shabbatean influences on a small *shtetl* in Poland in the seventeenth century. In his second novel, *דער זינדיקער משיח* (The Sinful Messiah), which has never been translated, he focuses on Frankism.⁶⁴ Apart from these two novels, describing Jewish messianic mass movements, in some of his other novels and many of his short stories Bashevis focuses on the ḥasidic life of the small *shtetlekh*, with all its ancient customs and superstitions, which he had experienced in Biłgoraj.

Nevertheless modern Jewish ideas and movements did eventually penetrate Biłgoraj's immutability, and through the influence of some of his new friends, as well as the town's watchmaker Todros, “אַ זייל פֿון דער השכלה אין בילגאָריי” (a pillar of the Enlightenment in Biłgoraj), Yitskhok soon acquired access to secular learning and literature. Motl Shur, one of Yitskhok's new friends, provided him with a Hebrew grammar, textbooks and various volumes of Hebrew prose and poetry, and Yitskhok wrote his first poem in Hebrew. He also became a teacher of Hebrew, running evening classes for young secular Jewish men and women.⁶⁵

From a series of booklets for the study of the Polish language Yitskhok taught himself Polish, and was eventually able to read world literature in Polish translation. He also read

⁶³ המשחים-זאמלונג, 132.

⁶⁴ *דער זינדיקער משיח* was serialized in the Yiddish פֿאַרווערטס in New York in 1935-36.

⁶⁵ בית-דין שטוב, 338, 349, 359. Cf. *In My Father's Court*, 288, 297, 306.

literature in German and was particularly influenced by Knut Hamsun. He began writing both in Hebrew and in Yiddish, trying to imitate Knut Hamsun's style, but he was far from pleased with his first literary ventures.⁶⁶

With Todros, the watchmaker, Yitskhok discussed God, nature, the First Cause of existence and other maskilic subjects, and from him he also borrowed an old German textbook of physics. As the *hasidim* were getting more and more enraged by the fact that the grandson of the Bilgoraj rabbi was becoming "קאליע" (corrupt), Yitskhok realized that the *Haskalah* in Bilgoraj was about a century late.⁶⁷

Eventually a Yiddish library was opened in a private home in Bilgoraj. Yitskhok's friends provided him with both secular Hebrew and Yiddish literature. In addition to this, many volumes of European literature in Yiddish translation arrived from America. Among the volumes sent from America Yitskhok also found a book by Hilel Tseytlin on the history of world philosophy and Jewish philosophy, entitled *דאס פראַבלעם פון גוטס און שלעכטס* ("The Problem of Good and Evil"), as well as a volume by Stupnicki on Spinoza's philosophy.⁶⁸

Yitskhok's father had cursed Spinoza and said that he had not discovered anything new. Concerning the relationship of God and the world, Spinoza's ideas were similar to those of the Baal Shem Tov, who had reportedly stated: "אל עולם - עולם הוא אל ואל הוא עולם" (God of the world – The world is God and God is the world). Of course, the Baal Shem Tov had lived after Spinoza, but Pinkhes-Mendl argued that Spinoza had drawn from ancient kabbalistic sources. Yitskhok, who had already read a considerable amount of kabbalistic literature, immediately fell under the spell of Spinoza's philosophy. Towards the end of the first volume of his memoirs, Yitskhok Bashevis adds that at the time when he was writing, he was already more critical of Spinoza's ideas, but in his youth

⁶⁶ *המשכים-זאמלונג*, 158, 160, 163.

⁶⁷ *בית-דין שטוב*, 350 f. Cf. *In My Father's Court*, 298 f.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Yiddish: 356 f.; English: 303 f.

he was completely intoxicated by Spinoza's philosophy, "ווי היפנאטיזירט" (as if under hypnosis), and this hypnosis lasted for many years.⁶⁹

In a chapter of his *המשכים-זאמלונג* Bashevis remarks that he had been interested in "פילאסאָפֿיע, מיסטיציזם, נשמה-גריבלענישן" (philosophy, mysticism, soul-searching) since his childhood.⁷⁰ But comparing Spinoza's philosophy with the teachings of the Kabbalah, he had to admit that Spinoza's God was too cold for him, his world too meaningless and his human being too insignificant. In the Kabbalah, on the other hand, he found knowledge, understanding, beauty, meaning, greatness and exaltedness. While Spinoza ridiculed everything, the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud and the Kabbalah focused on the lofty, the pure, the exalted and the miraculous in God's creation. According to the Kabbalah, even the *קליפה* (*Klipah* – the power of evil) was "אַ יֵשׁ, עפֿעס וואָס האָט אַ ציל" (an entity, something which has a purpose and a meaning).⁷¹ Studying kabbalistic works and Spinoza's philosophy in Biłgoraj, the adolescent Yitskhok felt that he was everything at the same time: "אַ שפינאָזיסט, אַ מקובל, אַן אַפיקורס, רעליגיעז, אַ אַרײַנגעטאָן אין שיינע געדאַנקען און אין מיאוסע מחשבות" (a Spinozaist, a Kabbalist, a heretic, religious, occupied with beautiful thoughts and with ugly ideas).⁷²

This characterization is reiterated, when Yitskhok Bashevis describes his adolescent attempt to return to Warsaw, to study at a rabbinical seminary, which had not even been established yet. At the time of his journey from Biłgoraj to Warsaw, he saw himself both as a Kabbalist and as a foolish boy, both as a dreamer and as a candidate for a rabbinical seminary.⁷³ In Warsaw he was accepted at the Takhkemoynei Rabbinical Seminary, but he had to return to Biłgoraj until the opening of the seminary.⁷⁴ Two years later, in 1922,

⁶⁹ Ibid., Yiddish: 357 f.; English: 305. The statement attributed to the Baal Shem Tov is not fully quoted in the English translation.

⁷⁰ *המשכים-זאמלונג*, 151.

⁷¹ Ibid., 152.

⁷² Ibid., 152.

⁷³ Ibid., 227.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 236, 276 f.

Yitskhok had already spent several months in Warsaw, studying at the seminary and suffering from hunger and deprivation. He had returned to Biłgoraj, but when his father had been offered a rabbinical post in a tiny *shtetl* in Galicia and was preparing to move there with his family, Yitskhok decided to return to Warsaw, where his older brother Yisroel-Yehoshue was living once more. Yisroel-Yehoshue had left Bolshevik Russia, had published a drama and was beginning to establish himself in Warsaw. With his brother and his family Yitskhok stayed at a dacha in Miedzeszyn outside Warsaw during the summer months. His brother introduced him to various modern Yiddish writers, and through his brother Yitskhok eventually had the opportunity to visit the famous Yiddish “ליטעראַטור-פֿאַרײַן” (Writers’ Association) on Tłomackie 13 in Warsaw.⁷⁵

At his brother’s dacha Yitskhok also wrote a booklet, entitled “שפינאָזאַ און די קבלה” (Spinoza and the Kabbalah), in which he compared Spinoza’s philosophy with the teachings of the Kabbalah. The main purpose of this booklet was to demonstrate that Spinoza had not broadened and enriched the ideas of the Kabbalah. On the contrary:

“די צען ספֿירות זענען מער ווי שפינאָזאַס צוויי אַטריבוטן. די אידעע פֿון צמצום, פֿון דער געטלעכער אייגנשרומפונג פֿון די אייגענע כוחות, גיט זין און אויפֿקלערונג דעם פראָצעס פֿון דער באַשאַפֿונג.”

(The ten *Sfirot* are more than Spinoza’s two attributes. The idea of *Zimzum*, of the Divine contraction of God’s own powers, provides meaning and elucidation to the process of creation.). Yitskhok held that the Kabbalah was the greatest philosophy, the highest metaphysics, the most developed religious system. Spinoza’s philosophy was nothing else than a “פֿאַרקירצטע און אייגענשרומפֿענע קבלה” (abbreviated and contracted form of Kabbalah).⁷⁶

Although Yisroel-Yehoshue was impressed by the language and the logic of his brother’s booklet, Yitskhok was not able to find a publisher for his manuscript and threw it away

⁷⁵ Ibid., 279, 285-295, 307-312.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 297 f.

in despair.⁷⁷

Yitskhok's years in Biłgoraj provided him with the opportunity to experience the ancient customs and superstitions of Jewish *shtetl* life, as well as to further his studies of both mystical, kabbalistic literature and modern secular literature. As he established himself as a Yiddish writer in Warsaw, he could draw on his experiences of *shtetl* life as well as on his kabbalistic studies in Biłgoraj.

2.5. Bashevis's Sources, Informing His Treatment of Jewish Mysticism and Mystical

Messianism

In one of the episodes, found in the second collection of his memoirs, Bashevis describes his kabbalistic studies in the Turzysk ḥasidic *shtibl* in Biłgoraj. He mentions one work, the “שפע טל” (*Shef'a Tal*), which he read from beginning to end. Regarding another work, the “קל"ח פתחי חכמה" פון ר' משה-חיים לוצאטא – אן אריינפיר אין דער קבלה פון אר"י” (*Keleḥ Pitḥei Hokhmah* by Rabbi Moshe Ḥayim Luzzatto – an introduction to the Kabbalah of the ARI), he states that he literally devoured the book.⁷⁸

The *Shef'a Tal* (Abundance of Dew) by Shabbetai Sheftel Horowitz (Prague, 1612) and the *Keleḥ Pitḥei Hokhmah* (138 Gates of Wisdom) by Moshe Ḥayim Luzzatto (Korzec, 1785) are only two examples of kabbalistic works mentioned explicitly in Yitskhok Bashevis's memoirs.

As a boy Yitskhok was surrounded by Jewish religious works, both in his father's בית-דין שטוב (rabbinic court) and in the Radzymin ḥasidic *shtibl* in Warsaw, including not only the Hebrew Bible, the *Mishnah*, the *Tosefta*, the Babylonian Talmud, the *Yerushalmi*, Midrashic literature, like the *Mekhilta*, *Sifra* and *Sifrei*, halakhic literature, like the *Shulḥan 'Arukh* and Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah*, and *musar* literature (Jewish ethical works), like Bahyah ibn Pakudah's *Hovot ha-Levavot* (Duties of the Heart –

⁷⁷ Ibid., 297, 301-304.

⁷⁸ דמשכים-זאמלונג, 152. (My own translation.)

written around 1080), but also kabbalistic and ḥasidic literature.⁷⁹

The *Zohar* is mentioned several times as being studied by various Jews, with whom

Yitskhok and his family were in contact.⁸⁰ Bashevis also refers to the *תיקוני זוהר*

(*Tikunei Zohar*), an independant book, which forms part of the Zoharic literature. This

work consists of a commentary on the Torah portion *בראשית* (*Bereshit*), each section

(*תיקון*) beginning with a new interpretation of the word “בראשית” (“in the beginning”).

Yitskhok Bashevis mentions this work in connection with a couple, pursued by bad luck,

to whom his father lent a copy of the *Tikunei Zohar* as a “סגולה צו פֿאַרטרייבן שדים”

(remedy to ward off demons).⁸¹

Several other mystical works, in particular ethical literature, written under kabbalistic influence, are mentioned by Bashevis in connection with his mother’s reading. Thus

Yitskhok Bashevis reports that his mother was quoting stories from the *קב הישר* (*Kav*

ha-Yashar, Measure of Righteousness), a moralistic book by Rabbi Zvi Hirsh

Kaidanover, written under kabbalistic, Lurianic influence (Frankfurt, 1705), and from

the *ספר החסידים* (*Sefer Ḥasidim*, Book of the Devout), an “edition of the literary

testaments of the three founders” of the *Ḥasidei ’Ashkenaz*, a mystical movement of

mediaeval Germany (published in two different versions, one in Lemberg, 1863/67,

the other in an edition by J. Wistinetski, Frankfurt, 1891).⁸² Yitskhok’s mother

apparently read a considerable amount of *musar* literature, some of which bore the

“stamp of kabbalistic influences”. Apart from the *Kav ha-Yashar* Bashevis refers to

the *שבט מוסר* (*Shevet Musar*, Rod of Chastisement) by Elijah ha-Kohen (Constantinople,

1712) and the *מסילת ישרים* (*Mesilat Yesharim*, Path of the Righteous) by Moshe Ḥayim

⁷⁹ בית-דין שטוב, e.g. 76, 81, 100 f., 139, 204, 249, 252, 292.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 53, 112, 167, 171, 214, 237.

⁸¹ המשכים-זאמלונג, 82. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 218.

⁸² בית-דין שטוב, 10. Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken, 1946, 83, 369; G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 196; Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, New York: Atheneum, 1974 (first ed. JPS, 1939), 320 f.

Luzzatto (Amsterdam, 1740), both of which were written under Lurianic influence.⁸³

Another such work mentioned is the ראשית-חכמה (*Reshit Hokhmah*, Beginning of Wisdom) by Elijah de Vidas (Venice, 1579), which was one of the pioneering works, combining *musar* literature with kabbalistic teachings.⁸⁴ The *Reshit Hokhmah* is cited together with the *Zohar* and the של"ה (*Shnei Luhot ha-Brit*) by Isaiah Horowitz (Amsterdam, 1648), another ethical work, written under kabbalistic influence.⁸⁵

Another work read by Yitskhok's mother was the ספר-הברית (*Sefer ha-Brit*, Book of the Covenant) by Pinkhas Eliyah Horowitz of Vilna (Bruenn, 1897), which was an attempt to "link Kabbalah with philosophical studies". During the philosophical discussions with Yisroel-Yehoshue, Basheve based her arguments on the religious philosophy of the *Sefer ha-Brit*.⁸⁶ Yitskhok Bashevis also reports that he himself read the *Sefer ha-Brit* during his childhood in Warsaw.⁸⁷

Yitskhok's father had various kabbalistic works in his rabbinic court. In his memoirs Bashevis mentions three of them in particular: "עמוד העבודה, שפע טל, שער אורה" (*Amud ha-'Avodah* [the Pillar of Service], *Shef'a Tal* [Abundance of Dew], *Sha'arei 'Orah* [Gates of Light]). These are the works, which Pinkhes-Mendl gave to the young man who had come to learn Kabbalah from him, and who became Yitskhok's Talmud teacher for a short period of time.⁸⁸

The *Sha'arei 'Orah*, written by Joseph Gikatilla around 1290 (published in 1559; new edition by J. Ben-Shlomo, Jerusalem, 1970), is a "detailed explanation of kabbalistic symbolism" and the designation of the ten *Sfirot*. This book, which already shows the influence of parts of the *Zohar*, became one of the major works of Spanish Kabbalah.⁸⁹

⁸³ בית-דין שטוב, 76, 231. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 195 f.

⁸⁴ בית-דין שטוב, 53. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 196.

⁸⁵ בית-דין שטוב, 53. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 78, 195.

⁸⁶ בית-דין שטוב, 175 f., 204. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 84.

⁸⁷ המשכים-זאמלונג, 74, 78.

⁸⁸ בית-דין שטוב, 252.

⁸⁹ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 59, 410.

The above-mentioned *Shef'a Tal* by Shabbetai Sheftel Horowitz of Prague (1612), which Yitskhok also studied in Biłgoraj, is an attempt to reconcile the Lurianic theory of *Zimzum* with the Kabbalah of Moshe Cordovero.⁹⁰

The *'Amud ha-'Avodah* is an introduction to Lurianic Kabbalah by Barukh Kosover (written about 1763, but only printed in 1854).⁹¹ Bashevis reports in his memoirs that once, when his mother was tarrying for several weeks in Biłgoraj and Yitskhok was left without any supervision in the family's apartment in Warsaw, he studied Talmud with Tosafot, looked through the *Shulḥan 'Arukh* and Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* and also found the "עמוד העבודה" פון ר' ברוך קאסאָווער (*'Amud ha-'Avodah* by R. Barukh Kosover) among the books on his father's shelves. Reading this kabbalistic work as a boy, there were many things, which Yitskhok did not understand. But then Bashevis continues:

“אַבער דאָ און דאָרט האָב איך יאָ עפעס באַנומען. ס'איז געווען ווי אַ פאַרזיגלטער קוואַל וואָלט זיך געעפנט

“אין מיין מוח. (But here and there I did understand something. It was, as if a sealed source had been opened in my brain.)⁹²

Another work of the “Lurianic school” mentioned by Bashevis in his memoirs, is the *Ma'avar Yabok* (Crossing of the Yabok) by Aharon Berekhiah b. Moshe of Modena (Mantua, 1623). The *Ma'avar Yabok* is a work dealing with life after death and providing a summary of Lurianic eschatological teachings. Bashevis refers to this book in connection with a ḥasidic man, who used to come to his father's court to write and rewrite his will and who was “אײנגעטאָן אין מעבר יבוק און אין יענער-וועלט” (completely occupied with the *Ma'avar Yabok* and the World-to-Come).⁹³

Apart from his interest in kabbalistic literature Yitskhok Bashevis also mentions his contact with ḥasidic literature in his childhood. Thus for example he refers to the young son-in-law of Yoysef Mates, who used to sit in the Radzymin *shtibl* on Krochmalna

⁹⁰ Ibid., 77.

⁹¹ Ibid., 84, 134.

⁹² 139, בית-דין שטוב

⁹³ Ibid., 90. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 333.

Street, studying the Talmud and reading ḥasidic books, like the *נועם אלימלך* (*No 'am 'Elimelekh*) and the *קדושת לוי* (*Kedushat Levi*).⁹⁴

The *No 'am 'Elimelekh* (Pleasantness of Elimelekh) is a ḥasidic work written by R. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk (Lemberg, 1788), the *Kedushat Levi* (Holiness of Levi) a ḥasidic work by R. Levi Yitshak of Berdichev (Slavuta, 1798).⁹⁵

Bashevis also mentions one of the “בטלנים” (impractical, unworldly men), who used to gather in his father’s court. This young man, named Mates, had become a follower of Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav, and he was constantly reading the *ליקוטי מוהר"ן* (*Likutei Mohara"n*), *ליקוטי תפילות* (*Likutei Tefilot*), *ליקוטי הלכות* (*Likutei Halakhot*) and “ר' נחמניס מעשיות” (R. Naḥman’s Stories). He was convinced that all the other “חסיד'ישע ספרים” (ḥasidic works) could not compare to these books. Mates often came to the apartment of the family Zinger, and without saying a word, he would begin to dance and clap his hands. Then he would noisily quote Rabbi Naḥman’s teaching:

“קײן יאוש איז גאָרנישט פאַראַן!...”⁹⁶ (There should not be any sadness!...).

The *Likutei Mohara"n* (Collection of Our Teacher, Our Rabbi, R. Naḥman) is a collection of the teachings and sermons of R. Naḥman of Bratslav, in two volumes (Ostróg, 1808; Mogilëv, 1811).⁹⁷ The *Likutei Tefilot* (Collection of Prayers) is the Bratslav prayerbook, compiled by R. Nosn Shternharts of Nemirów (Bracław, 1822).⁹⁸ The *Likutei Halakhot* (Collection of halakhic teachings) is another work by R. Nosn Shternharts, published in eight volumes (Żółkiew, 1846; Lemberg, 1861).⁹⁹ R. Naḥman’s stories are collected in a bilingual edition (Hebrew – Yiddish), in a volume entitled *סיפורי מעשיות* (*Sipurei Ma'asiot* or *Sipurey Mayses*, literally: Stories of Tales, first ed.: Ostróg, 1815).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ בית-דין שטוב, 292.

⁹⁵ Cf. Ada Rapoport-Albert (ed.), *Hasidism Reappraised*, London: Littman Library, 1996, 470, 477.

⁹⁶ בית-דין שטוב, 249 f.

⁹⁷ Cf. A. Rapoport-Albert (ed.), *Hasidism Reappraised*, 480.

⁹⁸ Cf. Joseph Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, Oxford: Littman Library, 1985, 50, 54.

⁹⁹ Cf. A. Rapoport-Albert (ed.), *Hasidism Reappraised*, 481.

¹⁰⁰ Cf.: חבא שמעורק, *פרקים פון דער יידישער ליטעראַטור-געשיכטע*, Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1988, 227, 246.

These ḥasidic, kabbalistic and ethical and philosophical works, written under kabbalistic influence, which are mentioned in Bashevis's memoirs, do not constitute a comprehensive list of the mystical works, found in Pinkhes-Mendl's rabbinical court and in the Radzymin ḥasidic *shtibl* on Krochmalna Street, to which Yitskhok had access during his childhood in Warsaw. They are, however, among those examples of mystical literature, which Bashevis frequently cites throughout his work.

Thus, for example, the above-mentioned ḥasidic works, the *Likutei Mohara"n*, *Likutei Halakhot*, *Likutei Tefilot*, *No'am 'Elimelekh* and *Kedushat Levi* are specified as being found on the bookshelves of one of the characters in Bashevis's *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, who is a follower of R. Naḥman of Bratslav.¹⁰¹ This particular ḥasidic character, Menashe-Dovidl, is incidentally also reported to be dancing and declaring that there should not be any sadness, just like the idler Mates, whom Yitskhok had known as a child.¹⁰²

In *די פאמיליע מושקאט* the Lurianic eschatological work *מעבר יבוק*, mentioned in Bashevis's memoirs, is cited as being studied by the octogenarian patriarch Meshulem Mushkat before his death.¹⁰³

The *Zohar* is referred to frequently throughout Bashevis's works, as being studied or quoted by various characters or as being found on their bookshelves.¹⁰⁴ The *Tikunei Zohar* is also occasionally said to be studied or quoted by some of Bashevis's characters.¹⁰⁵

In addition to the *Zohar*, two other kabbalistic works, mentioned in Bashevis's memoirs, are reported to be studied by Yasha Mazur in *פון לובלין דער קונצנמאכער*, when he becomes a penitent. These are the *Shef'a Tal* and the *Shnei Luḥot ha-Brit*.¹⁰⁶ The *Shnei Luḥot*

¹⁰¹ *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, 501.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 498-500, 666. – בית-דין שטוב, 249 f.

¹⁰³ *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, 114. – בית-דין שטוב, 90.

¹⁰⁴ See: *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, 130 f., 165, 351, 501, 556, 642; *דער שטן אין גארי*, 27, 30 f., 66, 76, 120, 142, 156, 166; *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, 237; *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, 255; *דער בעל-תשובה*, Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1974, 108; *מעשיות פון דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1982, 20, 39.

¹⁰⁵ See: *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, 71, 158; *דער שטן אין גארי*, 642.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 240, 242 f. – בית-דין שטוב, 53, 252.

ha-Brit is also cited as being studied by Rabbi Dan Katsenelenboygn, the grandfather of Oyzer-Heshl Banet, the main character of *די פאָמיליע מושקאָט*.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore it is referred to by the penitent Yoysef Shapiro in *דער בעל-תשובה* (*The Penitent*).¹⁰⁸ Yoysef Shapiro also refers to the *Reshit Hokhmah* and the *Mesilat Yesharim*, two of the ethical works, written under kabbalistic influence, which are mentioned in Bashevis's memoirs.¹⁰⁹

During his years in Bilgoraj Yitskhok had further opportunity to dip into kabbalistic literature. He was often sitting alone in the ḥasidic *shtibl*, studying the Hebrew Bible, being particularly interested in *איוב* (Job) and *משלי* (Proverbs). He was also looking through Jewish philosophical works, like Maimonides's *מורה נבוכים* (*The Guide for the Perplexed*) and Saadia Gaon's *האמונות והדעות* (*Book of Beliefs and Opinions*). Incidentally Yitskhok Bashevis occasionally cites these two works, as well as Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* and Bahyah ibn Pakuda's ethical, philosophical *חובות הלבבות* (*The Duties of the Heart*), two of his mother's favourite books, as examples of the philosophical studies of some of his characters.¹¹⁰

In the Turzysk ḥasidic *shtibl* there was also *פאָקטיש חיים וויטאַל* ("עץ חיים" פֿון אַר"י (פֿאַקטיש חיים וויטאַל) (an *Ez Hayim* by the ARI (actually by Ḥayim Vital) and a *Pardes* by R. Moshe Cordovero). Yitskhok dipped into these "שווערע קבלה-ספֿרים" (difficult kabbalistic works) and understood more than he had previously thought.¹¹¹

The *Ez Hayim* is a book of Lurianic teachings, written down approximately between 1573 and 1576 by Ḥayim Vital, the chief disciple of the אַר"י (R. Isaac Luria). The work consists of eight parts, called "שערים" ("Gates") and was published with the bulk of

¹⁰⁷ די פאָמיליע מושקאָט, 351.

¹⁰⁸ דער בעל-תשובה, 108.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 60, 69, 108.

¹¹⁰ See for example: די פאָמיליע מושקאָט, 285; דער קנעכט, 54, 116.

¹¹¹ דעם שנים-זאָמלונג, 151.

Ḥayim Vital's writings in Korzec in 1784, although different versions of this work had been issued earlier.¹¹²

The title "פרדס" refers to the *פרדס רימונים* (*Pardes Rimonim*, Orchard of Pomegranates), which is the first major work of Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570), the main systematic theologian of the Kabbalah in Safed. The work was written in 1548 and first published in Cracow in 1592.¹¹³

In addition to Ḥayim Vital's *'Ez Ḥayim* and Moshe Cordovero's *Pardes Rimonim* Yitskhok Bashevis cites Shabbetai Sheftel Horowitz's *Shef'a Tal* and Moshe Ḥayim Luzzatto's *Keleḥ Pitḥei Hokhmah* as examples of kabbalistic works, which he studied in the ḥasidic *shtibl* in Biłgoraj, as mentioned above.¹¹⁴ Bashevis also refers to his study of the *Shef'a Tal* at another point in his memoirs. Thus he informs his readers that he was both secretly reading books by Goethe, Shakespeare, Strindberg and other writers from the secular library in Biłgoraj, and studying Kabbalah, after his discovery of the *Shef'a Tal* in the house of study.¹¹⁵

A few years later, when Yitskhok had written his booklet on Spinoza and the Kabbalah and was traveling to Warsaw, looking for help in publishing it, he was asked at the synagogue on Tłomackie Street, which literature he had read, on which he was basing his ideas on the subject. He referred to Spinoza's *Ethics* and *Tractatus Theologi-Politicus* and to four of the kabbalistic works, cited earlier: דער "שפע טל", דער "שערי אורה", דער "פרדס" --- "קל"ח פתחי חכמה", דער "פרדס" (the *Shef'a Tal*, the *Sha'arei 'Orah*, the *Keleḥ Pitḥei Hokhmah*, the *Pardes*).¹¹⁶

These four kabbalistic works, cited here again, together with the *'Ez Ḥayim*, cited earlier, seem to be the main kabbalistic works studied by Yitskhok during his years in Biłgoraj,

¹¹² Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 424 f.

¹¹³ Ibid., 73; and J. Ben-Shlomo's article on Cordovero, ibid., 401-404.

¹¹⁴ *המשכים-תאמלוג*, 152. – See: The beginning of Section 2.5, 40.

¹¹⁵ *המשכים-תאמלוג*, 209.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 302.

although in the ḥasidic *shtibl* he probably had access to other kabbalistic literature as well, which is not mentioned in Bashevis's memoirs.

The only other mystical work, referred to in his memoirs, is the “ספר תניא” (religious work *Tanya*), of which Bashevis says: “ווי איך האָב דאָמאָלס אָפֿט אַרײַנגעקוקט” (into which I was often looking at that time).¹¹⁷ The *Tanya* is a major *Habad* ḥasidic work, written by R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1812). It was first published under the title *ליקוטי אמרים* (*Likutei 'Amarim*) – (Slavuta, 1796). The title *Tanya* was employed in the second edition (Żółkiew, 1799). The standard edition is that of Vilna (1900).¹¹⁸

This is the work, which Yitskhok reportedly took with him, when he traveled from Biłgoraj to Warsaw on his own for the first time, in order to apply for the Takhkemoynei Rabbinical Seminary.¹¹⁹

From the mystical works, which Yitskhok studied in Biłgoraj and which are explicitly mentioned in Bashevis's memoirs, the *'Ez Hayim* is frequently cited throughout his works. Thus it is studied by young men, who are not yet twenty, to the greatest disdain of Rabbi Beynesh Ashkenazi in גאָרײ דער שטן אין גאָרײ.¹²⁰ In *די פאָמיליע מושקאָט* the *'Ez Hayim* is said to be studied by Oyzer-Heshl's grandfather Rabbi Dan Katsenelenboygn, by the *rebe* of Białodrewna and by another ḥasidic character.¹²¹ In *דער קנעכט* the main character Yankev recalls a kabbalistic idea from his previous study of the *'Ez Hayim*.¹²² In *דער קונצנמאָכער פון לובלין* Yasha Mazur, who has turned into R. Yankev, the penitent, is studying the *'Ez Hayim* in his penitential cell.¹²³ Apart from the *Zohar*, the *'Ez Hayim*, the *Shnei Luḥot ha-Brit* and the *Shef'a Tal*, Cordovero's *Pardes Rimonim* is also said to

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 227.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Naftali Loewenthal, 'Habad Approaches to Contemplative Prayer, 1790-1920', in: A. Rapoport-Albert (ed.), *Hasidism Reappraised*, 289.

¹¹⁹ *דמשכים-זאמלונג*, 227.

¹²⁰ *דער שטן אין גאָרײ*, 30.

¹²¹ *די פאָמיליע מושקאָט*, 285, 556, 642.

¹²² *דער קנעכט*, 189.

¹²³ *דער קונצנמאָכער פון לובלין*, 243.

be among the books studied by Yasha, after becoming a penitent.¹²⁴ The *Pardes Rimonim* is likewise studied by Yankev in דער קנעכט.¹²⁵ Meyer Tumtum speaks about his studies of the *Zohar*, the *Pardes Rimonim* and the 'Ez Ḥayim in the title story of מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון (Stories From Behind the Stove).¹²⁶ The *Pardes Rimonim* and the 'Ez Ḥayim are also studied by Yoyne Meyer in 'דער שוחט' (The Slaughterer) in the same collection of short stories, מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון.¹²⁷

These are the kabbalistic works explicitly mentioned by Yitskhok Bashevis as having constituted an important part of his mystical studies.¹²⁸ There are, however, also several other mystical works, referred to in Bashevis's novels and short stories, which are not mentioned in his memoirs. Yitskhok Bashevis must have had access to these works at some point during his life, although he does not specify in his memoirs, whether he has come across these specific mystical works in Warsaw or in Biłgoraj, and in which particular context he has come into contact with them.

One of these works is the kabbalistic משנת חסידים (*Mishnat Ḥasidim*, Mishnah of the Pious), which is said to be studied by both Meyer Tumtum and Yoyne Meyer in Bashevis's collection of short stories מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון.¹²⁹ The *Mishnat Ḥasidim* is a summary of Lurianic כוונות (mystical intentions) and "mystical prayers" by the Italian Kabbalist Immanuel Ḥai Ricchi (Amsterdam, 1727).¹³⁰ This kabbalistic book is also mentioned in די פאמיליע מושקאט, where one of the ḥasidic characters is reported to have written a commentary on *Mishnat Ḥasidim*.¹³¹ The same ḥasidic character, R. Moyshe-Gavriel, is also said to be studying the ספרא דצניעותא (*Sifra di-Zni'uta*, "Book of Concealment") and the תולדות יעקב יוסף (*Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, Generations of

¹²⁴ Ibid., 237, 240, 243.

¹²⁵ דער קנעכט, 116.

¹²⁶ מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון, 20.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 31.

¹²⁸ המשכים-זאמלונג, 151 f., 302.

¹²⁹ מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון, 20, 31.

¹³⁰ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 84, 179.

¹³¹ די פאמיליע מושקאט, 512.

Jacob-Joseph), in addition to the *Zohar*, the *Tikunei Zohar* and the *'Ez Hayim*, referred to above. The *Sifra di-Zni'uta* is a document of six pages, containing a commentary on passages from the first six chapters of the Book of Genesis in a “highly oracular and obscure” style, which forms part of the “Zoharic literature”.¹³² The *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef* is a ḥasidic work, written by R. Ya'akov Yosef of Polonnoye (Korzec, 1780).¹³³ It is also reported to be found on the bookshelves of the above-mentioned Bratslav ḥasidic character Menashe-Dovidl in די פאמיליע מושקאט.¹³⁴

Another kabbalistic work, not mentioned in Bashevis's memoirs, which is cited in one of his novels, is the ספר-הגלגולים (*Sefer ha-Gilgulim*, Book of Transmigrations). This work is quoted in דער שטן אין גארי by R. Itshe Mates, one of the leaders of the Shabbatean movement in Goraj, together with passages from the *Zohar* and various *Midrashim*.¹³⁵ The *Sefer ha-Gilgulim* is a Lurianic work by R. Hayim Vital, presenting “lengthy explanations of the histories of biblical characters in the light of their former *gilgulim*” (Frankfurt, 1684).¹³⁶ Another mystical work, cited in the same context, is referred to by Bashevis as “רזיאל-המלאך” (The Angel Razi'el)¹³⁷ This work is better known under the title ספר רזיאל (*Sefer Razi'el*) and includes the first part of R. Elazar of Worms's work *Sodei Razaya* (“Secrets of the Mysteries”) – (Amsterdam, 1701). The *Sefer Razi'el* contains long lists of Divine and angelic names and is often used for magical purposes.¹³⁸ Although this mystical work is not specifically cited in the two Yiddish volumes of Bashevis's memoirs which exist in book form, it is mentioned at one point in the author's semi-fictional autobiography, published in English as *Love and Exile*. Referring to his reading of kabbalistic works in his youth, Bashevis states: “Some

¹³² Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 159 f.

¹³³ Cf. A. Rapoport-Albert (ed.), *Hasidism Reappraised*, 475.

¹³⁴ די פאמיליע מושקאט, 501.

¹³⁵ דער שטן אין גארי, 66.

¹³⁶ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 348.

¹³⁷ דער שטן אין גארי, 66.

¹³⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*; J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 70, 72, 77, 92, 95.

of the Cabala books were chiefly concerned with sacred matters, but others, such as the *Book of Razi'el* and the *Book of the Devout*, devoted much space to the powers of evil – demons, devils, imps, hobgoblins – as well as to magic.”¹³⁹ The “*Book of Razi'el*” obviously refers to the *Sefer Razi'el*, the “*Book of the Devout*” to the *Sefer Ḥasidim*, mentioned above.¹⁴⁰

In דער שטן אין גאָרײ the *Sefer Razi'el* is also mentioned among the mystical works studied by young men of not yet twenty, of which the rabbi of Goraj, R. Beynesh, is highly critical.¹⁴¹ In two other novels by Bashevis, די פאַמיליע מושקאַט and דער קנעכט, the *Sefer Razi'el* is employed for magical purposes by some of his characters.¹⁴² In דער קנעכט the *Sefer Razi'el* is among the three mystical works carried by Yankev, as a protection against demons. The other two works are the *Tikunei Zohar*, already mentioned above, and a mystical work, which is not cited in the two volumes of Bashevis’s memoirs, but is frequently referred to throughout his novels and short stories, the ספר יצירה (*Sefer Yezirah*, “Book of Creation”).¹⁴³

The *Sefer Yezirah* is the “earliest extant Hebrew text of systematic, speculative thought”, containing speculation on the “מעשה בראשית” (“act of creation”) by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The major part of this work was written in Palestine between the third and the sixth century C.E., and the whole work was printed for the first time in Mantua in 1562.¹⁴⁴

In Bashevis’s works the *Sefer Yezirah* is often cited as being studied by some of his characters or as being employed for magical purposes. Thus it is not only used as an apotropaic device by Yankev in דער קנעכט, but also by one of the ḥasidic characters in

¹³⁹ I.B. Singer, *Love and Exile*, 12.

¹⁴⁰ See: The beginning of Section 2.5, 41.

¹⁴¹ דער שטן אין גאָרײ, 30.

¹⁴² די פאַמיליע מושקאַט, 412; דער קנעכט, 189.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 189.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 23, 27, 29.

די פאמיליע מושקאט.¹⁴⁵ Apart from this, the *Sefer Yezirah* is studied by Oyzer-Heshl's grandfather Rabbi Dan, and Oyzer-Heshl, admiring the stars in a majestic nocturnal sky, feels reminded of the holy names in his grandfather's *Sefer Yezirah*.¹⁴⁶ The *Sefer Yezirah* is also referred to several times in דער שטן אין גאריי. It is said to be studied by the Kabbalist R. Mordkhe Yoysef, and R. Itshe Mates employs the *Sefer Yezirah* in a magical way by carrying it with him to ward off evil spirits and by producing doves by incantations from it, as it is rumoured.¹⁴⁷ In מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון Meyer Tumtum carries the *Sefer Yezirah* and employs it as a protection against an evil spirit.¹⁴⁸ In the story entitled 'דער שוחט' in the same collection, מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון, the *Sefer Yezirah* is among the mystical works, reported to be studied by Yoyne Meyer.¹⁴⁹

These are all instances, where the *Sefer Yezirah* is directly referred to in Bashevis's works. There are, however, numerous occasions, where Bashevis makes use of the central idea of the *Sefer Yezirah*, the creation of the world by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the resulting power inherent in language in general and in works composed out of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in particular. The mystical basis of this idea will be presented within the following chapter, and its use in some of Bashevis's novels will be identified in the course of the detailed analysis of these novels.

There is very little information on Yitskhok's mystical reading material during the years, when he was trying to establish himself back in Warsaw, becoming associated with the Yiddish Writers' Association, working as a proofreader for the ליטעראַרישע בלעטער, translating world literature into Yiddish and eventually publishing his own short stories in Yiddish publications in Warsaw. Bashevis remarks in his semi-fictional autobiography

¹⁴⁵ די פאמיליע מושקאט, 129, דער קנעכט, 189, 207, 214.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 294, 298.

¹⁴⁷ דער שטן אין גאריי, 47, 81, 160.

¹⁴⁸ מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון, 24.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 31.

that he spent hours at the Bresler Library, reading books on philosophy, on psychology and on science. During these years he also became interested in psychic research and he often took his books on this subject along to the Writers' association, where he sat reading, being ridiculed by the Yiddish writers for his choice of reading material.¹⁵⁰ At the Writers' Association Yitskhok also met the Yiddish poet and playwright Arn Tseytlin (Aaron Zeitlin), the son of the Jewish philosopher and Kabbalist Hilel Tseytlin, whose history of philosophy Yitskhok had read in Bilgoraj. Like his father, Arn was a mystic, fascinated by Kabbalah. Arn and Yitskhok soon became friends, and in 1932 they collaborated on editing the Yiddish journal גלאַנס, in which Yitskhok Bashevis published his first novel ״דער שטן אין גאָר״ in 1933.¹⁵¹

In his autobiography Bashevis remarks that he was still reading “cabala books and Chassidic volumes” at this time in his life, but he does not specify any of these works. “Rummaging through the bookstores and libraries”, he found various books on Shabbatai Zvi and Jacob Frank and he became interested in these eras of Jewish history. He mentions “Professor Kraushaar’s works about the False Messiah, Jacob Frank, and his disciples” in particular, and he states that he read everything he could find “about the era of Sabbetai Zevi, in whose footsteps Jacob Frank had followed”. But he does not provide any titles of the works, which he has read on this subject.¹⁵² Bashevis also mentions books on “the Crusades and their mass hysterias, as well as various accounts of dybbuks both Jewish and Gentile”. In these works he found everything he had been pondering previously, and he realized that these subjects had already been discussed in his family’s home. He recalls his father’s admiration for Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschuetz, an eighteenth century Kabbalist and author of the *לוחות עדות* (*Luhot ‘Edut*, Tablets of Testimony, published in Altona in 1755 and 1775), a copy of which could usually be found on the

¹⁵⁰ I.B. Singer, *Love and Exile*, 52-54.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 55-57, 136, 185 f. Cf. also: J. Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life*, 61 f.

¹⁵² I.B. Singer, *Love and Exile*, 94 f.

desk in his father's study. Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschuetz had been accused by his opponents, particularly by Rabbi Jacob Emden, of being a secret follower of Shabbatai Zvi and of issuing amulets with Shabbatean formulae.¹⁵³ Yitskhok's father constantly cited Jacob Emden's works *Torat ha-Kena'ot* (The Teaching of Zeal, Amsterdam, 1752), *'Edut b-Ya'akov* (Testimony in Jacob) and *Shvirat Luhot ha-'Aron* (Breaking of the Tablets of the Ark), and argued that Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschuetz had been "a just and pious man" and that all the accusations against him were false.¹⁵⁴

Bashevis adds: "Disputes between rabbis going back some two hundred years had more substance in our house than current events in the daily newspaper." He informs his readers that his father believed every word written by the Kabbalists and was highly critical of those who held that the *Zohar* was not written by Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, to whom it is traditionally attributed, but by the Spanish Kabbalist Moshe ben Shem Tov de Leon (1240-1305), whom modern scholars credit with the composition of the major part of the *Zohar*.¹⁵⁵ Yitskhok's father constantly told "tales of transmigrated spirits, dybbuks, and miracles performed by various wonder-rabbis" to his younger children, resenting the rationalism and logic of his wife Basheve and the mitnagdic tendency of her father, the rabbi of Biłgoraj, who "thought highly of Jacob Emden". Bashevis adds: "From childhood I had been steeped in Chassidism, cabala, miracles, and all kinds of occult beliefs and fantasies. After lengthy stumbling and groping I rediscovered what I had been carrying within me the whole time."¹⁵⁶

This passage from Bashevis's autobiography is very informative for the purpose of this investigation of Bashevis's sources on Jewish mysticism and mystical messianism.

After publishing various short stories of a realist style and character in the Yiddish press

¹⁵³ Ibid., 95 f. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 285, 407.

¹⁵⁴ I.B. Singer, *Love and Exile*, 96.

¹⁵⁵ I.B. Singer, *Love and Exile*, 96. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 213, 233-235, 432-434, 442.

¹⁵⁶ I.B. Singer, *Love and Exile*, 96 f.

in Warsaw, mainly in the weekly *ליטעראַרישע בלעטער*, during the years of 1925-1932, Bashevis's first full-length novel *דער שטן אין גאָר*, published in *גלאָבוס* in 1933, presents an important turning point in his writings. It is an account of the influence of Shabbatean messianism on a small *shtetl* in Poland, filled with mystical allusions, descriptions of demonical possession and mass hysteria, and it demonstrates the author's exceptional knowledge of Shabbai Zvi's biography, the historical development of the Shabbatean movement and the Shabbatean interpretation of ideas from Lurianic Kabbalah, as well as his knowledge of ethnographic detail, his ability to imitate various styles and his familiarity with accounts of demonic possession.

From the above-quoted passage of Bashevis's autobiography we know that he had combed the Warsaw libraries and bookshops and read everything he could find on the eras of Shabbatai Zvi and Jacob Frank and the messianic mass movements incited by them, although he does not mention any specific titles. Furthermore we know about his reading on mass hysteria, connected with the time of the Crusades, and on demonic possession, although he again does not cite any specific works. This reading is supplemented by his childhood memories of his father's tales of transmigrated spirits, dybbuks and other supernatural phenomena, as well as by his experience of the old-fashioned Jewish life of a *shtetl*, with all its customs and superstitions, during his years in Bilgoraj.

But the most interesting detail in this passage is the reference to the controversy between Rabbi Jacob Emden and Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz concerning Rabbi Jonathan's alleged Shabbatean beliefs, which was a popular topic of discussion between Yitskhok's parents.¹⁵⁷ Jonathan Eybeschutz's *Luhot 'Edut*, a favourite work of Yitskhok's father, includes an interpretation of the "Holy Names" found in Rabbi Jonathan's amulets and a defence against Jacob Emden's allegations that these amulets contain "unmistakable

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 96.

Shabbatean formulae”.¹⁵⁸ Rabbi Jacob Emden, Shabbateanism’s “most fiery opponent”, and the author of numerous writings criticizing Shabbateanism and its “European branches”, contributed considerably to our knowledge of the Shabbatean movement and the “critical examination of Jewish mysticism”.¹⁵⁹ One of the three works by Jacob Emden, mentioned explicitly by Bashevis as being frequently cited by his father, the *Torat ha-Kena’ot*, is an important source on Shabbatai Zvi and his movement. It contains four different accounts on Shabbatai Zvi: An abbreviated Hebrew version of Leyb ben Ozer’s Yiddish manuscript, entitled באַשר״בונוג פון שבתי צבי; a Hebrew redaction of a Dutch account of Shabbatai Zvi by Thomas Coenen (Amsterdam, 1669), “with additions from an unknown source”; Abraham Cuenque’s memoir (written in Frankfurt in 1690) with critical notes by Moses Hāgiz and Tobias Kohen’s account of Shabbatai Zvi from his book *Ma’ašeh Tovyah* (Venice, 1707). Jacob Emden also published a pamphlet by the rabbis of Venice against Nathan of Gaza (Venice, 1668) and a “Testimony” by R. Moses ben Hābib of Salonika (about 1700), reporting traditions concerning Shabbatai Zvi and his followers.¹⁶⁰

Thus it is a significant piece of information that Yitskhok had access to such an important historical source on Shabbatai Zvi and his movement in his father’s rabbinical court. He might also have had access to this work in the house of his mother’s family in Biłgoraj, since his grandfather had “thought highly of Jacob Emden”.¹⁶¹

All these works, cited in Bashevis’s autobiography, those he refers to by name and those he only refers to by subject matter, form an important part of his source material for his first historical novel לער שטן אין גאָר״. There is an important article, entitled ‘The Sources of Yitskhok Bashevis-Zinger’s *Der sotn in goray*’ by Prof. Chava Turniansky, in which

¹⁵⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 407.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998, 210.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi: The Mystical Messiah*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989 (first ed. 1973), 935, 939 f.

¹⁶¹ I.B. Singer, *Love and Exile*, 96.

she investigates further possible sources of Bashevis's first novel. In addition to the above-mentioned mystical works, explicitly cited in the novel, and Jacob Emden's *Torat ha-Kena'ot*, she suggests that Bashevis has consulted the existing Jewish histories by Graetz or Dubnow on the period of Shabbatai Zvi, as well as the attempts to portray the life and times of Shabbatai Zvi in Hebrew and Yiddish works of fiction. Examples of this are Sholem Ash's drama *שבתי צבי* (*Shabbatai Zvi*), published in 1908, and his novel *קידוש השם* (*Sanctification of the Name*), published in 1919, Opatoshu's novel *אין פוילישע וועלדער* (*In Polish Woods*) of 1921, Moyshe Kulbak's drama *יעקב פראנק* (*Jacob Frank*) of 1923 and Arn Tseytlin's drama of the same title of 1929, as well as Nathan Bistricki's Hebrew drama *שבתי צבי* (*Shabbatai Zvi*) of 1931 and Uri Zvi Grinberg's poetry of 1924. She also mentions a few other old Hebrew accounts of Shabbatai Zvi, with which Bashevis might have been familiar, for example Nathan-Nata Hannover's *Yeven Meẓulah* (The Miry Pit), a Yiddish translation of which was published in Piotrków in 1925, and Jacob Sasportas's *Kizur Zizāt Novel Zvi*, which was published in Lwów in 1870.¹⁶² This article also provides a convincing analysis of the story about the exorcism of a dybbuk in the last two chapters of Bashevis's novel and the sources of this story, based on Chone Shmeruk's previous research. Chone Shmeruk mentions the *שער הגלגולים* (*Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim*, Gate of Transmigrations; Przemyśl, 1875), the *שבחי האר"י* (*Shivhei ha-'Ar"i*, In Praise of the ARI), the *ספר תולדות האר"י* (*Sefer Toldot ha-'Ar"i*, Book of the generations of the ARI) and the *מעשה "כי נורא הוא"* (*Ma'ašeh ha-Shem ki nora hu*, Story of the Eternal, for He is awe-inspiring; first printed at the end of Moshe ben Menakhem Graf's *זרע קודש* [Holy Seed], Fürth, 1696).¹⁶³ There is also a clear connection between Bashevis's dybbuk story and a seventeenth century story concerning the dybbuk of Korets, entitled "מעשה של רוח בק"ק קארעץ" (Tale of a spirit in the holy community of

¹⁶² Chava Turniansky, 'The Sources of Yitskhok Bashevis-Zinger's *Der sotn in goray*', in: Hugh Denman (ed.), *Isaac Bashevis Singer: His Work and His World*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003, 243-264.

¹⁶³ Chone Shmeruk, 'The Use of Monologue as a Narrative Technique in the Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer', in: *דער שפיגל און אנדערע דערציילונגען*, VIII f. and the Hebrew original of this article, *ibid.*, ט.

Korets), which is included in Max Weinreich's history of Yiddish literature in a section entitled "צוויי צייטונגסמעסיקע באַריכטן פֿון 17טן יאָרהונדערט" (Two quasi-journalistic reports from the 17th century).¹⁶⁴ This connection is likewise analyzed in detail in the above-mentioned article by Chava Turniansky.

All these sources, together with the works, referred to in Bashevis's autobiography and the mystical works, mentioned explicitly in "דער שטן אין גאָר", have contributed to the unique composition of Bashevis's first novel. The role of Jewish mysticism and Shabbatean messianism in the novel as a whole will be documented in detail in a separate chapter of this study.

2.6. Conclusion

In the two collections of Bashevis's memoirs, which are available in Yiddish book form, *מיין טאַטנס בית-דין שטוב* and *המשכים-זאמלונג* [דעם שטוב בית-דין-שטוב], there are many references to kabbalistic literature, earlier Jewish mystical literature, ḥasidic literature and ethical works, written under kabbalistic influence, with which the young Yitskhok had come into contact in his father's rabbinical court in Warsaw and during his years at the house of his mother's family in Bilgoraj. Furthermore several kabbalistic ideas are referred to in connection with Yitskhok's father and his mystical beliefs and teachings.

From his early childhood Yitskhok had been steeped in Ḥasidism, Kabbalah and tales of supernatural occurrences, as he himself remarks in his autobiography.¹⁶⁵ In the second Yiddish volume of his memoirs Bashevis also states that everything connected with philosophical questions, mysticism and soul-searching had been familiar to him since his childhood.¹⁶⁶

On his father's side Yitskhok was descended from generations of rabbis, *ḥasidim* and

¹⁶⁴ מאַקס וויינרײַך, *בילדער פֿון דער ייִדישער ליטעראַטור-געשיכטע פֿון די אָנדייבן ביז מענדעלע מוכר-ספרים*, Vilna: Tamar, 1928, 254-261.

¹⁶⁵ I.B. Singer, *Love and Exile*, 97.

¹⁶⁶ *המשכים-זאמלונג*, 151.

Kabbalists, and his father, the unofficial rabbi of Krochmalna Street in Warsaw, was an ardent *ḥasid*, with a bookcase filled with ḥasidic and kabbalistic literature. Yitskhok's mother also came from a venerated rabbinical family, but her father, the much-respected rabbi of Bilgoraj, was a rationalist and a *mitnaged*, an opponent of Ḥasidism.

Yitskhok and his siblings lived in a household fraught with tension between their parents' diametrically opposed characters, formed by their different family backgrounds, Pinkhes-Mendl's mysticism, his ḥasidic enthusiasm and his belief in people and particularly in ḥasidic wonder rabbis, and Basheve's rationalism, scepticism and mitnagdic tendencies. But while each of Yitskhok's two older siblings turned to one of their parents in their search for a role model, Hinde-Ester to her father's enthusiasm and Yisroel-Yehoshue to his mother's rationalism and scepticism, Yitskhok was strongly influenced by both of his parents and succeeded in integrating both his father's mysticism and his mother's rationalism in his writings.

Although on beginning his career as a Yiddish writer, Yitskhok chose the name Bashevis derived from his mother's name Basheve as his *nom de plume*, thereby acknowledging his mother's part of his heritage, he remained fascinated by his father's mystical beliefs and teachings, which also found their way into Bashevis's writings. Among the motifs associated with his father's mystical world, which can be traced in Bashevis's writings, is the connection between the majesty of the nocturnal sky and mystical images of the higher spheres and the world-to-come. Another such motif is the power and holiness inherent in writings in the Hebrew script, connected to the idea of the creation of the world by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, as it is expressed in *Sefer Yezirah*. An important ḥasidic teaching, expressed by Yitskhok's father, is the idea that everything is Godliness. Bashevis frequently employs this mystical idea of God's immanence in the world in his works as one of the experiences of God made by his characters, the experience of God's revelation in God's creation. The second extreme form of experience

of the Divine, made by Bashevis's characters throughout his works, the experience of God's concealment and inscrutability in the face of suffering, is often explained by his characters with a particular interpretation of a kabbalistic, Lurianic idea, the concept of *Zimzum*. The Divine act of *Zimzum*, of God's self-contraction and withdrawal, in order to make the creation of the world possible, also allowed the emergence of evil in the world. According to one interpretation of the concept of *Zimzum*, held by several of Bashevis's characters, the metaphysical root of evil is already inherent in the privation of the act of *Zimzum*, and the purpose of creation was to give God's creatures the opportunity to perfect themselves and to choose between good and evil. This interpretation of *Zimzum* is expressed particularly in the writings of Moshe Hayim Luzzatto.¹⁶⁷ It is therefore interesting to note that Bashevis mentions two of Luzzatto's works explicitly in his memoirs as forming part of the kabbalistic literature, to which he had access during his childhood and youth. These are the *Keleḥ Pitḥei Hokhmah* and the ethical work *Mesilat Yesharim*. Furthermore Bashevis mentions an introduction to Lurianic Kabbalah, which he had tried to understand as a boy. This is Barukh Kosover's *'Amud ha-'Avodah*, which expresses the same teleological interpretation of *Zimzum*, upheld by Luzzatto, but explained in simpler, more accessible terms.

Another motif, derived from Lurianic Kabbalah, which is frequently employed in Bashevis's writings and which can be traced back to Pinkhes-Mendl's kabbalistic instructions to his son, is the motif of the "הייליקע פֿונקען" or "sparks of holiness", connected to the Lurianic concept of the "breaking of the vessels". Pinkhes-Mendl taught his son that, according to the Kabbalah, there are even "sparks of holiness" in the mud in the gutter. In Bashevis's writings sparks of light can frequently be found in contexts of physical or metaphorical darkness.

In his father's rabbinical court Yitskhok had the opportunity to dip into kabbalistic and

¹⁶⁷ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 135.

other Jewish mystical literature. Several works are explicitly cited in Bashevis's memoirs, but they hardly constitute a comprehensive list of the mystical works in Pinkhes-Mendl's study. More titles of kabbalistic works are mentioned in connection with Yitskhok's studies in the Turzysk ḥasidic *shtibl* in Biłgoraj, which obviously do not constitute a comprehensive list either. Other mystical works are cited in Bashevis's writings, which are not explicitly mentioned in his memoirs. All the titles of mystical works, provided in Bashevis's memoirs and his other writings, form a considerable part of the mystical literature, which was available to him in his earlier years, which he has dipped into and partly studied in more depth, but it is most likely that there were many more mystical works, available to him, which he does not refer to in his writings.

Most prominent among the works, which he does mention, are the *Zohar* and other works of the Zoharic literature, the early mystical work *Sefer Yeẓirah*, works connected to Jewish magic and supernatural phenomena, like the *Sefer Razi'el* and the *Sefer Ḥasidim*, works presenting the Kabbalah of Moshe Cordovero and particularly works presenting the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, like Ḥayim Vital's *'Ez Ḥayim* and Moshe Ḥayim Luzzatto's works, as well as ethical works, written under kabbalistic, mainly Lurianic influence.

For the composition of his first full length novel *דער שטן אין גאָרײ*, in addition to the mystical works explicitly cited, Bashevis must have also consulted the available works on Jewish history, modern works of fiction, dealing with Shabbatai Ẓvi and his period, as well as older Hebrew sources on Shabbatai Ẓvi and the Shabbatean movement. In particular, as he mentions in his autobiography, he was familiar with the controversy between Jacob Emden and Jonathan Eybeschuetz, whom Emden had accused of being a secret follower of Shabbatai Ẓvi. Works by both Emden and Eybeschuetz were accessible to Yitskhok already in his father's court, and one of Jacob Emden's works, the *Torat ha-Kena'ot*, was an important source on Shabbatai Ẓvi and his movement.

The specific mystical concepts, employed by Bashevis in his writings, will be explained in a separate chapter. The role of Jewish mysticism in the literary composition of four of his major novels will also be documented in separate chapters of this study. The purpose of this chapter was to explore the mystical influences on Bashevis's life, his family background, his experiences in his father's rabbinical court, ideas connected to his father's mystical world view, as well as his experiences of old-fashioned traditional Jewish *shtetl* life in Biłgoraj, and particularly to investigate the numerous sources informing Bashevis's treatment of Jewish mysticism and mystical messianism in his writings.

3. Jewish Mystical Concepts, Images and Themes in Bashevis's Writings

3.1. Introduction

יא, ווי לאנג ס'איז דא א יידיש וואָרט, האָב איך אַן אָנהאַלטעניש. ווי לאַנג די מילכן

האַבן גישט אויפֿגעגעסן ס'לעצטע בלעטל, איז נאָך דאָ מיט וואָס זיך צו שפּילן.

וואָס וועט זיין שפּעטער, וויל איך פֿאַרן מויל גישט ברענגען.

אַן אַ יידיש אות –

איז אַ שד אַ ייד – אויס...¹

Yes, as long as there is a Jewish word, I have got sustenance.

As long as the moths have not devoured the last page, there is still something to play with. What will happen after this, I'd rather not bring to my lips.

When the last Jewish letter is gone,

the last of the Jewish demons is gone...²

This quotation from Bashevis's short story 'מעשה טישעוויץ', found in his collection of stories *דער שפיגל און אַנדערע דערציילונגען* (*The Mirror and Other Stories*) and translated as 'The Last Demon', is one of the best examples of an important Jewish mystical idea underlying many of Bashevis's writings, the idea of the power inherent in language and in particular in the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. According to the earliest systematic Hebrew mystical work, the *ספר יצירה* or "Book of Creation", which Bashevis often refers to in his writings, the universe was created from infinite combinations of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The universe is therefore essentially linguistic, and its Divine Creator can be understood as the original archetypal writer.³ Thus, according to this mystical linguistic theory, language both creates reality and is reality. Bashevis, as a

¹ יצחק באַשעוויס-זינגער, *דער שפיגל און אַנדערע דערציילונגען*, 22.

² My own translation. The existing English translation by Martha Glicklich and Cecil Hemley omits some significant details, translating "אַ יידיש וואָרט" as "a single volume" and omitting the fact that in the Yiddish original both the last letter and the last of the demons are Jewish. – Cf. I.B. Singer, *Short Friday and Other Stories*, London: Penguin, 1983 (first ed. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1964), 112.

³ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 23-26.

writer of Yiddish fiction, imitates God's primal creative act in his creation of fictional worlds through language and, more precisely, through a language written in the same Hebrew characters, with which the whole universe was created, according to the teachings of the *Sefer Yezirah*.

This idea is one of the most fundamental Jewish mystical concepts, which permeate Bashevis's writings. This chapter will present an overview of this and other Jewish mystical ideas, images and themes employed in Bashevis's works and provide an explanation of their theoretical background.

There is a close connection between the "linguistic-mystical cosmogony" of *Sefer Yezirah* and forms of Jewish magic, based on the "creative, magical power of the letters and words".⁴ In Bashevis's writings mysticism and magic are often intertwined. Thus Jewish mystical works are frequently employed for magical purposes by several of his characters. Various examples of "קבלה מעשית" or practical Kabbalah are cited repeatedly, many of his characters adhere to superstitious beliefs and practices, and in his short stories Bashevis's fictional worlds are often populated by demons, dybbuks and "גלגולים" (transmigrated souls).

But the idea of the creation of the world through combinations of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, as it is expressed in *Sefer Yezirah*, is an important Jewish mystical concept in its own right, which transcends its use in Jewish magic. In Bashevis's works this idea plays a significant role, which deserves further investigation. It also has considerable implications for Bashevis's own artistic creation and his self-understanding as a Yiddish writer.

It is important furthermore to take into account the doctrine of creation in Lurianic Kabbalah, since Lurianic ideas, images and allusions can be found frequently throughout Bashevis's works. The Lurianic concept of *Zimzum* is often referred to in Bashevis's

⁴ Ibid., 26.

writings and is closely connected with one of the two extreme experiences of God, made by many of his characters, that is to say God's concealment and the hiding of God's face, which is juxtaposed to the experience of Divine revelation in nature, God's creation. The Lurianic concept of the "breaking of the vessels" and the emergence of the *Klipot* as the root of evil is also significant for an understanding of the meaning and purpose of evil expressed by several of Bashevis's characters. Another motif closely connected with this concept is the image of "פֿונקען" or "sparks" of light, appearing throughout Bashevis's works in contexts of darkness or evil and alluding to the Lurianic idea of the "sparks of holiness". The last stage in the Lurianic doctrine of creation is "תיקון", the restoration of the universe to its originally intended state of harmony. The hope for *Tikun* is closely connected with the hope for messianic redemption, which finds its expression in many of Bashevis's writings. It involves both the overcoming of Israel's exile and of the exile of the *Shekhinah*. In most of Bashevis's writings this hope for redemption remains unfulfilled. But there are a few examples in his short stories and particularly in his novel *דער קנעכט*, where a vision of *Tikun* is expressed in images relating to the "זיווג קדישא" or "sacred marriage".

Finally the interpretation of Lurianic concepts in Shabbateanism requires some elucidation, since it plays a major role in Bashevis's first novel *דער שטן אין גאָר*.

The idea concerning the power of language, expressed in Bashevis's short story 'מעשה טישעוויץ', has a close parallel in his novel *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, where we find a reference to the artistry of the magician, whose every word has a meaning.⁵

Clearly an oblique allusion is intended to Bashevis's own fiction, in which (at least in Yiddish) every word is weighed for its connotations.

Thus Bashevis's use of Jewish mystical concepts, images and themes in his writings has

⁵ 'מעשה טישעוויץ', in: *דער שפיגל און אנדערע דערציילונגען*, 12, 22. – *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, 11 f. See below: Section 3.3, 76.

a deep meaning for his literary creation, which it is possible to elucidate.

3.2. Jewish Mysticism and Magic

Throughout Bashevis's writings there are many references to the use of Jewish mystical works for magical purposes. Thus in *דער שטן אין גאָרײ* one of the leaders of the Shabbatean movement in Goraj, R. Itshe Mates, utilises of the *Sefer Yezirah* in an apotropaic manner and, according to a rumour, by producing from it doves by means of incantations.⁶ In *די פאָמיליע מושקאַט* one ḥasidic character named Akive decides to put the *Sefer Yezirah* underneath his pillow as a protection against the forces of the *סיטרא אחרא* (the realm of Satan and the evil spirits).⁷ For the same reason the *Sefer Razi'el* is placed underneath the pillow of Eydl, Oyzer-Heshl's first wife, when she is about to give birth.⁸ In *דער קנעכט* Yankev carries with him the *Sefer Yezirah*, *Sefer Razi'el* and *Tikunei Zohar* as a protection against demons and he places the *Sefer Yezirah* underneath Sore's pillow, when she is struggling in a particularly difficult labour.⁹ In *דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין*, when the magician Yasha Mazur picks up a torn book from a synagogue, he wonders, whether this is a kabbalistic text, which he could use for his magical performances, for instance in order to tap wine from the wall or to create living doves.¹⁰

These are only a few significant examples in Bashevis's works, where Jewish mysticism and magic are closely connected. In fact, there has been a considerable "magical influence" on Jewish mysticism, beginning already with the *Heikhalot* literature. It is assumed that the Hebrew language possesses "special traits, which account for the influence of masters using combinations of letters that form the divine names". This "magical view of the Hebrew language" is shared by most forms of magic in Judaism

⁶ *דער שטן אין גאָרײ*, 81, 160.

⁷ *די פאָמיליע מושקאַט*, 129.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 412.

⁹ *דער קנעכט*, 189, 207.

¹⁰ *דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין*, 72, 74.

and has remained influential in numerous kabbalistic texts.¹¹

All the examples from Bashevis's writings of the use of Jewish mystical works for magical or superstitious practices testify to the popular belief in the inherent power of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and particularly of texts containing "שמות" (holy names).

Among the texts employed for magical purposes the *Sefer Razi'el* and *Sefer Yezirah* figure most prominently. The *Sefer Razi'el*, contains lists of angelic names, specific Divine names, incantation formulas, texts of amulets as well as detailed instructions on their preparation.¹² The *Sefer Yezirah* has also frequently been connected with forms of Jewish magic, based on the "creative, magical power" of letters and words, since it speaks of the letters, out of which Heaven and earth were created.

This idea of the power of letters was already known in Talmudic times. Thus the first generation Babylonian 'Amora Rab (c. 200 C.E.) said concerning Bezalel, the artist who was chosen to build the tabernacle in the wilderness (Ex 31, 1-11), that he knew "לצרף אותיות שובראו בהן שמים וארץ" (how to combine the letters, by which Heaven and earth were created).¹³ According to another Talmudic text, two first generation Palestinian 'Amoraim, R. 'Oshaya and R. Ḥanina (bar Ḥama), used to occupy themselves every week before the beginning of Shabat with a text referred to as "ספר יצירה" (*Sefer Yezirah*, Book of Creation), by means of which they created an "עיגלא תילתא" (a calf one third of its full growth, or: a calf in its third year), which they ate.¹⁴ In another version of the same story the work, studied by R. 'Oshaia and R. Ḥanina, is called "הלכות יצירה" (Laws of Creation).¹⁵ It is not clear, however, if this work refers to the extant *Sefer Yezirah*, an earlier version or a completely different mystical text, which is no longer extant.

¹¹ Cf. Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, Albany: SUNY, 1995, 65.

¹² Cf. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 77, 92, 95, 117, 140, 145.

¹³ b Berakhot 55 a.

¹⁴ b Sanhedrin 65 b.

¹⁵ b Sanhedrin 67 b.

During the Middle Ages, some circles in France and Germany interpreted *Sefer Yezirah* as a “guide to magical usage”. According to a commentary on the *Sefer Yezirah* by Judah b. Barzillai (beginning of the twelfth century), after a “profound study of the mysteries of *Sefer Yezirah*” on the creation of the universe, the sages “acquired the power to create living beings”, although the purpose of such creation was “purely symbolic and contemplative”.¹⁶ From these Talmudic legends and their mediaeval interpretation, the *Hasidei 'Ashkenaz* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries developed the idea of the creation of a *golem* as a “mystical ritual”. The commentary on *Sefer Yezirah* by R. Elazar of Worms (d. between 1223 and 1232) contains technical instructions on the creation of a *golem*, including 23 folio columns of letter combinations to be recited during the act of creation.¹⁷

Bashevis must have been familiar with these magical interpretations of *Sefer Yezirah*, since he has many characters throughout his works, who employ *Sefer Yezirah* for magical purposes, either to ward off demons or to create living beings with its help. In a book for children, entitled *The Golem*, he narrates the famous legend of the creation of a *golem* by R. Judah Leyb b. Bezalel of Prague.¹⁸ But apart from this, the living creatures supposedly created by Bashevis’s characters with the help of *Sefer Yezirah*, are almost exclusively doves. Such is the case with R. Itshe Mates in “דער שטן אין גאָר” and with some of the followers of the Shabbatean movement in Pilica in the epilogue of “דער קונעכט”, who have reportedly occupied themselves with “קבלה מעשית” (practical Kabbalah), trying to tap wine from the wall and to create living doves with the help of *Sefer Yezirah*.¹⁹ These two examples of practical Kabbalah are cited frequently throughout Bashevis’s works.

¹⁶ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 352.

¹⁷ Ibid. Cf. also: J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 85.

¹⁸ I.B. Singer, *The Golem*, with illustrations by Uri Shulevitz, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982, translated by the author, with the help of Alma Singer and Deborah Menashe and edited by Robert Giroux. The Yiddish original was published under the title “דער גולם: אַ מעשה פֿאַר קינדער און דערוואַקסענע” in New York on 25 and 26 April and 2, 3, 9, 10, 16 and 17 May 1969.

¹⁹ “דער שטן אין גאָר”, 160; “דער קונעכט”, 278.

They are reflected not only in *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, in Yasha Mazur's speculations on the magic he could perform with the help of his newly discovered Hebrew text, which he assumes to be kabbalistic, but also in *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, in Herts Yanover's theories on psychic research, according to which in a state of unconsciousness it is possible to create "יש מאין" (something out of nothing), as an example of which the creation of doves by unspecified Kabbalists is cited, again connected to the tapping of wine from a wall.²⁰

Furthermore towards the beginning of *Shosha* the narrator boasts to his childhood friend of his familiarity with the Kabbalah, as a result of which he was able to draw wine from the wall and create living doves.²¹ The narrator of the short memoir 'די סודות פון דער קבלה' also boasts of his ability of performing the same two magical activities with the help of his kabbalistic studies.²²

The idea of the creation of living beings through the power of combinations of Hebrew letters is congruent with the Talmudic legends and the mediaeval commentaries on *Sefer Yezirah*. But the fact, that the living creatures supposedly created in Bashevis's writings, are neither calves as in the Talmudic account, nor human-like creatures as the mediaeval *golem*, but doves, can only be explained as a personal variation of Bashevis's own making, possibly influenced by something he heard during his childhood. The particular combination of creating living doves and tapping wine from the wall indeed appears in an untranslated episode of Bashevis's memoirs *מיין טאטנס בית-דין שטוב*, as mentioned previously.²³ But the use of these two magical experiments as a recurrent motif throughout Bashevis's works can only be understood as a special stylistic device, which accords with Bashevis's frequent use of other recurrent images, such as descriptions of the nocturnal sky, connected with visions of the higher spheres and the image of sparks

²⁰ *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, 74; *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, 136.

²¹ I.B. Singer, *Shosha*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978, 7.

²² 'די סודות פון דער קבלה', in: *דער שפיגל און אנדערע דערציילונגען*, 274.

²³ *בית-דין שטוב*, 167 f. – See: Section 2.3, 32.

of light in contexts of darkness, which will be discussed below.²⁴

The second kind of magical usage of *Sefer Yezirah* and other Jewish mystical works, referred to above, is connected to the superstitious practice of warding off the demons, which were supposed to surround a person in a time of danger. The apotropaic practices, described in Bashevis's works, are employed by various Jewish characters, living in the seventeenth century, including Yankev and members of the community in Pilica in דער שטן אין גאָרײַ and the Shabbatean leaders R. Itshe Mates and R. Gedalye in דער שטן אין גאָרײַ, as well as by various other traditional Jewish characters from later centuries, including several twentieth century ḥasidic and other traditional Jewish characters in די פאָמיליע מושקאָט.²⁵

The apotropaic devices employed by Bashevis's characters include the superstitious practice of carrying Jewish mystical works as a protection against demons and the use of written amulets. A particularly critical time, when apotropaic practices were considered necessary, was the moment of birth.²⁶ Thus "שיר-המעלות" (amulets hung up in a lying-in chamber) are prepared for Eydl in די פאָמיליע מושקאָט, when she is about to give birth.²⁷ These are special amulets containing sections of the Psalms, beginning with the words "שיר המעלות" (A Song of Ascent) – [Ps 120-134]. The Psalms were "highly regarded for their potency". Psalm 126, for instance, was placed in a house to protect children "against the hazards of infancy".²⁸ The same practice of placing "שיר-המעלות" in a lying-in chamber is also employed by Yankev in דער קנעכט. In addition to this, Yankev provides Sore with a "קמיע" (amulet), which she has to wear around her neck as a protection against Igeret, the queen of the evil spirits, and other demons.²⁹ Written

²⁴ Regarding images of the nocturnal sky and higher spheres, see below: Sections 5.4.2 and 6.3.5. Regarding the image of "sparks", see: Section 3.4.2 and Sections 4.4.2, 5.4.4, 6.4, 7.5.2.

²⁵ דער קנעכט, 189, 207, 214 f.; דער שטן אין גאָרײַ, 78, 81, 119; די פאָמיליע מושקאָט, 129, 412.

²⁶ Cf. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 168 f.

²⁷ די פאָמיליע מושקאָט, 412.

²⁸ Cf. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 109, 139.

²⁹ דער קנעכט, 207, 211, 214.

amulets were particularly popular as a protection against demons, since they contain the “most powerful elements of Jewish magic – the names”.³⁰ Another apotropaic device, mentioned both in connection with Sore in *דער קנעכט* and with Eydl in *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, is the knife placed underneath the pillow of the woman in childbirth, together with either the *Sefer Yezirah* in the case of Sore or the *Sefer Razi'el* in the case of Eydl.³¹ The knife, given to a woman during the last days prior to her delivery, was one of the widespread “anti-demonic weapons”. The use of *Sefer Yezirah* and *Sefer Razi'el* for magical or superstitious practices has already been discussed above.³² Further magical practices employed on Sore’s behalf by the women of the Pilica community, who gather at her bedside, include the use of a magic bowl and incantations, which were one of the most prominent elements in Jewish magic.³³

Another superstitious idea, expressed in connection with Sore in *דער קנעכט* and in various other places throughout Bashevis’s works, is the belief in “דיבוקים” (dybbuks). When Sore, who is supposedly mute, begins to cry out in her native Polish, the women at her bedside are convinced that a dybbuk has entered her.³⁴ The idea of the dybbuk as the spirit of a dead person, seeking refuge in the body of a living person, was combined with the doctrine of “גלגול” (transmigration of the soul) in the sixteenth century and became a widespread popular belief. The term “דיבוק” is an abbreviation of “דיבוק מרוח רעה” (cleaving or adhesion of an evil spirit) and was “introduced into literature only in the 17th century from the spoken language of German and Polish Jews”.³⁵ Seventeenth century Poland is, in fact, the setting of both *דער קנעכט* and *דער שטן אין גאריי*, where an abundancy of superstitious beliefs and practices can be found. With regard to *דער קנעכט*,

³⁰ Cf. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 139.

³¹ *דער קנעכט*, 207; *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, 412.

³² Cf. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 160, 168 f. – On the magical use of *Sefer Yezirah* and *Sefer Raziel*, see above: Section 3.2, 67.

³³ *דער קנעכט*, 214 f. Cf. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 115.

³⁴ *דער קנעכט*, 216 ff.

³⁵ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 348.

the reader knows from the beginning that the dybbuk, which has supposedly entered Sore, is nothing other than a superstitious fantasy, but with regard to "דער שטן אין גאָר", the dybbuk reportedly possessing Rekhele appears to be substantial, at least in the context of this fictional creation.³⁶

Bashevis, however, is consistently ambivalent on the subject of demons and dybbuks. The question of Bashevis's belief in the demonic and his use of it in his fiction frequently arises in his many interviews. In an interview with Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, Bashevis distinguishes between his own belief and his literary use of the supernatural. On the one hand, he states: "I truly believe that there are forces and spirits in the world, about which we know very little, which influence our lives. A hundred years from now, when people know more about other things, they will also know more about these spiritual powers. [...] I find it very easy to believe in reincarnation, possession by devils, and other such things. We have many proofs that these things exist."³⁷ On the other hand, he speaks of his "literary reason" for his use of "the demonic and supernatural": "It's a kind of spiritual stenography. It gives me more freedom. For another thing, the demons and Satan represent to me, in a sense, the ways of the world. Instead of saying this is the way things happen, I will say, this is the way demons behave. Demons symbolize the world for me, and by that I mean human beings and human behaviour".³⁸ In an interview with Cyrena Pondrom, Bashevis, on the one hand, agrees with the suggestion that in his works demons or supernatural forces often "manifest themselves in psychological terms, as psychological forces", saying: "In writing you have to find a way to say these things or hint them. I found that folklore is the best way of expressing these feelings, because folklore has already expressed them, has already given clothes to these ideas. By really

³⁶ "דער שטן אין גאָר", 169-189.

³⁷ Cf. Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, 'An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer', in: *Commentary* 36 (November 1963), reprinted in: G. Farrell (ed.), *Conversations*, 18 f.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19 f.

calling demons names and by assigning to them certain functions, it makes it more concrete and in writing you have to be concrete; if not it becomes philosophy or brooding.”³⁹ On the other hand, Bashevis again stresses his belief in supernatural powers as a substantive reality: “But basically behind all these names and all these functions is the idea that powers exist – of which we really don’t know.” And: “It is true I don’t know what these powers are. They may be divine powers or other kinds of powers, but I will always have this feeling, and this is the reason that I write about the supernatural. The supernatural for me is not really supernatural; it’s powers which we don’t know.”⁴⁰

In an interview with Grace Farrell, Bashevis replies to a question regarding the “imps who are always testing man”: “It’s all parables; we don’t know what they are. It’s man himself who is always... we are always tempted whether the imps do it or some other creatures. All these names are taken from folklore.”⁴¹ On a deeper level he connects the existence of the powers of evil in this world with the fact that human beings have free choice: “The material world is a combination of seeing and blindness. This blindness we call Satan. If we would become all seeing, we would not have free choice anymore.

Because if we would see God, if we would see His greatness, there would be no temptation or sin. And since God wanted us to have free will this means that Satan, in other words the principle of evil, must exist. Because what does free choice mean? It means the freedom to choose between good and evil. If there is no evil there is no freedom.”⁴²

Bashevis’s ideas on the origins and purpose of evil and its connection to free will, however, are closely connected with a particular interpretation of the Lurianic doctrine of creation, which will be discussed in more detail below.

³⁹ Cf. Cyrena Pondrom, ‘Isaac Bashevis Singer: An Interview’, in: *Contemporary Literature* 10:1-2 (1969), reprinted in: G. Farrell (ed.), *Conversations*, 65 f.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 64, 66.

⁴¹ Cf. Grace Farrell, ‘Seeing and Blindness: A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer’, in: *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 9:2 (Winter 1976), reprinted in: G. Farrell (ed.), *Conversations*, 137.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 139.

3.3. Creation and Language – The Central Idea of *Sefer Yezirah* and Its Implications for Bashevis's Writings

In the same interview, quoted above, Bashevis connects God's creation of the universe to the creative art of the artist or writer, saying: "Well I will say that to me God is an artist. I say that His attribute is creativity. Creativity is also the attribute of the artist. So we can call Him the great artist, the almighty artist, or something like this." And: "So I would say in every process of creation the writer has to repeat in a small way what God did in a big way".⁴³

This statement of Bashevis goes back to the teachings of the earliest systematic Hebrew mystical work, the ספר יצירה or "Book of Creation" (Palestine, third - sixth century C.E.). *Sefer Yezirah* describes the creation of the world by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. According to its teachings, the world only came into being through the power of the Hebrew script. There was no cosmogony or creation "*avant la lettre*".⁴⁴ According to the *Sefer Yezirah*, in the process of creation God wrote "בשלשים ושנים נתיבות פליאות חכמה" (in thirty-two miraculous ways of wisdom), referring to the "עשר ספירות בלימה" (ten *Sfirot*, ineffable) and the "עשרים ושנים אותיות יסוד" (twenty-two elemental letters [of the Hebrew alphabet]).⁴⁵ At a later point in *Sefer Yezirah* we read: "עשרים ושנים אותיות חקקן" (Twenty-two letters; He drew them, carved them, weighed them and changed them, combined them, formed through them the soul of everything, which is formed, and the soul of everything, which will be formed in the future.)⁴⁶ All "real beings in the three states of the cosmos" – "עולם" ("world"), "שנה" ("year", referring to time) and "נפש" (the human soul) – were created

⁴³ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Das Buch Jezirah*. ספר יצירה, translated by Johann Friedrich von Meyer and edited by Eveline Goodman-Thau & Christoph Schulte, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993, vii.

⁴⁵ ספר יצירה, chapter 1, section 1-2. Here the term *Sfirot* does not yet have the meaning it acquired in later kabbalistic writings. It is seemingly simply used here to mean "numbers", although in employing this term, the author of *Sefer Yezirah* might also be alluding to "metaphysical principles" or "stages in the creation of the world". Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 23.

⁴⁶ ספר יצירה, chapter 2, section 2.

through combinations of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and particularly by way of the “231 gates”, i.e. all the possible combinations of the Hebrew letters in groups of two.⁴⁷ Thus every existing thing contains these “linguistic elements” and “exists by their power”. Their “foundation is one name”, the Tetragrammaton, or “perhaps, the alphabetical order which in its entirety is considered one mystical name”. The world-process is therefore “essentially a linguistic one, based on the unlimited combinations of the letters”.⁴⁸

Thus the Divine Creator can be understood as the original archetypal writer, which accounts for Bashevis’s idea, expressed in the above-quoted interview, that God is an artist and that the writer repeats God’s primal creative act in his creation of fictional worlds through language.

This idea also finds its expression in Bashevis’s novel *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*. In this novel the images of the “קונצנמאכער” (magician) and his frequently hidden God, for whom he is searching, are often interwoven. At one point the connection between God and the magician is explicitly made, when the magician Yasha Mazur, admiring the beauty of nature, calls out to the Creator: “...! איך נישט א קונצנמאכער, נישט איך!” (You are a magician, not me!...).⁴⁹ This passage not only describes Yasha’s experience of God’s revelation in nature, but also sets forth an explicit connection between the Creator-God and the artist-magician within Bashevis’s literary creation of *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*. In this novel both the Creator-God and the artist-magician are experienced by others in the two extremes of concealment and of revelation in creation or art.

The concealed God has a close counterpart on the human level in the secretive magician, whose secrets cannot be made out even by his own wife. But even if the magician seemingly speaks foolishly, his words always have a meaning, although his wife

⁴⁷ ספר יצירה, chapter 2, section 4; chapter 6, section 1. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 25.

⁴⁸ ספר יצירה, chapter 2, section 4-5. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 25.

⁴⁹ דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין, 65.

sometimes only grasps this meaning long after he has left.⁵⁰ The artistry of the magician can be understood as an allusion to the artistry of the author, whose every word has a meaning, although it might sometimes only be grasped by the reader long after he or she has read it for the first time. Clearly, a parallel is implied here with the author Bashevis, who as a Yiddish writer, creates his fictional worlds by means of a language written with the same letters of the Hebrew alphabet, through which the Creator-God created the whole universe, according to the teachings of *Sefer Yeẓirah*.

But while the emphasis in *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* is on the artistic aspect of creation, the idea of the creation of the universe out of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet itself is also an important underlying theme in *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, where it is closely connected to the idea of the inherent power and holiness in Hebrew religious works and the resulting strength and comfort these works can provide in a time of calamity and despair.

In *די פאמיליע מושקאט* we find several references to a mystical, concealed script in the context of descriptions of the nocturnal sky. Thus the novel's main character Oyzer-Heshl, admiring the nocturnal sky one evening in Warsaw, has the feeling that, as if through a miracle everything had been transformed into a "קבלהשע(ר) שריפט" (kabbalistic script).⁵¹ On a visit to his *shtetl* Kleyn-Tereshpol (probably Teresopol-Zygmunt), the sceptic Oyzer-Heshl discusses the formation of the universe with his grandfather, Rabbi Dan Katsenelenboygn, and notices the *Sefer Yeẓirah* on top of a pile of Jewish religious works on his grandfather's desk. After this conversation Oyzer-Heshl goes out into the open and, admiring the majesty of the nocturnal sky, the stars look to him like Hebrew letters and vowel signs, concealed and strange, "ווי די שמות אין זיידענס ספר-יצירה" (like the holy names in his grandfather's *Sefer Yeẓirah*).⁵² Looking at the immensity of the sky after his discussion about the formation of the universe, Oyzer-Heshl seems to recognize

⁵⁰ Ibid., 11 f.

⁵¹ *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, 68.

⁵² Ibid., 294-298.

God's creation in the majesty of nature and seems to understand the power of the Hebrew letters to bring about this creation, according to the *Sefer Yezirah*, which he has just seen on his grandfather's desk.

This idea is reiterated in connection with Rabbi Dan's arrival in Warsaw, after having been driven out of Kleyn-Tereshpol during the First World War and having overcome many dangers on his way. When Rabbi Dan is sitting in a house of study in Warsaw, surrounded by Jewish books, including several kabbalistic works, he feels safe and at home again after the hostilities he has experienced from gentile peasants and soldiers on his journey. He knows that he only needs to open one of the volumes on the shelves, and he can draw in the words of the living God, וואָס מיט זיי זענען געוואָרן באַשאַפֿן "די אותיות, וואָס מיט זיי זענען געוואָרן באַשאַפֿן" (the letters, through which all worlds were created).⁵³

Earlier on, when Rabbi Dan has to leave Kleyn-Tereshpol and burns all the manuscripts of his Hebrew commentaries, the parchment is consumed immediately, but the Hebrew writing seems to withstand the fire, and "פֿייערדיקע אותיות" (fiery letters) keep on glowing for a long time.⁵⁴

All these three paragraphs from די פאָמיליע מושקאַט express the idea of an inherent power in the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The Hebrew letters are associated with the light of the stars and with the light of fire. As explained above, the whole universe was created by means of these Hebrew letters, according to the teachings of *Sefer Yezirah*, and therefore all the Jewish texts, written with these Hebrew characters, also have the power to sustain Jews against the adversities and calamities of the surrounding world.

This idea finds its most poignant expression in the epilogue of the Yiddish original of די פאָמיליע מושקאַט, which is omitted in the English translation. Oyzer-Heshl, who has pursued modern, secular knowledge and secular visions of redemption, but has not found, what he was looking for, returns to the words of the Hebrew Bible, when he stays behind

⁵³ Ibid., 351.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 320.

in Warsaw during the bombing at the beginning of the Second World War. In the face of the impending Nazi invasion and of death and destruction, Oyzer-Heshl rediscovers the clarity, the validity and the power of the words of the Torah and the Prophets and feels that these are more than mere words: “דאָס זײַנען נישט קיין ווערטער, נאָר פֿלאַמען” (These are not words, but flames).⁵⁵

Here Hebrew letters and words, in this case the words of the Hebrew Bible, are again associated with the light and strength of fire. The Yiddish readers of this novel know that Oyzer-Heshl’s return to the ideas and values of Judaism and of the Hebrew Bible will not prevent his physical destruction by the Nazis and that these Jewish writings will be almost all that remains of pre-War Jewish life in Poland. Nevertheless Bashevis’s Yiddish readers can acknowledge the power and validity of these ancient Hebrew words and the strength they provide to Jews to persevere despite persecution and calamities.

For the survivors of the Holocaust, Jewish books become the means of remaining Jewish and of returning to the Jewish life of one’s ancestors in Poland and other places in Eastern Europe. For the Yiddish writer Bashevis, his Yiddish writings become the means of reconstructing and reinventing this Polish-Jewish life before the War.

We can see this clearly from one of Bashevis’s short stories, a supernatural tale with a historical setting. The short story ‘מעשה טישעוויץ’ (translated as ‘The Last Demon’), set in the small *shtetl* of טישעוויץ (Tiszowce) in Poland after the War, is told by a first-person narrator, who introduces himself as a Jewish demon, the last of his kind.⁵⁶ He had been sent to Tiszowce long before the War, on a mission to lead the saintly rabbi of the town into temptation. Unsuccessful in his ventures, he had remained in the *shtetl*, bearing witness to all that had happened: חורבן טישעוויץ, חורבן פוילן. נישטאָ מער: “כ’האָב אַלץ בײַגעוואוינט: חורבן טישעוויץ, חורבן פוילן. נישטאָ מער קיין שרים.” (I have witnessed everything, the destruction of Tiszowce,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 757 f.

⁵⁶ ‘מעשה טישעוויץ’, in: דער שפּיגל און אַנדערע דערציילונגען, 12. Cf.: ‘The Last Demon’, in: *Short Friday and Other Stories*, 103.

the destruction of Poland. There are no more Jews, no more demons.).⁵⁷ The saintly rabbi has died “על-קידוש-השם” (as a Jewish martyr; literally: sanctifying God’s name), the Jews of Tiszowce have been murdered and most of the Jewish books have been burned.

Demons are not needed anymore, since human beings have become like demons themselves: “דאָס דור איז שוין זיבן מאָל כולו חייב, נאָר משיח קומט נישט” (“The generation is already guilty seven times over, but Messiah does not come.”).⁵⁸ The last Jewish demon sits alone in an attic in Tiszowce, drawing his sustenance from a Yiddish book of stories, left over from the time before the Holocaust: “די מעשה אַליין איז קובעבע מיט קאַטשקע-מילך, אָבער ייִדישע אותיות האָבן אַ האַפֿט.” (“The stories in the book are pablum and duck milk, but the Hebrew letters have a weight of their own.”).⁵⁹

This idea is again based on the central idea of *Sefer Yezirah*, the creation of the world by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Therefore, when these letters were gone, the whole creation would cease to exist. As the last Jewish demon says at the end of his story: “אָן אַ ייִדיש אות - איז אַ שד אַ ייד - אויס...” (When the last Jewish letter is gone, the last of the Jewish demons is gone.).⁶⁰ Literally, when the last letter is gone, the story will be over, and the last demon will cease to exist, since he has no substance outside this story.⁶¹

But according to the linguistic theory of the *Sefer Yezirah*, the whole universe was created through Hebrew letters and words, and without them everything would cease to exist.

The *Sefer Yezirah* is even mentioned explicitly in the story. When the demon-narrator tries to persuade the young rabbi to commit a sin, the rabbi drives him off with the *Sefer Yezirah*, and: “קעגן ספֿר יצירה קאָן קיינער פֿון אונדז נישט באַשטיין.” (“What devil can withstand

⁵⁷ דער שפיגל 21. (My own translation.)

⁵⁸ דער שפיגל 12, 21. *Short Friday*, 103, 111. On the concept of “כולו חייב”, see: b Sanhedrin 98 a.

⁵⁹ דער שפיגל 12. *Short Friday*, 103.

⁶⁰ דער שפיגל 22.

⁶¹ Cf. Grace Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption: The Fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, 26.

the *Book of Creation*?").⁶² Later on, when the rabbi has already been murdered together with his whole community, we find the following statement, made by Bashevis's demonic narrator: "דער ספֿר יצירה איז צוריק בײַ דעם מנהיג הבירה." (Literally: The *Sefer Yezirah* has been returned to the Leader of the Divine Residence. – In the English translation: "The *Book of Creation* has been returned to the Creator.>").⁶³

These references to *Sefer Yezirah* confirm the assumption that this story is based on the linguistic theory, expressed in this early mystical text. But unlike Bashevis's novel *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, in this story the emphasis is more on destruction than on creation or artistic creativity. The story itself, however, is a finely crafted artistic creation, which sheds some light on Bashevis's self-understanding as a Yiddish writer. Although the narrator of this story is a demon, he "bears marked resemblances to the author".⁶⁴ Like Bashevis, "the last demon has been deprived of his subject, the Jews of Eastern Europe". Like Bashevis, "the last demon attempts to speak as if history had *not* destroyed his subject and as if he could defy time".⁶⁵ As the last demon says: "איך רעד בלשון איצט, ווייל בײַ מיר שטייט די צײַט." ("I speak in the present tense as for me time stands still.").⁶⁶ Like Bashevis, the last demon has to sustain himself on Yiddish books. But Bashevis makes his own Yiddish writings "the instrument for preserving the memory" of the Jewish life in Poland, which has been destroyed.⁶⁷

In reconstructing and recreating this Polish-Jewish life as an artist, Bashevis imitates the primal creative act of the Creator-God. Like the Creator and archetypal writer, Bashevis, as a Yiddish writer, creates and recreates worlds through language, by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

⁶² דער שפיגל, 21. *Short Friday*, 110.

⁶³ דער שפיגל, 21. *Short Friday*, 111.

⁶⁴ Cf. Edward Alexander, 'The Destruction and Resurrection of the Jews in the Fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer', in: Grace Farrell (ed.), *Critical Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer*, New York: G.K. Hall, 100.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁶⁶ דער שפיגל, 12. *Short Friday*, 103.

⁶⁷ Cf. E. Alexander, 'Destruction and Resurrection', in: G. Farrell, *Critical Essays*, 100.

3.4. The Doctrine of Creation in Lurianic Kabbalah and Its Interpretations in Bashevis's

Works

3.4.1. The Concept of *Zimzum* and Its Interpretations

In addition to the early Jewish mystical idea of the creation of the universe through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, as it is expressed in the *Sefer Yezirah*, Bashevis frequently refers or alludes to later kabbalistic ideas on creation, and in particular to the doctrine of creation in Lurianic Kabbalah.

Theoretically it is possible to think of God either as “God Himself with reference to His own nature alone” or as “God in His relation to His creation”. But according to Scholem, all Kabbalists agree that “no religious knowledge of God” can be gained “except through contemplation of the relationship of God to creation”.⁶⁸ For the unknowable aspect of God the early Kabbalists of Provence and Spain coined the term “אין-סוף” (“Infinite”). Other terms were used as well for the domain of the hidden God, like “that which thought cannot attain”, “the concealed light”, “the concealment of secrecy”, etc. The infinite *'Ein-Sof* does not reveal itself in a way which “makes knowledge of its nature possible”. Only through the “finite nature of every existing thing”, that is through the “actual existence of creation itself” it is possible to deduce the existence of *'Ein-Sof* as “the first infinite cause”.⁶⁹

The whole problem of creation is “bound up with the revelation of the hidden God and His outward movement”. In this context the most significant question was, whether the “first step from concealment to manifestation” was a movement toward the outer world at all, or whether it was “a step inward”, a withdrawal of *'Ein-Sof* “into the depth of itself”. While earlier Kabbalists in Provence and Spain, as well as Isaac Luria's teacher Moshe Cordovero, adopted the former view, Isaac Luria himself and all subsequent

⁶⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 88 f.

Lurianic Kabbalah took the latter position, speaking of a return of God “into the depths of Himself preceding creation”. This first Divine act of withdrawal, concealment and limitation preceding creation is referred to in Lurianic Kabbalah as “צמצום” (“contraction”).⁷⁰

It has been suggested that *Zimzum* is the “secret signature” in Bashevis’s books.⁷¹ In an interview with Irving Howe, Bashevis speaks about the influence of Kabbalah on his work and explains the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*, although he does not employ this term here: “The Cabala teaches us that to be able to create, God in a way had to dim His light, to extinguish part of His being to create a vacuum, and because of this, He could create. If He didn’t dim His light, His radiance would have filled the cosmos to such a degree that creation would be impossible.”⁷²

The starting point of the Lurianic doctrine of creation is the idea that in the beginning, when there was only the infinite *’Ein-Sof*, there was no space at all for creation. There could not have been an area which was “not already God”, “since that would constitute a limitation of His Infinity”. Thus the act of creation was only possible, if it was preceded by an act of limitation, by “the entry of God into Himself”, that is through the act of *Zimzum*, whereby God contracts Himself and so makes it possible for something which is not *’Ein-Sof* to exist. Through this withdrawal of some part of the Godhead, a room is created “for the creative processes to come into play”.⁷³

Scholem adds to his explanations of the Lurianic doctrine of *Zimzum* that one is “tempted to interpret this withdrawal of God into his own Being in terms of Exile”, as an act of God “banishing Himself from His totality into profound seclusion”.⁷⁴

Only after this first act of contraction and withdrawal, the second Divine act of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 90 f., 129.

⁷¹ Cf. C. Sinclair, *The Brothers Singer*, 45.

⁷² Cf. Isaac Bashevis Singer and Irving Howe, ‘Yiddish Tradition vs. Jewish Tradition, A Dialogue’, in: *Midstream* (June/July 1973), reprinted in: G. Farrell, *Conversations*, 127.

⁷³ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 129.

⁷⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 261.

emanation could take place, by which God sends out “a ray of His light” into the “primordial space”, vacated during the process of *Zimzum*, and begins His revelation, or rather His “unfolding as God the Creator, in the primordial space of His own creation”. Moreover, “every new act of emanation and manifestation is preceded by one of concentration and retraction”. Thus “the cosmic process becomes two-fold”, and without this “perpetual tension” between God’s withdrawal and outflowing manifestation “nothing in the world would exist”.⁷⁵

This idea finds its expression in many of Bashevis’s writings. Throughout his works we find various characters, who experience God in the two extreme forms of concealment and withdrawal on one hand, and of revelation in creation on the other. In *דער קנעכט*, Yankev, on the one hand, experiences a withdrawn, concealed God, who seems to have punished His people and hidden His face from it. On the other hand, he detects God’s hand in the powerful processes of nature around him, for example in the splendour of the fiery clouds, which he sees one morning at sunrise.⁷⁶ The Lurianic idea of the perpetual tension between God’s withdrawal and His manifestation in the process of creation is expressed here in the two images of God’s face, which is hidden or concealed and God’s hand, which seems manifest in nature, God’s creation.

The image of God’s hand in connection with Divine revelation in nature can also be found in Bashevis’s short story ‘די קליינע שוסטערלעך’ (‘The Little Shoemakers’), a tale about several generations of a family of shoemakers transplanted from a *shtetl* in Poland to modern America.⁷⁷ Aba Shuster, the last patriarch of a long line of shoemakers, is extremely fond of his small house in Frampol and the grounds around it. Looking at the dense growth of vegetation and observing the butterflies, bees and

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁷⁶ *דער קנעכט*, 12.

⁷⁷ ‘די קליינע שוסטערלעך’, in: *גימפל חם און אנדערע דערציילונגען*, New York: CYCO, 1963, 18-43, translated as: ‘The Little Shoemakers’ by Isaac Rosenfeld, in: *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, London: Penguin, 1984 (first ed. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), 38-56.

golden-bellied flies flying over it, Aba thinks: “קיינער האָט דאָ נישט געאַקערט און געזיט, אָבער אַ פֿאַרבאָרגענע האַנט האָט געטאָן וואונדער.” (Nobody had tilled or sown here, but a hidden hand had worked miracles.) Lifting up his eyes to the sky and admiring the formations of the clouds, he can even feel the presence of an awesome and merciful God and imagines the Almighty sitting on the “כסא הכבוד” (Throne of Glory) with the earth as His “פוסבענקעלע” (footstool).⁷⁸

The contrasting image of “הסתר פנים” (the hiding of God’s face) can be found in another short story, entitled ‘מ’דאָרף זיין בשמחה’ (translated as ‘Joy’), where the *rebe* of Komorów, R. Beynesh, temporarily loses his faith in God, after most of his children have died from various illnesses. For several months the grieving *rebe* completely withdraws from his declining court. On Rosh Hashanah he returns to his *hasidim*, sings the *kidush* with a festive melody and surprises his followers with new words of instruction and edification. He comments on the question, why the moon is hidden on Rosh Hashanah: The reason is that on Rosh Hashanah one prays for life and life is “פון אַלע חסדים” (free will) and “בחירה איז פאַרבאָרגעניש” (free will is concealment). “פון אַלע חסדים” (free will) and “בחירה איז פאַרבאָרגעניש” (free will is concealment). “Of all of God’s graces the greatest grace is the hiding of His face.”.⁷⁹

A similar idea is also expressed in the last chapter of *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, when Arele, the new *rebe* of Białodrewna, delivers a Rosh Hashanah sermon at the beginning of the Second World War. In this sermon he also mentions the fact that the moon is hidden on Rosh Hashanah. He associates the moon with “מידת הדין” (God’s attribute of justice) and states that “דין” (judgement) only exists for the sake of “בחירה” (free will). According to him, the purpose of creation is free will: “צוליב דער בחירה האָט אין-סוף זיך מצמצם געווען.” (For the sake of free will *’Ein-Sof* has contracted Himself.)

⁷⁸ גימפל תם, 25. *Collected Stories*, 44.

⁷⁹ 'מע דארף זיין שמחה', in: גומפל תם, 112, translated as 'Joy' by Norbert Guterman and Elaine Gottlieb, in: *Collected Stories*, 35.

“באַשאַפֿן די קליפות. (So that there should be free will, the *Klipot* were created.).⁸⁰

In Arele's sermon the act of *Zimzum* is closely connected to the emergence of the *Klipot*, the powers of evil in the world, and as in R. Beynesh's reflections the purpose of God's act of concealment is again understood to be free will.

This explanation of the existence of evil in the world, which is presented here, is given by several of Bashevis's characters throughout his works. It is a particular interpretation of the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*, which has its origins in a statement of Isaac Luria himself, but has not been developed further in the writings of Luria's chief disciple Hayim Vital. According to Luria, before the act of *Zimzum* “all the forces of God were stored within His infinite Self”, and the qualities of “חסד” (mercy) and of “דין” (judgement) were not yet recognizable as such. However, during the act of *Zimzum* the roots of “דין” became concentrated in one place, “from which the power of mercy had departed”. Thus the act of *Zimzum* was an “act of *Din*”, of “judgement and self-limitation”, “which reveals the roots of this quality in all that exists”.⁸¹

This idea was developed in the writings of Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, where it was given a teleological interpretation. Luzzatto believed that in the act of *Zimzum* the Creator has overcome “His innate law of goodness in creation”, so that God's creatures should not be made perfect. Instead they should be given the opportunity to perfect themselves and to choose between good and evil.⁸²

This interpretation of the act of *Zimzum* as enabling the existence of evil in the world and as providing the opportunity of free will for God's creatures, is exactly the explanation given by Arele in די פאַמיליע מושקאַט. The same interpretation of *Zimzum* is also expressed by the magician Yasha Mazur in דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין.

When the magician Yasha has himself immured in a penitential cell in the epilogue

⁸⁰ די פאַמיליע מושקאַט, 753 f.

⁸¹ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 130; *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 263, 411.

⁸² Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 135.

of דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין, he studies various kabbalistic works and reflects on the origins of evil. He comes to the conclusion that “די קליפה איז נישט מער ווי דער צמצום, (the *Klipah* is nothing more than *Zimzum*, by which ‘*Ein-Sof*’ has contracted Himself in order to create the world). This act was necessary, so that God would be able to show “חסד” (mercy) to His creatures, to teach them to do good and to walk in His ways, “פון אייגענעם ווילן, פון פרייען אָפקלייב” (out of their own will, out of free choice).⁸³

Here Yasha also follows the teleological interpretation of *Zimzum*, although he conflates two stages of the Lurianic doctrine of creation, which strictly speaking should be seen separately. It is possible to say that the “metaphysical root of evil” is already “inherent in the very privation”, which the first Divine act of *Zimzum* involves.⁸⁴ The *Klipot*, however, as the powers of evil, only emerged in connection with the second stage in the process of creation, according to Lurianic theory. This second stage, which involves the cosmic catastrophe of the “breaking of the vessels” and the emergence of the *Klipot*, will be discussed below.

The fact that Bashevis has so many of his characters throughout his works express this particular teleological interpretation of the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*, which was developed in the writings of Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, can be explained by his own kabbalistic reading material, which included at least two of Luzzatto’s works, the *Keleḥ Pithei Hokhmah* and the ethical work *Mesilat Yesharim*, as well as an introduction to Lurianic Kabbalah by Borekh Kosover, the ‘*Amud ha-‘Avodah*, in which Luzzatto’s interpretation of *Zimzum* is explained in more simple terms.⁸⁵ This also explains, why Bashevis gives the same teleological interpretation of *Zimzum*, expressed by so many characters in his works, when he speaks in his own voice in his

⁸³ דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין, 243.

⁸⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 135.

⁸⁵ Cf. *המשכים-ואמלוג*, 152, 302. – See: Section 2.5, 40-43; 2.6, 60.

interview with Irving Howe, the beginning of which was quoted earlier. Continuing his explanation of the Lurianic doctrine of creation, Bashevis states that “the Cabala teaches us that Satan makes possible creation, that without him this could not have happened”. “To be able to create He had to have Satan, because if Satan wouldn’t have been there, everything would be divinity, everything would be great and radiant...”, “... and there would be no place for individuality, for free choice.”⁸⁶

3.4.2. The Concept of the “Breaking of the Vessels” and the “Sparks of Holiness”

Both in Yasha’s reflections on the origins of evil in *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* and in Arele’s Rosh Hashanah sermon in *די פאמיליע מושקאט* two ideas are conflated, which actually constitute two different stages in the process towards creation, according to Lurianic Kabbalah. The first stage, which is the act of *Zimzum*, has been discussed above. The second stage of Divine emanation, following God’s act of self-contraction and withdrawal, includes a cosmic incident of immense implications, which is known in Lurianic Kabbalah as “שבירת הכלים” or “the breaking of the vessels”.

According to the Lurianic doctrine of creation, the “primordial space”, vacated in the act of *Zimzum* was subsequently filled with the Divine “light of emanation”. The first form, which emanation assumed after the act of *Zimzum*, is that of “אדם קדמון” (“primordial man”), consisting of the ten *Sfirot*. This realm of the *Sfirot* in the Lurianic system is understood as “a realm above the four worlds” of “אצילות” (the world of emanation), “בריאה” (the world of creation), “יצירה” (the world of formation) and “עשייה” (the world of action, referring to our terrestrial world).⁸⁷

The *Adam Kadmon* is “nothing but a first configuration of the divine light”, flowing from *Ein-Sof* into the primordial space, vacated during the act of *Zimzum*, and is

⁸⁶ Cf. I. B. Singer and I. Howe, ‘Yiddish Tradition vs. Jewish Tradition’, in: G. Farrell (ed.), *Conversations*, 127 f. See also G. Farrell, ‘Seeing and Blindness’, in: G. Farrell (ed.), *Conversations*, 139, which was quoted earlier (Section 3.2, 73).

⁸⁷ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 119, 136 f.

therefore “the first and highest form in which the divinity manifests itself” after the prior Divine act of concealment and self-limitation.⁸⁸ In Lurianic Kabbalah, the *'Adam Kadmon* serves as “a kind of intermediary link” between *'Ein-Sof* and “the hierarchy of worlds still to come”. The promotion of the *'Adam Kadmon* “to the rank of the first being”, emerging after the act of *Zimzum*, accounts for the “strong anthropomorphic coloring”, accompanying all descriptions of the process of emanation in Lurianic Kabbalah.⁸⁹

Furthermore in the Lurianic system “two essentially different symbolisms” are joined, that of light and that of language. According to Lurianic Kabbalah, from the head of the *'Adam Kadmon* “tremendous lights shone forth” and aligned themselves in complex patterns, assuming the form of letters, of cantillation marks and of other aspects of the Torah or the Hebrew language. Every constellation of lights was supposed to have “its particular linguistic expression”.⁹⁰

According to Luria, it was necessary that the lights of the *Sfirot* should be preserved in special “bowls” or “vessels”, since “the divine scheme of things involved the creation of finite beings and forms, each with its own allotted place in the ideal hierarchy”.⁹¹

Thus all the lights of the *Sfirot* “were given vessels, themselves made of thicker light”. However, at this point a cosmic incident occurred, which is known in Lurianic Kabbalah as “the breaking of the vessels” or “the death of the kings”. This cosmic occurrence was due to the fact that only the “vessels” assigned to the upper three *Sfirot* “managed to contain the light that flowed into them”. The “vessels” of the lower seven *Sfirot* broke, although to different degrees. Most of the light that had been in the vessels “was hurled down with the vessels themselves”, and from their “shards” the “קליפות”, the “dark forces” of the *sitra 'ahra*, “took on substance”. The “sparks of light”

⁸⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 265.

⁸⁹ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 137.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 137 f.

⁹¹ Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 265 f.

that had struck the vessels remained “captured” among the *Klipot*, “which are nourished by them”. The “broken vessels” were subjected to the process of *Tikun* or “restoration which began immediately after the disaster”, but their “dross” was unaffected, and from this “waste matter” the *Klipot*, “in their strict sense as the powers of evil”, emerged.⁹²

Throughout Bashevis’s works there are several direct references to the emergence of the *Klipot* and to the sparks of Divine light, known as “ניצוצות דקדושה” or “sparks of holiness”. But there are also a few images of breaking vessels, connected with some of Bashevis’s characters, and there are many instances, where “פּוֹנֶקֶן” or “sparks” of light appear in situations, in which there is some redemptive good in an otherwise dark or evil context. These images of “sparks” of light in contexts of darkness and evil correspond to the Lurianic idea of the “sparks” of Divine light, which are clinging to the *Klipot*, the powers of evil.

In Bashevis’s *די פאָמיליע מושקאָט* there are several direct references to ideas, connected to the Lurianic concept of the “breaking of the vessels”. Thus, for example, when Oyzer-Heshl’s grandfather Rabbi Dan is expelled from Kleyn-Tereshpol and experiences the hostility of many Gentile peasants and soldiers towards the Jews, he has the feeling that he is encountering the powers of darkness on his perilous journey, and that the “ניצוץ אלוקים” (spark of Divinity) within him is being extinguished. He also has the impression that the “עולם העשייה” (World of Action) is the “עולם הקליפות” (world of the *Klipot*). But he comforts himself with the thought that in its essence everything is “אלוקות” (Godliness), and that “אָפּילו די קליפה האָט איר וואָרצל אין אין-סוף” (even the *Klipah* has its root in *’Ein-Sof*). “דער תכלית איז בחירה.” (Its purpose is free will.).⁹³

Here both the *Klipot* and the “sparks” of Divine light are referred to in a context of evil and hostility. In fact, Rabbi Dan’s reflections on the existence of evil in the world are

⁹² Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 138 f.

⁹³ *די פאָמיליע מושקאָט*, 324.

based on a particular interpretation of the Lurianic concept of the “breaking of the vessels”, which is closely connected to the teleological interpretation of *Zimzum*, presented earlier. There are widely differing explanations of the “breaking of the vessels” in different Lurianic writings. According to one interpretation, the “breaking of the vessels” was “nothing less than a cosmic catastrophe”, a “mishap” in the “life-process of the Godhead”. But according to another interpretation, there is “teleological” purpose underlying the “breaking of the vessels”. It had to occur, in order to “pave the way for reward and punishment in the lower worlds”, which were about to be created.⁹⁴

Throughout his works Bashevis presents various characters, who follow this teleological explanation of the “breaking of the vessels” and the emergence of the *Klipah*, expressed here by Rabbi Dan through the statement that its purpose is free will. In Arele’s Rosh Hashanah sermon, which was quoted earlier, the first two Divine acts in the process towards creation, the act of *Zimzum*, of God’s concealment and withdrawal, and the act of Divine emanation, which led to the “breaking of the vessels” and the formation of the *Klipot*, are conflated. The purpose of both of these acts is interpreted to be the possibility of free will.⁹⁵ The same teleological interpretation of both *Zimzum* and the emergence of the *Klipot* is also given in Yasha’s reflections in *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, as mentioned above.⁹⁶

In *דער קנעכט*, on three occasions the *Klipot* are referred to in connection with the question of evil and suffering in our world and the experience of God’s absence or concealment in the face of human suffering, expressed in the image of the hiding of God’s face. Thus Yankev asks, for how long the *Klipah* will still have the upper hand, and for how long there will still be suffering, hunger, the shedding of innocent blood,

⁹⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 139 f.

⁹⁵ *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, 754. – See: Section 3.4.1, 84 f.

⁹⁶ *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, 243. – See: Section 3.4.1, 85 f.

the atrocities of those who are strong, and the fear of those who are oppressed. He acknowledges that God had to hide His face from His creation, so that His creatures should possess free will, but he thinks that the time for redemption has come.⁹⁷

On another occasion Yankev asks himself, why God had to create this world in the first place and why he had to include the *Klipot*, sin and suffering in His creation.

He has studied the Kabbalah of Moshe Cordovero and Isaac Luria and knows their answers to this question. But in the face of the brutal murder of young children, which he has witnessed during the Chmielnicki massacres in 1648, he is not satisfied with these answers.⁹⁸

However, Yankev does not have any other answer to the question of evil and suffering, and later on in the novel he returns to the explanation, given in the Lurianic works, he has studied, or rather the particular version of the Lurianic doctrine, which is also expressed by Yasha in *לובלין פון קונצנמאכער דער*. Thus Yankev states that *די קליפה איז* "די קליפה איז נישט מער ווי צמצום, לידיקייט, הסתר פנים" (the *Klipah* is nothing more than *Zimzum*, emptiness, the hiding of God's face).⁹⁹ This statement expresses the explanation that the root of evil, for which the *Klipah* stands, was already inherent in the Creator's first act of *Zimzum*, of God's self-limitation and concealment. Here the Lurianic concepts of *Zimzum* and the "breaking of the vessels" are again conflated, and a teleological interpretation of both of them is upheld.

These are only a few examples of direct references to the Lurianic concept of the "breaking of the vessels" and the emergence of the *Klipot* in Bashevis's works. There are, however, many more indirect references, images and allusions, connected to this Lurianic idea. In *לער שטן אין גאָר*, for example, there are two instances of breaking vessels in connection with Rekhele, the main female character of the novel. When

⁹⁷ *לער קנעכט*, 42 f.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

R. Itshe Mates meets Rekhele for the first time, an earthen pot falls from her hands and breaks into shards.¹⁰⁰ During the celebration of Rekhele's and R. Itshe Mates' wedding someone stumbles and a vessel breaks.¹⁰¹ Both of these references to the "breaking of the vessels" occur in connection with the union between Rekhele and R. Itshe Mates. At their betrothal feast a song had been intoned, in which a prayer for this bride and groom was connected with a prayer for the coming of the Messiah and the reunification of the *Shekhinah* with the rest of the Godhead.¹⁰² Here at their wedding there is a mock reference to the cosmic catastrophe of the "breaking of the vessels", which caused the separation between the *Shekhinah*, identical with the tenth *Sfirah* "מלכות" (kingdom), and the remaining nine *Sfirot* in the first place.

In addition to this, several interesting allusions to ideas connected with the "breaking of the vessels" can be found in *דער קנעכט*. In this novel there are two references to a "שאַל" ("husk" or "shell"), which can be understood as allusions to the "קליפה", since the literal meaning of this term is "husk" or "shell". Both of these references occur in connection with Wanda, the daughter of Yankev's Polish master, for whom Yankev feels a forbidden love, although she is a Gentile.¹⁰³ One of these passages also includes a reference to a "ניצוץ" or "spark" of Divine light. This connection of the image of the "ניצוץ" or "spark" with the image of a "שאַל" or "husk", is particularly significant, since according to Lurianic Kabbalah, many "sparks" of Divine light remained captured among the *Klipot*, the "hylic forces of evil", whose hold in the world is supposed to be "particularly strong among the Gentiles".¹⁰⁴ In the novel Yankev is ashamed of his love for a Gentile woman, but he realizes that even Esau, traditionally seen as the ancestor of

¹⁰⁰ דער שטן אין גאָר, 68.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 105.

¹⁰² Ibid., 84.

¹⁰³ דער קנעכט, 62, 239.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, New York: Schocken, 1971, 94.

the Gentiles, carries a “spark” of the souls of Abraham and Isaac within himself.¹⁰⁵

All these references to the “breaking of the vessels” will be discussed in more depth in their appropriate context when analyzing Bashevis’s novels. Here it may suffice to give one more example, which is characteristic of Bashevis’s use of the image of “פונקען” or “sparks” in his works. In *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, when the magician Yasha first starts to fall prey to his temptations concerning Emilia, although he is a married man, he is startled in his attempt to undress her by the appearance of fiery “פונקען” (sparks), which emanate from her silk dress.¹⁰⁶ This is a typical example of the appearance of “sparks” of light in contexts of darkness or evil in Bashevis’s works, which are highly allusive to the Lurianic “sparks of holiness”. In this case, through the sudden appearance of these redemptive “sparks”, the attempt of seduction is brought to a halt, and Yasha is prevented from breaking the commandment against adultery and from inflicting more pain upon his wife. But what is also interesting in this scene, is the mixture of mysticism and rationalism. On the one hand, Yasha is startled on account of the mysterious fire of the “פונקען” or “sparks”. On the other hand, he knows exactly that this fire is “שטאטישע עלעקטריע” (static electricity).¹⁰⁷ This mixture of mysticism and realism is characteristic of Bashevis’s works.

3.4.3. The Concept of *Tikun* and Images of the “זיווג קדישא” (Sacred Marriage)

In *די פאמיליע מושקאט* the old *rebe* of Białodrewna reflects on the great fortune bestowed upon human beings, that they are created in the “צלם אלוקים” (image of God) and that they have been given the power “מתקן צו זיין פגמות” (to rectify cosmic defects) and “אויפצוברענגען די נציצות-דקדושה צום מקור” (to lead the sparks of holiness back to their

¹⁰⁵ דער קנעכט, 61 f.

¹⁰⁶ דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין, 111.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 111.

source).¹⁰⁸

This passage is one of several passages in Bashevis's works, containing explicit references to the Lurianic concept of "תיקון" (cosmic restoration), which is the final stage in the Lurianic doctrine of creation. The cosmic incident of the "breaking of the vessels" marks a "cosmic turning-point" in the relation of the *'Adam Kadmon* to the worlds developing beneath him. As a result of the "breaking of the vessels" none of the four worlds of *'Azilut*, *Bri'ah*, *Yezirah* and *'Asiyah* is "located in its proper place", each of them standing "a rank lower than it should be". All the "subsequent processes of creation" aim at restoring this "primal fault". The process of "cosmic restoration and reintegration" is referred to as "תיקון" (*Tikun*), and the laws governing this process of *Tikun* "constitute the largest part of Lurianic Kabbalah".¹⁰⁹

The process of *Tikun*, the "restoration of the universe to its original design in the mind of its Creator", was begun with the help of the light, issuing from *'Adam Kadmon*'s "forehead" and reorganizing "the disorderly confusion that resulted from the breaking of the vessels". In the Lurianic system the ten *Sfirot*, out of which the *'Adam Kadmon* consisted before the "breaking of the vessels", were restructured into five configurations, called "פרצופים" (literally "faces" or "physiognomies").¹¹⁰ Their names were suggested to Luria by the "symbolism of the Zohar", which was reinterpreted by him. These five *Parzufim* are "אריך אנפין" (literally "the long-faced one", but actually signifying "the Long-Suffering"), "אבא" ("father"), "אמא" ("mother"), "זעיר אנפין" (literally "the short-faced one", signifying the "Impatient") and "נוקבא דזעיר" ("the female of *Ze'ir*"), which is also referred to as "רחל" (Rachel).¹¹¹ The "אריך אנפין" is the restructured configuration of the *Sfirah* of "כתר" ("crown"). The *Sfirot* "חכמה"

¹⁰⁸ די פאמיליע משקאט, 541. – The Hebrew word for "sparks of holiness" can be found both in Bashevis's works and in his kabbalistic sources in varying spellings: "ניצוצות דקדושה", "ניצוצין דקדושה", "נציצות-דקדושה". In the present study I use whichever spelling is employed in the sources cited.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 140, 142.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 140.

¹¹¹ Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 269 f.; *Kabbalah*, 140 f.

(“wisdom”) and “בינה” (“understanding”) have become the *Parzufim* of “אבא ואמא”, which serve as the “supreme archetype” for the procreative “coupling” that, in its “metaphorical aspect” of “הסתכלות פנים בפנים” (“looking face-to-face”), is the “common root of all intellectual and erotic unions”. From the union of “אבא ואמא” the *Parzuf* of “זעיר אנוכי” was “born”, which is comprised of the six lower *Sfirot* of “גדולה” (“greatness”), “גבורה” (“strength”), “תפארת” (“beauty”), “נצח” (“endurance”), “הוד” (“majesty”) and “יסוד” (“foundation”). The last *Sfirah* of “מלכות” (“kingdom”), which corresponds to the *Shekhinah*, was converted into the *Parzuf* of “נוקבא דזעיר”, the female partner of *Ze’ir*. These five *Parzufim* constitute the final figure of the *’Adam Kadmon*, as it evolved in the first stages of *Tikun*.¹¹²

A significant part of the process of *Tikun* of the “broken vessels” has, in fact, already been completed through the activity of “supernal lights”. But the crucial point in Lurianic Kabbalah is that “certain concluding actions” have been reserved for human beings, and the completion of *Tikun*, depends on human action. The completion of *Tikun* is synonymous with both earthly redemption, the end of the “historic exile of the Jewish people” and the celestial re-unification within the Godhead, the end of the “mystic exile of the *Shekhinah*”, caused by the “breaking of the vessels”.¹¹³ The religious acts of the Jew, prayer, the study of the Torah and the fulfilment of the commandments, have the power to “prepare the way for the final restitution of all the scattered and exiled lights and sparks” and for the restoration of the world to its originally intended state of harmony.¹¹⁴

The process of *Tikun* is described in explicitly sexual terms: Should human beings perform their tasks properly and fulfil their “mission” of the *Tikun* of the inward aspects of the worlds, the “female waters” that enable the “supernal couplings” to take

¹¹² Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 270; *Kabbalah*, 106, 140-142.

¹¹³ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 142 f.

¹¹⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 274.

place “will be aroused” and the work of the outward *Tikun* will be completed by concealed “supernal lights”, which will only reveal themselves “in the messianic future”.¹¹⁵

This kind of explicit sexual terminology was already present in earlier Kabbalah, particularly in the *Zohar*, where the idea of the “זיווג קדוש” or “sacred marriage” plays a central role. The *Zohar* describes the sacred union between two of the *Sfirot* within the Godhead. The *Sfirah* of “מלכות”, the tenth of the *Sfirot*, is consistently understood as the female aspect of God and is identified with the *Shekhinah*. It is symbolized by either the Biblical Rachel or Leah. Its male partner in the sacred union is usually understood to be the *Sfirah* of “תפארת”, the sixth and central *Sfirah*, symbolized by the Biblical Jacob. But at times this male partner can also be “יסוד”, the ninth *Sfirah*, into which all the higher *Sfirot* flow.¹¹⁶

According to Lurianic Kabbalah, this harmonious union within the Godhead had been destroyed during the “breaking of the vessels”. But during the subsequent process of *Tikun* two significant unions take place, that of the supernal “אבא ואמא”, leading to the birth of the “זעיר אנוכי”. The “זעיר אנוכי”, consisting of six of the restructured lower *Sfirot*, including “תפארת” and “יסוד”, subsequently becomes the male partner in the sacred union with the restructured tenth *Sfirah* of “מלכות”, the *Shekhinah*, which now becomes the *Parzuf* of “רחל” (Rachel).

Given the explicit sexual descriptions of the process of *Tikun* in Lurianic Kabbalah, it is not surprising that in connection with various visions of redemption Bashevis employs a vast amount of sexual imagery.

In an apocalyptic tale entitled ‘דער באַל’ (translated as ‘The Gentleman from Cracow’)

¹¹⁵ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 143.

¹¹⁶ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, New York: Schocken, 1996 (first ed. 1965), 138; G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, New York: Schocken, 1991, 183.

a whole town's hope for redemption from a life of poverty and misery is bound up with a huge ball, instigated by a rich gentleman from Cracow, during which he announces that every virgin in the *shtetl* must marry that night and all marriages must be consummated before midnight.¹¹⁷ The alleged doctor from Cracow reveals himself as a descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, a heaven-sent messenger with a mission to save the inhabitants of Kleyn-Turbin (probably Mały Turbin) from their destitution and desolation. The Jews of Kleyn-Turbin agree to the lottery destined to provide every girl in the *shtetl* with a husband and with a large dowry from the wealthy doctor. The gentleman himself marries a harlot named Hodl. During the ensuing frenzy, the wild communal dancing and the sexual excesses, a bolt of lightning strikes and all the buildings of the town are consumed by fire. The gentleman reveals his true identity as the chief demon Ketev Mriri.¹¹⁸

The town's initial hope for redemption, resulting in a mass hysteria and in complete sexual debauchery, has not only remained unfulfilled, but has ended in utter destruction. The rabbi's call to "תשובה" (repentance) and his self-sacrificing efforts, however, finally lead to a rebuilding of the community after the destruction.¹¹⁹

In another apocalyptic tale, 'דער חורבן פון קרעשעוו' ('The Destruction of Kreshev') the protagonist's hope for redemption is likewise bound up with sexual debauchery.¹²⁰ But in this short story the apocalyptic destruction, following the sexual excesses, is not followed by a rebuilding or by an "entry into a better way of life".¹²¹

The young Kabbalist and secret Shabbatean Shloymele is convinced that the generation before the redemption cannot become 'כולו זכאי' (completely virtuous) and therefore it

¹¹⁷ 'דער באַל', in: גימפל תם, 83-103, translated as: 'The Gentleman from Cracow' by Martha Glicklich and Elaine Gottlieb, in: *Collected Stories*, 15-28. In the English the name of the town is given as Frampol, whereas in the Yiddish original it is Kleyn-Turbin.

¹¹⁸ גימפל תם, 94-97.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 98-103.

¹²⁰ 'דער חורבן פון קרעשעוו', in: און אנדערע דערציילונגען, אַ מעשה פון פאַרצייטנס, 191-249; translated as: 'The Destruction of Kreshev' by Elaine Gottlieb and June Ruth Flaum, in: *Collected Stories*, 94-130.

¹²¹ Cf. E. Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 128.

has to be 'כולו חייב' (completely guilty).¹²² He thinks that the Messiah will not come, before all passions and desires are fulfilled. Therefore he persuades his wife Lise to commit adultery with the coachman Leybl. Shloymele tells Lise that she is a "גלגול" (reincarnation) of Abishag the Shunammite, King David's young wife, and that Leybl is a reincarnation of Adonijah, the son of Haggith and King David, who had sought Abishag in marriage after his father's death, but was put to death by his brother Solomon, the new king.¹²³ Shloymele presents himself as a reincarnation of King Solomon, who has been sent down to earth to rectify the error of his earlier existence. This rectification is referred to as "תיקון" (*Tikun*) and is described in explicit sexual terms by Shloymele: - "ווען ס'וועט זיין אַ באַהעפטונג צווישן אדונייהו בן חגית און אבישג השונמית - (If sexual intercourse takes place between Adonijah, the son of Haggith, and Abishag the Shunammite, the redemption will come.).¹²⁴ Shloymele also explains the secrets of "יחוד און זיווג" (unification and coupling) to Lise, according to Kabbalistic works such as the *Zohar* and the *'Ez Hayim*, expounding Isaac Luria's Kabbalistic system. Among other things he mentions the "באַהעפטענישן פון אבא" (the sexual intercourse between the holy father and the holy mother), referring to the *Parzufim* "אבא ואמא", which have emerged out of the *Sfirot* of "חכמה" and "בינה" according to Lurianic Kabbalah.¹²⁵ Of course, in the event the union of Lise and the coachman Leybl does not lead to any kind of redemption. The three sinners only sink more deeply into the dregs of sexual depravity, until Shloymele repents and the three culprits are punished in front of the whole community. This is not the end of the tale, however. After the public humiliation Lise hangs herself and Leybl takes revenge by burning down most of the

¹²² דער שטן אין גאריי, 224. Cf. b Sanhedrin 98 a.

¹²³ 1 Kings 2, 13-25. – In the English translation of 'דער חורבן פון קרעשעו' the coachman's name is not Leybl, but Mendel. *Collected Stories*, e.g. 113.

¹²⁴ דער שטן אין גאריי, 228 f.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 219.

town.¹²⁶ But otherwise than in “דער באַל”, there is no sign of redemption after the destruction of Krzeszów. As in דער שטן אין גאָר, the combination of false messianism with sexual debauchery has led to utter destruction.

In Bashevis's works the hope for redemption is a major theme, as we have seen, but in most of his works, as in ‘דער חורבן פון קרעשעוו’ as well as in דער שטן אין גאָר and in די פאַמיליע מושקאַט, this hope remains unfulfilled. Another major theme in Bashevis's works is love and sexuality, which in Lurianic Kabbalah is, of course, closely related to the theme of redemption or *Tikun*, as explained above. It is thus interesting to note that most of Bashevis's writings describe the failure of his characters to achieve sexual love. Many of his characters are driven by sexual depravity and lust, like Shloymele in ‘דער חורבן פון קרעשעוו’ or R. Gedalye in דער שטן אין גאָר. It is also lust, not love, which motivates many of Bashevis's male protagonists, like the magician Yasha Mazur in דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין and Oyzer-Heshl in די פאַמיליע מושקאַט to pursue several women, not being able to have a meaningful relationship with any one of them. The other extreme attitude towards sexual love, exhibited by some of Bashevis's male characters, is a disgust with the material world and with the whole of bodily existence, including sexuality. Two clear examples of such characters are R. Itshe Mates in דער שטן אין גאָר and Yoyne Meyer in the short story ‘דער שוחט’ (‘The Slaughterer’), who is disgusted with his work as a ritual slaughterer, as well as with the whole world of the body, and who turns mad at the end of the story.¹²⁷

In Bashevis's writings, which are replete with mismatched couples and descriptions of depraved sexuality, there are only a few instances of couples, sharing a life of true love and happiness. The two best examples of this are the short story ‘דער קורצער פרייטיק’

¹²⁶ דער שטן אין גאָר, 244-249.

¹²⁷ ‘דער שוחט’, in: מעשיות פון דינשערין אייוון, 27-42; translated as: ‘The Slaughterer’ by Mirra Ginsburg, in: *Collected Stories*, 207-216.

(‘Short Friday’) and the novel *דער קנעכט* 7. Both of these works employ the Biblical verse “הנאהבים והנעימים בחייהם ובמותם לא נפרדו” ([They] “were loved and dear in their lives, and in their death they were not divided”) – [2 Sam 1, 23], as a “description of sexual love” and as a “thematic core”.¹²⁸

‘דער קורצער פרייטיק’ tells the story of a poor, but happy couple, Shmuel-Leybele and Shoshe, who live a traditional Jewish life in the community of קליין-יוזעפאוו (Mały Józefów).¹²⁹ The couple’s love for each other is reflected in their special love of celebrating Shabat. After introducing the two main characters, the first part of the story describes their lavish preparations for Shabat, at first in general terms, after that concentrating on a particular Friday in the month of *Tevet*, the shortest Friday of the year. At the end of the first part, Shmuel-Leybele hears the recital of שיר-השירים (Song of Songs) in the synagogue and prays with such “כוונה”, that in a mystical way the words of his prayers seem to rise up to the ark and from there all the way to the “כסא-הכבוד” (Throne of Glory).¹³⁰

Shabat is often seen as Israel’s bride. It is welcomed by reciting the Song of Songs, which is traditionally understood as a song of love between God and the community of Israel. In the Kabbalah the community of Israel was identified with the *Shekhinah* and everything which is said “in the Talmudic interpretation of Song of Songs about the community of Israel” and its union with God, was “transferred to the *Shekhinah*” and the sacred union with her male counterpart within the Godhead.¹³¹

Gershom Scholem calls Shabat “*the day of the Kabbalah*”. Shabat, the bride (referred to in Shlomo Alkabez’s hymn “לכה דודי”) and the *Shekhinah* were identified by the Safed

¹²⁸ Cf. Bonnie Lyons, ‘Sexual Love in I.B. Singer’s Work’, in: Daniel Walden (ed.), *Isaac Bashevis Singer. A Reconsideration (Studies in American Jewish Literature 1)*, Albany: SUNY, 1981, 61. – The English translation of the verse from 2 Samuel is quoted according to *The Jerusalem Bible*.

¹²⁹ ‘דער קורצער פרייטיק’, in: *די צוקונפט* 50:1 (January 1945), 19-23; translated as: ‘Short Friday’ by Joseph Singer and Roger Klein, in: *Short Friday and Other Stories*, 191-202. In the English translation the name of the *shtetl* is given as Lapschitz.

¹³⁰ *די צוקונפט* 50:1, 21.

¹³¹ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 106.

Kabbalists. The Talmudic passage, telling us that Torah scholars used to have marital intercourse especially on Friday night, was reinterpreted. Shabat was interpreted as a marriage festival and the “earthly union between man and woman” on Friday night was taken as a “symbolic reference to the heavenly marriage” between the *Shekhinah* and its male counterpart.¹³²

The second part of ‘דער קורצער פרייטיק’ describes the couple’s celebration of Shabat, which is imbued with an atmosphere of holiness. On the way home from the synagogue it seems to Shmuel-Leybele, as if his *shtetl* had blended with the “הימל” (sky / Heaven). His poor room seems to him like “גן-עדן” (Paradise).¹³³ Before the Sabbath meal he sings the “אשת חיל” (“The worthy woman”), the hymn in praise of the Jewish housewife, but reinterpreted by the Kabbalists as referring to the *Shekhinah*.¹³⁴ The couple’s festive Friday night meal, surrounded by words of prayer, is sanctified, as is their love-making, described in the final part of the story.

Given the atmosphere of sanctity permeating the whole story and the erotic-mystical associations referred to above, it can be said that the couple’s union on Shabat reflects the “זיווג קדישא” or “sacred marriage” between the *Shekhinah* – or its restructured configuration in the *Parzuf* of “Rachel” in Lurianic Kabbalah – with its male counterpart within the Godhead. ‘דער קורצער פרייטיק’ is thus one of the rare visions of *Tikun* in Bashevis’s works. The short story ends with the couple dying side by side (being too tired to check the stove after their love-making) and with “הייליקע מלאכים” (holy angels) leading them to Paradise.¹³⁵

¹³² Ibid., 139 f. The Talmudic passage referred to is: b Ketubot 62 b.

¹³³ די צוקונפט 50:1, 21.

¹³⁴ Ibid. Cf. G.Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 142.

¹³⁵ די צוקונפט 50:1, 23.

3.5. The Interpretation of Lurianic Concepts in Shabbateanism and Its Depiction in

Bashevis's Works

The Lurianic concepts, introduced above, particularly the ideas of the “breaking of the vessels” and the “sparks of holiness”, as well as the doctrine of *Tikun*, also figure prominently in seventeenth century Shabbateanism, which is the main focus of Bashevis's first novel *דער שטן אין גאָר* and which also appears in the last sections of his other seventeenth century novel *דער קנעכט*.

In *דער שטן אין גאָר* R. Itshe Mates explains Shabbatai Zvi's mission to the inner circle of Kabbalists in Goraj and during his expositions he makes extensive use of Lurianic terminology. He tells the assembled Kabbalists that only a few “ניצוצין דקדושה” (“sparks of holiness”) were still present among the *Klipot*, to which the *sitra 'ahra* was clinging. According to R. Itshe Mates' explanations, Shabbatai Zvi was conducting a battle against these powers of evil, thus leading the “sparks of holiness” back to their source. When the last “ניצוץ” (“spark”) was back at its source, the “מלכא-קדישא” (“holy kingdom”) would be revealed.¹³⁶

This meeting of the kabbalistic elite in Goraj takes place during the year 5426 (1665/66). This was the year, when Shabbatai Zvi, who was born in Smyrna in 1626, revealed himself as the Messiah and “ignited a Messianic movement”, which began in Palestine and “reached out to the entire Diaspora”.¹³⁷ The Shabbatean messianic movement began in 1665 after the encounter of Shabbatai Zvi with Nathan of Gaza, a young rabbi and Kabbalist who had “delved deeply into Lurianic Kabbalah”.¹³⁸ Nathan of Gaza had a vision of Shabbatai Zvi as the Messiah, and after their encounter he started to appear as Shabbatai Zvi's prophet and “standard-bearer”, publishing the coming redemption in an “apocryphal text attributed to one Abraham he-Hasid, a contemporary of the famous

¹³⁶ *דער שטן אין גאָר*, 65.

¹³⁷ Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 59.

¹³⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 249 f., 435.

Judah he-Ḥasid”, who supposedly prophesied the appearance of Shabbatai Ṭvi and proclaimed him the “redeemer of Israel”. Thus when Shabbatai Ṭvi proclaimed himself the Messiah in 1665, he swept with him the whole congregation in Gaza. From there “the messianic news spread like a wildfire to other communities in Palestine”, and soon after a “wave of legends and reports of miracles” concerning Shabbatai Ṭvi and his prophet swept the Diaspora.¹³⁹ For the Jewish masses in the Diaspora the personality of the Messiah was from the beginning “covered by a thick web of legends”, which had little to do with the real Shabbatai Ṭvi.¹⁴⁰

This is also the case in Bashevis’s “דער שטן אין גאָר” (emissary from the land of Israel) and R. Gedalye announce all the legendary miracles, supposedly performed by Shabbatai Ṭvi. For example R. Gedalye proclaims that Shabbatai Ṭvi had already revealed himself and was now on his way to claim the crown from the Sultan of Stambul, riding on a wild lion, accompanied by princes and prophets from the other side of the river Sambatyon. The sea was parting before him and a pillar of fire was showing him the way.¹⁴¹

According to Scholem, several factors contributed to the success of Shabbatean messianism throughout the Diaspora. Not only did the “messianic call” come from the “Holy Land” and was accompanied by a “renewal of prophecy”, most prominently in the figure of Nathan of Gaza. But a particularly important factor was also the combination of popular apocalyptic beliefs, which appealed to the masses, and reinterpretations of ideas from Lurianic Kabbalah, which appealed to the kabbalistic elite: “The double response of the broad masses and the kabbalistic elite imparted a powerful impetus to the movement.”¹⁴²

The propaganda to the masses consisted of such legendary messianic images as imparted

¹³⁹ Ibid. 249-251.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 59.

¹⁴¹ “דער שטן אין גאָר” 42, 113.

¹⁴² Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Ṭevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 464-466.

by R. Gedalye, whereas the kabbalistic elite enjoyed an explanation of Shabbatai Zvi's messianic activity in Lurianic terms, as it was provided by R. Itshe Mates at the meeting of the Kabbalists in Goraj.

Lurianic Kabbalah had added new dimensions to the “popular Messianic folk-myth of a conquering national hero”, who was supposed to free the Jewish people from the “yoke of the Gentiles”. The “redemptive process”, leading to a “עולם התיקון” (“restored world”), was “raised to the level of a supreme cosmic drama”. It was understood as a “fundamental transformation of the entire Creation”, leading to the “rectification of the primordial catastrophe” of the “breaking of the vessels”, in the course of which all the worlds would be returned to their originally intended place and the “original unity and perfection” of the Godhead would be restored.¹⁴³

Here again an important part of this process was the raising of the sparks of Divine light, captured among the *Klipot*, the hylic forces of evil, and their return to their Divine source. Adherents of the Shabbatean movement were convinced that Shabbatai Zvi, whom they believed to be the Messiah, would fulfil this task, just as R. Itshe Mates explains to the Kabbalists in Goraj.¹⁴⁴

Towards the end of דער קנעכט an emissary from the land of Israel tells Yankev of the imminent redemption, calculated for the year 5426 (1665/66), and places the activities of Shabbatai Zvi and other Shabbatean leaders in the context of Isaac Luria's Kabbalah. The emissary advises Yankev to settle in the land of Israel with his son, because the Messiah existed already in this world and the Jews in Israel would be the first to welcome the redeemer. He says that the “יודעי חן (מקובלים)” (those knowledgeable in the mysterious wisdom [Kabbalists]) already knew the identity of the Messiah and the exact date of his revelation.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 87.

¹⁴⁴ דער שטן אין גאריי, 65

¹⁴⁵ דער קנעכט, 262.

From this passage it is obvious that the emissary is referring to Shabbatai Zvi as the Messiah, who will soon reveal himself. In the “עפילאָג” (Epilogue) it is confirmed that the emissary is a follower of Shabbatai Zvi, when it is specified that he became one of the prophets of the false Messiah.¹⁴⁶ It is likewise obvious that Yankev’s encounter with the emissary takes place before the year 1665, when Shabbatai Zvi proclaimed himself the Messiah, since the emissary only hints at the identity of the Messiah, without mentioning Shabbatai Zvi’s name. When he speaks of the “יודעי חן”, who know the identity of the Messiah, he is referring to those knowledgeable in “חכמה נסתרת”, that is hidden or mysterious wisdom, a term commonly applied to mystical, esoteric teaching. The emissary also informs Yankev that these knowledgeable Kabbalists in the land of Israel occupy themselves with “נסתרות” (hidden matters – usually referring to the study of Kabbalah). They employ “שמות הקדושים” (holy names), “יחודים” (unifications) and “צירופים” (combinations of letters), practice “תעניתים” (fasts) and study Kabbalah during the entire night.¹⁴⁷

These Kabbalists from the circle of Shabbatai Zvi employ practices like “צירופים”, that is combinations of letters and holy names, which were widely used by the Lurianic Kabbalists in their “כוונות” (intentions for prayer) and “יחודים”, that is acts of unifications of Divine names which, according to the Lurianic understanding, were supposed to effect unification within the Godhead.¹⁴⁸

The emissary also states that the great leaders of former generations, like “ארי הקודש” (the holy ARI – R. Isaac Luria), R. Hayim Vital and R. Shlomo Alkabez, are no longer there. But he says that the “סוכת שלום” (tabernacle of peace) still exists in Safed and that “יפתח בדורו כשמואל בדורו” (Yeftah in his generation was like Shmuel in his generation).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 281.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 255.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 178-180.

¹⁴⁹ דער קנעכט, 255. Cf. b Rosh Hashanah 25 b.

This statement shows that the emissary views the Shabbatean leaders, who were active in the land of Israel at the time, as being as significant as the most famous Safed Kabbalists were in their generation. At the same time he places the Shabbatean leaders within the tradition of R. Shlomo Alkabez [c. 1505-1584], R. Isaac Luria [1534-1572] and Luria's chief disciple R. Ḥayim Vital [1542-1620]. It was, in fact an important characteristic of Shabbatean "messianic propaganda", addressed to kabbalistic scholars, that it would show the "apparent continuity" of Shabbatean ideas with earlier "Zoharic and Lurianic esotericism".¹⁵⁰

Lurianic Kabbalah had already taught its adherents to prepare themselves "more for an inner than for an outer renewal", although it was assumed that the one could not take place without the other. The followers of Shabbatai Ṭvi certainly expected him to fulfil traditional Jewish messianic hopes, but for those, more familiar with Lurianic teachings, the emphasis was on the inner aspects of redemption. They believed that the redemption had begun already, that "inwardly all was in the process of renewal" and that "the nature of the Godhead" had already been "fundamentally altered".¹⁵¹

In September 1666 Shabbatai Ṭvi was given the choice by the Sultan of Istanbul of death as a martyr or conversion to Islam. Shabbatai Ṭvi became a Muslim and saved his life. His apostasy produced a "profound shock" among his followers.¹⁵² The majority of his followers, the Jewish masses, for whom Shabbatean messianism was "predominantly a belief in earthly and political redemption" despaired of their faith after Shabbatai Ṭvi's conversion. But for the ideological hardcore of the Shabbatean movement, particularly for those who were well versed in Lurianic Kabbalah, the conversion did not bring their faith to an end, because these Shabbatean leaders

¹⁵⁰ Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Ṭvi: The Mystical Messiah*, 466.

¹⁵¹ Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 87, 92.

¹⁵² Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 265.

were not preoccupied with political redemption in the first place, but rather with the “redemption of religion and faith” and the “redemption of God”.¹⁵³

These Shabbatean ideologues, who still held fast to their belief after Shabbatai Zvi’s apostasy, were convinced that the inward aspects of the redemption had indeed begun, but that “its ways were mysterious and its outward aspect was still incomplete”. The completion of the cosmic process of *Tikun* had to be delayed, because not all the “ניצוצות דקדושה” (“sparks of holiness”) had been “gathered back again to their source”. Many Divine “sparks” still remained captured within the “impure realm” of the *Klipot*. Thus the process of redemption was still incomplete and it was left to the “Redeemer” “to descend through the gates of impurity” into the realm of the *Klipot* and “to rescue the divine sparks still imprisoned there”.¹⁵⁴ This reinterpretation of the Lurianic doctrines of the “breaking of the vessels” and *Tikun* was employed by Shabbatean ideologues to justify Shabbatai Zvi’s conversion to Islam.

Those who still continued to believe in Shabbatai Zvi’s messianic mission after his conversion, called themselves “believers” and their secret faith the “holy faith”.¹⁵⁵

Bashevis employs the term “בני-הימנותא” or “בני-מהימנותא” (literally: sons of faithfulness; i.e. the Faithful) in both דער קנעכט and דער שטן אין גאָרײ, referring to the adherents of the Shabbatean movement after Shabbatai Zvi’s apostasy, when the movement had “developed all the characteristics of a spiritualist sect”.¹⁵⁶ Persecutions by rabbis and communal leaders compelled the followers of Shabbatai Zvi to develop “their own special feeling of apartness” and their “need to preserve their secret”.¹⁵⁷

This secretive character of Shabbateanism after Shabbatai’s conversion is also emphasized by Bashevis in the epilogue of דער קנעכט, which takes place many years after

¹⁵³ Cf. Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism*, Albany: SUNY, 1993, 95, 99.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 92, 94.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 91, 94.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 92. – דער קנעכט, 279, דער שטן אין גאָרײ, 157.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 92.

the apostasy. The epilogue recounts the split in the Jewish community of Pilica at the time of Shabbatai Zvi's messianic claims and particularly after his conversion to Islam. It describes how the community excommunicated the "כת" (sect), which in turn excommunicated the rabbi and the seven town elders. After Shabbatai Zvi's conversion, those who remained faithful to the apostate, met in market places of various towns, recognizing each other through special signs. Apart from their secret faith, they also shared business interests and arranged marriages within their own group.¹⁵⁸

But the "believers" themselves were not one coherent group. They were divided into two major factions, a "moderate" wing and a "radical", "antinomian" wing of Shabbateanism, which had by then become a "heretical movement".¹⁵⁹ Both factions supported the reinterpretation of the Lurianic doctrines of the "breaking of the vessels" and *Tikun* as a justification of Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy. But according to the "moderates", the "apostasy of the Messiah" was not intended as an example for others. The Jew "was expected to remain a Jew", and the commandments of the Torah were not to be "openly tampered" with.¹⁶⁰ The radical, antinomian wing, on the other hand, believed that they had to descend to the "abyss" with their "Redeemer", and that there was a "potential holiness of sin", and therefore they began to violate the commandments and to commit "sacred" sins.¹⁶¹

The split within the Shabbatean movement after the apostasy is reflected in Bashevis's "דער שטן אין גאָר", where the two factions within heretical Shabbateanism are also described. But there is one major difference between Scholem's scholarly analysis and Bashevis's presentation in his novel, since, according to Bashevis's presentation, it was only the radical group, who supported the reinterpretation of Lurianic doctrines to justify

¹⁵⁸ דער קנעכט, 278 f.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 88, 100.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 109 f., 113.

Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy. According to Bashevis, the moderate group was convinced that Shabbatai Zvi had passed into the "עולם האצילות" (World of Emanation) and that the apostate in Istanbul was, in fact, not Shabbatai Zvi at all, but the demon אשמדאי (Asmodeus). They also believed that redemption would only come, when the generation had become "כולו זכאי" (completely virtuous). In contrast to Scholem, it is only Bashevis's second group, the radicals, who upheld the concept that the Messiah had to descend to the realm of the "חיצונים" (the shells of the broken "vessels" in the "Nether Sphere") to rescue the "נציצות דקדושה" ("sparks of holiness") from them. They believed that they had to follow the example of their Messiah and that the generation before redemption had to become "כולו חייב" (completely guilty). The remainder of Bashevis's presentation again matches Scholem's account, describing, how these radical antinomians went to great lengths to commit every possible sin.¹⁶²

This radical, antinomian behaviour of several adherents of Shabbateanism is also described in דער קנעכט. These radical Shabbateans are described as having ceased to observe Jewish law, because they believed that the Torah was about to be annulled. Others interpreted the verse "ושכנתי אתכם בתוך טומאתכם" (And I will dwell with you in the midst of your uncleanness [Lev 16, 16]) as a justification for committing all kinds of abominations, particularly sexual transgressions.¹⁶³

It is not stated, to which period of time Bashevis is referring here. But historically, ideas like those described in this paragraph were commonly held by the radical wing of Shabbateans after Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy. They believed that prior to the advent of the Messiah the "inward" and the "outward" aspects of *Tikun* were in harmony, and for this reason great "תיקונים" (cosmic restorations) could be effected "by means of outwardly performing the commandments". However, since the "Redeemer" had come and had

¹⁶² דער שטן אין גארי, 158 f. – On the state of the generation before redemption, see: b Sanhedrin 98 a.

¹⁶³ דער קנעכט, 278. The actual verse in Leviticus reads: "[וכן יעשה לאהל מועד] השכן אתם בתוך טמאתם" ("[and so shall he do for the Tent of Meeting,] that remains among them in the midst of their uncleanness").

descended into the Nether World to rescue the last “sparks of holiness” from the grasp of the *Klipot*, the inward and the outward aspects of redemption are “in opposition”. Now the “inward commandment”, which alone can effect a *Tikun*, has become “synonymous with the outward transgression”. They believed that at this stage in history “the violation of the Torah” was its true fulfilment, and they frequently employed the above-quoted verse from Leviticus to justify their belief in the “sanctifying power of sin”.¹⁶⁴

The description of Shabbatean messianism in Bashevis’s novels *דער שטן אין גאָר* and *דער קנעכט* differs very little from the modern scholarly interpretations of Scholem, Liebes and others, although at least during the time he wrote his first novel, these scholarly works did not yet exist. Bashevis’s knowledge of the historical details of the period of Shabbatean messianism must be attributed to his reading of some of the primary sources of this period, which also formed part of Scholem’s source material, as explained above.¹⁶⁵ The few differences between Bashevis’s and Scholem’s presentation are probably due to varying interpretations of the source material. Bashevis’s account of Shabbatean messianism comprises both the outward historical development of the movement and the reinterpretation of Lurianic concepts by the inner circle of Shabbatean ideologues and Kabbalists.

After having presented both the historical background of Shabbatean messianism and its use of Lurianic Kabbalah, as it is described by Bashevis, the literary role of Shabbatean messianism in Bashevis’s *דער שטן אין גאָר* and *דער קנעכט* will be investigated within the framework of the detailed discussion of these two novels.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 110, 113.

¹⁶⁵ See: Section 2.5, 53-58.

3.6. Conclusion

Bashevis's novels and short stories are imbued with mystical images, references to Jewish mystical concepts and allusions to kabbalistic ideas. Various recurrent themes can be identified, which form the basis of these mystical images, references and allusions. One of these themes, which needs to be taken into consideration, is the use of mysticism for magical purposes. There are many characters throughout Bashevis's writings, who employ Jewish mystical works for magical practices. Most prominent among these works are the *Sefer Yeẓirah* and the *Sefer Razi'el*, although the *Tikunei Zohar* is also mentioned in this context. These mystical works are employed to fulfil one of two major functions, either to provide protection from demons and evil spirits, or to serve as a guide for performing magical activities, such as the creation of living beings by means of certain combinations of letters, taken from these mystical works, particularly from the *Sefer Yeẓirah*.

Among the apotropaic devices, employed by many of Bashevis's more superstitious characters, are amulets, incantations and the practice of placing a knife together with a Jewish mystical work, like the *Sefer Yeẓirah* or the *Sefer Razi'el*, under the pillow of a woman in childbirth. Bashevis is consistently ambivalent on the subject of demons and dybbuks, with which his fictional worlds, particularly his short stories, are replete.

Concerning the use of Jewish mystical works for creative, magical purposes, there are two specific magical experiments, the tapping of wine from the wall and the creation of living doves, which are frequently cited as examples of practical Kabbalah in Bashevis's writings. The creation of living beings with the help of *Sefer Yeẓirah* can be traced back to Talmudic legends on the creation of calves and mediaeval commentaries on *Sefer Yeẓirah*, according to which this work can be employed as a manual for the creation of a *golem*. The reference to the creation of doves with the help of *Sefer Yeẓirah* in Bashevis's writings is a variation of this Talmudic and mediaeval idea. The recurrent motif of the

same two magical experiments throughout Bashevis's works is a special stylistic device, which has to be seen in the context of his use of other recurrent images, such as images of the nocturnal sky and the motif of sparks of light in contexts of darkness.

All the examples of magical activities in Bashevis's writings testify to the popular belief in the inherent power of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and in particular of Divine names. The belief in the creative, magical power of Hebrew letters and words is based on the "linguistic-mystical cosmogony" of the *Sefer Yezirah*, according to which the universe was created through combinations of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The world-process is therefore essentially linguistic and the Divine Creator, who formed the world out of combinations of Hebrew letters, can be understood as the original archetypal writer.¹⁶⁶

Bashevis holds, as he states in an interview, that the artist or writer imitates God's primal creative act in his creation of fictional worlds through language.¹⁶⁷ This idea finds its fullest expression in Bashevis's novel *פון לובלין קונצנמאכער דער*, where the images of the Creator-God and the artist-magician are frequently interwoven. Both are experienced by others in the two extremes of concealment and of revelation in creation or art. This also applies to the artist and Yiddish writer Bashevis, who resembles the artist-magician Yasha Mazur in many ways. Bashevis also bears a marked resemblance to the demonic narrator of the short story 'מעשה טישעוויץ'. Like the last remaining demon after the Holocaust in this short story, Bashevis is deprived of his subject, the majority of the Jewish population in Eastern Europe and, like the last demon, Bashevis sustains himself with Yiddish books. But in his own Yiddish writings Bashevis reconstructs and recreates the life of Jews in Poland in its various aspects and throughout several centuries. In his recreation of past Jewish lives and his creation of fictional worlds, he not only employs the native language of the vast majority of those Jews, who were murdered, but also the

¹⁶⁶ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 25 f.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. G. Farrell, *Conversations*, 145.

same letters of the Hebrew alphabet, through which, according to the *Sefer Yezirah*, the whole universe was created.

In addition to the idea of creation, expressed in the earliest Hebrew mystical text, the *Sefer Yezirah*, Bashevis often makes use of later kabbalistic ideas of creation. The doctrine of creation in Lurianic Kabbalah and its three major stages, *Zimzum*, the “breaking of the vessels” and *Tikun*, play a significant role throughout Bashevis’s works. It has been suggested that *Zimzum*, the act of withdrawal and self-limitation of the Creator prior to the act of creation, is the “secret signature” in Bashevis’s works.¹⁶⁸

In Bashevis’s writings there are various characters, who experience God in the two extremes of concealment and inscrutability on the one hand and of revelation in creation on the other hand. This corresponds to the first two stages in the process towards creation according to Lurianic Kabbalah. The Divine act of emanation and manifestation had to be preceded by a Divine act of contraction and withdrawal. This withdrawal of God into the depths of His own Being can be understood in terms of Exile. The Divine act of *Zimzum*, which made the creation of the world possible, also enabled the emergence of evil through the vacation of a space from the previously all-encompassing presence of the Divine. This understanding of *Zimzum*, which was developed particularly in the writings of Moshe Hayim Luzzatto and given a teleological explanation, is also expressed by several of Bashevis’s characters. The expression most commonly used by Bashevis’s characters for explaining God’s act of withdrawal, which enabled the existence of evil in the world, is the statement that its purpose was “בחירה” (free will).

But during the reflections of Bashevis’s characters on the purpose of evil two ideas are frequently conflated, which represent two different stages in the process towards creation in the Lurianic system. These are the act of *Zimzum* and the subsequent act of Divine emanation, during which the cosmic incident of the “breaking of the vessels” occurred.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. C. Sinclair, *The Brothers Singer*, 45.

The breaking of the “vessels”, assigned to the Divine light of the *Sfirot*, led to the formation of the *Klipot*, the forces of evil, from the shards of the broken “vessels” and to the scattering of “sparks” of Divine light throughout the universe, including the realm of the *Klipot*. Following a possible teleological interpretation of both *Zimzum* and the “breaking of the vessels”, which in some Lurianic writings is understood to be nothing more than a cosmic catastrophe, Bashevis has several of his characters state that the purpose of both *Zimzum* and the “breaking of the vessels” was free will.

In addition to several direct references to the “breaking of the vessels”, the emergence of the *Klipot* and the “ניצוצות דקדושה” (“sparks of holiness”), Bashevis also employs allusive images of breaking vessels and particularly of “פונקען” or “sparks” of light, which appear throughout his works as glimpses of redemptive good in contexts of darkness or evil.

More than the act of *Zimzum*, the incident of the “breaking of the vessels” has to be understood in terms of Exile, since the whole order of the universe, including the Divine realm of the *Sfirot* had been upset. All the subsequent cosmic processes aim at restoring this primal fault through the act of *Tikun* (cosmic restoration). The completion of *Tikun* is synonymous with both the end of the exile of the Jewish people and the end of the cosmic exile of the *Shekhinah* and the celestial re-unification of this female aspect of the Divine with its male partner within the Godhead. The process of *Tikun* is described in explicitly sexual terms in the Lurianic writings, going back to the earlier Zoharic idea of the “זיווג קדישא” or “sacred marriage” within the realm of the *Sfirot*. Influenced by these descriptions of *Tikun* in kabbalistic literature, Bashevis makes extensive use of erotic-mystical imagery in connection with various visions of redemption, as explained above.

In *דער קנעכט* and *דער שטן אין גאָר* Bashevis also presents Shabbatean messianic ideas and the Shabbatean use of Lurianic terminology. His descriptions of Shabbateanism, which differ very little from modern scholarly interpretations, will be further investigated in connection with these two novels.

דער שטן אין גאריי (Satan in Goray)

(Satan in Goray)

4.1. Introduction: "The Birth-pangs of the Messiah"

די גרעסטע מקובלים פון פוילן און אַנדערע לענדער האָבן אַנטפלעקט אַלערליי רמזים אין זיין זיין און אין פאַרצייטישע קבלה-ספרים, אַז די טעג פון גלות זענען געציילטע. כמעלניצקיס שחיתות זענען געווען די געבורט-ווייען פון משיח. על פי סוד האָבן זיי געמוזט זיך אָנהייבן שנת ת"ח און זיך פאַרציען ביז סוף פון היינטיקן יאָר, התכ"ו, ווען ס'וועט זיין די גאולה שלמה.¹

The greatest cabalists in Poland and other lands uncovered numerous allusions in the Zohar and in antique cabalistic volumes proving that the days of the Exile were numbered. Chmelnicki's massacres were the birth-pangs of the Messiah. According to a secret formula, these pangs were destined to begin in the year 1648 and extend till the end of the present year [1665/66], when the full and perfect redemption would come.²

Yitskhok Bashevis's work *דער שטן אין גאריי* (*Satan in Goray*) is his first novel. It was initially serialized in the literary Yiddish monthly *גלאַבוס* in Warsaw between January and September 1933. In 1935 it was published in book form by the prestigious Yiddish PEN Club in Warsaw. Not until twenty years later did the novel become accessible to the English-speaking public with Jacob Sloan's translation, published in the United States in 1955.

¹ יצחק באַשעוויס, *דער שטן אין גאריי*, 27. All page numbers within the text of this chapter refer to the Yiddish original, unless otherwise stated.

² I.B. Singer, *Satan in Goray*, London: Penguin, 1980 (first ed. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1958), 23. In this chapter the English text is quoted according to Jacob Sloan's translation, unless it differs significantly from the Yiddish original.

דער שטן אין גארי is a historical novel, written in a highly imaginative narrative style. In a “juxtaposition of the fantastic and the factual” it describes the effects of Shabbatean messianism on a small *shtetl* in Poland in the aftermath of the massacres of the Cossack hetman Bogdan Chmielnicki in 1648, which were interpreted by many as the “birth-pangs of the Messiah”.³ And indeed, a claimant of this title appeared in the person of one Shabbatai Zvi (1626-1676), who made his messianic claims at exactly the calculated time and in the aftermath of the massacres that had shattered Polish Jewry, a fact which contributed greatly to Shabbatai Zvi’s credibility among the masses of the Jewish population in Eastern Europe.⁴

After a short summary of the storyline of Bashevis’s first novel, the author’s presentation of Shabbatean messianism will be compared with modern scholarly views on this subject. Furthermore Bashevis’s use of Jewish mystical references and motifs and their connection to some of the main characters of the novel will be documented. More than any other of Bashevis’s novels, דער שטן אין גארי is replete with kabbalistic terminology and ideas, which this chapter will identify.

4.2. The Storyline of דער שטן אין גארי

The action of Bashevis’s first novel takes place in Goraj, a small *shtetl* near Lublin, most of whose citizens have been killed during the Chmielnicki massacres in 1648. The few who survived begin to return to Goraj after the calamities, among them the rabbi of the town, Rabbi Beynesh Ashkenazi, and R. Elazar Babad (Reb Eleazar Babad in the English), the former community leader, with his daughter Rekhele.

After 1648 extraordinary rumours have started to spread throughout Poland that

³ Cf. C. Sinclair, *The Brothers Singer*, 77.

⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 244, 262.

Chmielnicki's massacres were the "געבורט-ווייען פון משיח" ("birth-pangs of the Messiah") – [27] and that one man, Shabbatai Zvi, was the Messiah for whom Israel had been waiting [29].

A packman by the name of R. Itshe Mates arrives in Goraj with news about Shabbatai Zvi. Being entertained in the rabbi's own house by Levi, the rabbi's son, a supporter of the Shabbatean movement, R. Itshe Mates explains Shabbatai Zvi's mission to the assembled Kabbalists of Goraj [64 f.]. One of R. Itshe Mates' tasks in Goray is to check the *mezuzot* on the doorposts, and this is, how he meets Rekhele, on whose *mezuzah* God's name has been erased. He soon decides, that Rekhele was sent to him "מן השמים" ("from Heaven"), and he proposes marriage to her [67 f.].

Meanwhile Rabbi Beynesh receives a letter from Lublin, warning him that R. Itshe Mates is a forger and that Shabbatai Zvi is a false Messiah [77 f.]. Rabbi Beynesh prepares for war with the Shabbateans, warning his congregation that "צוואיילן דעם קץ" ("to hasten the end of days") is a grave sin [81 f.]. But his end approaches very soon, in the night of R. Itshe Mates' and Rekhele's betrothal feast, where "מעשים חתופים" ("profanations") are occurring, as he is informed [89]. He sets off to Rekhele's house immediately, but is seized by a storm and falls to the ground. Finally the rabbi decides to leave his congregation and to die peacefully in Lublin [98].

After Rabbi Beynesh's disappearance from Goraj his son Levi becomes the new rabbi of the town and performs the wedding ceremony for R. Itshe Mates and Rekhele. But the marriage remains unconsumated and R. Itshe Mates is mocked by many in Goraj [111 f.]. A new arrival in Goraj, R. Gedalye from Zamość, brings more astonishing news about Shabbatai Zvi. R. Gedalye takes up the post of ritual slaughterer in Goraj, and with his winning personality he soon becomes the true leader of Goraj [119].

Meanwhile Rekhele has a vision of an angel and starts prophesying that the redemption

will come at the new year [125-127]. R. Gedalye sends her husband, R. Itshe Mates, and the Kabbalist R. Mordkhe Yoysef on a mission to spread the news of Rekhele's prophecy [128-131]. Eventually he settles her in his own house, sets her up as a prophetess and feels free to have sexual intercourse with Rekhele [132, 143].

The people of Goraj wait expectantly for the sounding of the "שופר-של-משיח" (the shofar of the Messiah) until Rosh Hashanah. But on the expected date nothing significant happens [145-148]. After this, conditions become unbearable in Goraj. In the month of *Kislev* the emissaries, R. Mordkhe Yoysef and R. Itshe Mates, return unexpectedly, announcing a bitter calamity: Shabbatai Zvi has put on a "טאַלפּאַן" (fez) and has converted to Islam [154 f.].

On hearing the news of Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy, a battle begins to rage in Rekhele's breast between the "קדושה" ("sacred") and the "טומאה" ("profane") – [163, 165]. The "profane" finally wins power over Rekhele and she is defiled by a strange figure, whom she identifies as "שטן" ("Satan") – [167 f., 171].

The repentant Kabbalist R. Mordkhe Yoysef eventually succeeds in driving out the dybbuk, by which Rekhele is possessed, but she dies three days later [188]. R. Gedalye is imprisoned, but manages to flee and becomes an apostate [180 f., 189].

4.3. Bashevis's Presentation of Shabbatean Messianism Compared with Modern

Scholarly Views

4.3.1. The Opponents of the Shabbatean Movement

In the first half of *לער שטן אין גאָרײ*, when rumours begin to spread that the massacres of 1648 were the "געבורט-ווייען פון משיח" ("birth-pangs of the Messiah") and that the Messiah had appeared in "איינעם אַ גרויסן און הייליקן מאַן, שבתי צבי" (one great and holy man, Shabbatai Zvi) – [27, 29], immediately there arises an opponent of such beliefs in

Goraj, Rabbi Beynesh, who represents the conservative, traditionalist stand in the controversy concerning Shabbatai Zvi. Rabbi Beynesh not only refuses to believe in Shabbatai Zvi being the Messiah and believes that “צואיילן דעם קץ” (“to hasten the end of days”) is a grave sin, but he is also highly critical of the predominance of kabbalistic studies in Polish Jewry in general: צופיל האָט מען זיך געגראָבן אין פאַרבאָרגענע זאַכן, צו ווייניק: “צופיל האָט מען זיך געטרונקען פון דעם אָפּענעם קוואַל פון תורה.” (“They delved too deeply into things that were meant to be hidden, they drank too little from the clear waters of the holy teachings.”) – [Yiddish: 30; English: 25 f.]. What is translated as “the holy teachings” is really תורה (Torah) in the Yiddish original. The two different areas of study referred to here are generally known as נסתר (that which is hidden), the study of the esoteric lore, speculations on the מעשה בראשית (mysteries of the Divine Chariot) and מעשה מרכבה (act of creation), the whole corpus of mystical, kabbalistic literature on the one hand, and גללה (that which is revealed), usually referring to the study of the Torah, the Talmud and halakhic literature on the other hand. The almost exclusive study of the נסתר (the hidden) and the little interest in the גללה (the revealed) among Polish Jews at the time, is the reason for Rabbi Beynesh’s criticism. He complains that young boys of not yet twenty are already poring over mystical works, such as the *‘Ez Hayim*, *Sefer Razi’el*, the *Zohar* and works on *merkavah* mysticism [30]. Unusual, however, is the fact that Bashevis mentions the study of the תנ”ך (Hebrew Bible), of “לשון-קודש” (the holy tongue) and of the early “פוסקים” (the halakhic works of rabbinic authorities), rather than Talmud study as being very important to Rabbi Beynesh and as neglected by the majority of Polish Jews [30].⁵

Moshe Idel, in describing the “stands of the conservatives” in the controversy

⁵ The translation of “פאַרציטישע פוסקים” as “early commentators” [English: 26] is not acceptable, because “commentators” usually refers to the Biblical commentators (מפרשים), whereas “פוסקים” is the word for rabbinic authorities on halakhic questions.

concerning Shabbatai Zvi, quotes Rabbi Jacob Emden, an opponent of the Shabbatai Zvi sect in the eighteenth century, who criticized not only the works of Shabbatai Zvi And “his accursed disciples” and their falsifying of works of the “ARI” (Rabbi Isaac Luria), but also their exclusive study of the “esoteric lore”: “They do not intend to study the knowledge of the performance of the commandments, but only look for the mystery of the Torah by the exclusive study of Zohar and Luria’s works.”⁶ Thus the “dangers of Kabbalah” do not only present themselves in the fabrication of Shabbatean pseudo-Lurianic works, but also in the “predominance” of kabbalistic studies itself as opposed to studies about the performance of the commandments.⁷

This is exactly Rabbi Beynesh’s criticism against the adherents of the Shabbatean movement in דער שטן אין גאָרײ. But Moshe Idel also stresses that the great opponents of the Shabbatean movement as well as of Ḥasidism were often themselves well-known Kabbalists. Therefore, the subject of “comprehensive criticism” was usually not Kabbalah itself, but only its exclusive study and its “heretical” interpretation.⁸ This is the main difference between Moshe Idel’s description of the “stands of the conservatives” and Bashevis’s Rabbi Beynesh, who deplores the kabbalistic works of the “ארי” (Rabbi Isaac Luria), which he considers as being full of “וידערשפּרוּכֶן” (contradictions) and even “ניבול-פה” (obscenity), and who, as his enemies claim, does not believe that the *Zohar* was written by Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai [30 f.].⁹

⁶ R. Jacob Emden, *Mitpaḥat Sfarim*, 77, as quoted by M. Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 34 f.

⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸ Ibid., 34 f.

⁹ In the English translation there is no mention of Rabbi Beynesh not believing that the *Zohar* was written by Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai (which, of course, it was not, according to modern scholarship. Its main part was supposed to have been composed by the Spanish Kabbalist Moshe ben Shem Tov de Leon between 1270 and 1300. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 232-235.) – Instead of this the corresponding sentence in the English only states that Rabbi Beynesh’s enemies were “claiming that he disbelieved in the cabala” [English: 27].

4.3.2. Shabbatean Messianism

According to Lurianic Kabbalah, the Kabbalists' major goal is to prepare their spirits for the coming of the Messiah and to hasten the time of the redemption. Already in the *Zohar* we can find a passage, which announces the redemption for the year 5408, i.e. 1648 C.E. The Kabbalists base their calculations on the verse בִּשְׁנַת הַיּוֹבֵל הַזֹּאת תָּשׁוּבוּ "בשנת היובל הזאת תשובו" ("In the year of this jubilee you shall return every man to his possession") – [Lev 25, 13], and comment on it: כִּישְׁתַּלֵּם הַזֹּאת שֶׁהוּא חֲמִישֵׁת אֲלָפִים וָאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת וְתַמְנִיָּא, "כישתלם הזאת שהוא חמשת אלפים וארבע מאות ותמניא" (When זאת will be completed, which is the year 5408, you shall return every man to his possession).¹⁰ The numerical value of the word זאת is 408, on adding 5000, one arrives at the year 5408, which corresponds to 1648 C.E. Since the celebration of the Jubilee implies the coming of the Messiah, he will arrive in 1648.¹¹

After the destruction of the First Temple and the time of the First Exile of the people of Israel the Jubilee was no longer observed because its observance depends on the land of Israel. Even in the period of the Second Temple the Jubilee was not operative, because the land of Israel was not fully occupied by the Jewish people. This is based on the verse: "וְקִדַּשְׁתֶּם אֶת שְׁנַת הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה וְקִרְאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ כָּל-יֹשְׁבֵיהָ יוֹבֵל הִיא תִהְיֶה לָכֶם" ("And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants: it shall be a jubilee for you") – [Lev 25, 10]. That means one can "proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants" only, if they are all in the land. If this is not given, the Jubilee is not observed. This is despite the fact that the שְׁבִיעִית (seventh year) with its שְׁמִיטַת כֶּסֶּפִּים (release of debts) was in operation in the time of the Second Temple, although its observance really depends on the observance of the

¹⁰ מדרש נעלם, פרשה תולדות 139, 2. Cf. A. Galanté, *Nouveaux Documents sur Sabbetaï Sevi*, Istanbul: Société Anonyme de Papeterie et d'Imprimerie (Fratelli Haim), 1935, 10.

¹¹ Ibid., 10.

יובל (Jubilee) and its שמיטת קרקע (release of land), which was no longer in operation at that time. It was simply instituted as a rabbinical ordinance to keep up the memory of the seventh year (זכר לשביעית).¹² The Jubilee would only be celebrated again with the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel and the full possession of the whole land, which is supposed to occur at the time of the coming of the Messiah. Since the Kabbalists calculated the celebration of the Jubilee for the year 1648, this implies the coming of the Messiah during that year.

In 1648 the Jews of Poland were persecuted by the soldiers of Chmielnicki. According to the Talmud, the coming of the Messiah will be preceded by sufferings and persecutions, the so-called “חבלי משיח” (“birth-pangs of the Messiah”).¹³ The numerical value of חבלי משיח is also 408. On adding 5000 to it, we arrive again at the year 5408, i.e. 1648 C.E. for the “birth-pangs of the Messiah”.¹⁴ This corresponds exactly to the calculations of the Kabbalists in גאָרני, דער שטן אין גאָרני, who interpret Chmielnicki’s massacres as the “חבלי משיח” (“birth-pangs of the Messiah”): “על פי סוד האבן זיי געמוזט זיך: ‘געבורט-ווייען פון משיח’ אָנהויבן שנת ת”ח און זיך פאַרציען ביז סוף פון היינטיקן יאָר, התכ”ו, ווען ס’וועט זיין די גאולה שלמה” (“According to a secret formula, these pangs were destined to begin in the year 1648 and extend till the end of the present year, when the full and perfect redemption would come.”) – [Yiddish: 27; English: 23].

This “present year” is the year תכ”ו (5426), that is 1665/66 C.E. In 1648 Shabbatai Zvi, who was born in Smyrna in 1626, was 22 years old, and he was not yet famous for his messianic claims. The Shabbatean movement was initiated only in 1665, beginning in

¹² Cf. b Gittin 36 a-b and Rashi’s commentary ad locum.

¹³ Cf. b Sanhedrin 98 a, where a statement by Rabbi Yohanan is quoted: “אם ראית דור שצרות רבות באות עליו: כנהר חכה לו” (When you see a generation overwhelmed by many troubles as by a river, await him); and b Sanhedrin 98 b, where Abaye enquires of Rabbah, what is his reason for not wishing to see the Messiah, and asks him, whether this is because of the “birth-pangs” preceding the advent of the Messiah (the expression used here is “חבלי של משיח”).

¹⁴ Cf. A. Galanté, *Nouveaux Documents sur Sabbetaï Sevi*, 11.

Palestine and reaching out to the entire diaspora.¹⁵

Several of the factors, which, according to Gershom Scholem, contributed to the success of Shabbatean messianism throughout the diaspora, have been discussed already, in particular the unique combination of popular apocalyptic beliefs and reinterpretations of Lurianic ideas, which appealed to both the Jewish masses and the kabbalistic elite.¹⁶ Concerning another contributing factor, the “renewal of prophecy”, it is important to stress that this phenomenon was not confined to Shabbatai Zvi’s prophet Nathan of Gaza. There were also many people in the diaspora, who started prophesying, thereby fulfilling the verse concerning the end of days in Joel 3,1: “וּבָאוּ בְנֵיכֶם וּבָנוֹתֵיכֶם” (“and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy”).¹⁷ This phenomenon is also described in “אין אַלע לענדער פון דער וועלט שטייען- אויף נייע נביאים. פשוטע: דער שטן אין גאָרײ” (“In every land new prophets were appearing. Ordinary men - even girls and Christians...”), until even in Goraj there arises a prophetess in Rekhele, who proclaims God’s redemption for the new year [Yiddish: 115, 125-127; English: 99, 107 f.].

Another factor for the success of the Shabbatean movement was, according to Scholem, that it spoke to the minds of the Jewish people as a whole. “Conservative minds” could accept the message of “fulfillment of traditional eschatological expectations”, whereas “utopians” believed that messianic redemption would introduce a “new age”, in which the “old state of things” would pass away.¹⁸

In “דער שטן אין גאָרײ” the majority of the people of Goraj hope for the fulfilment of traditional messianic expectations, preparing themselves for the sounding of the shofar

¹⁵ On the beginnings of the Shabbatean movement, see: Section 3.5, 102 f.

¹⁶ See: Section 3.5, 103 f.

¹⁷ A. Galanté, *Nouveaux Documents sur Sabbetaï Sevi*, 14. Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 464;

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 467.

of the Messiah and their imminent journey to the Land of Israel [144 f.]. R. Gedalye's vision of redemption, however, is that of an era where all the sexual prohibitions will be abolished and every sexual union, including incest and adultery, will be a religious commandment [120]. Already before Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy R. Gedalye abolishes the laws of ritual purity and lives openly in an adulterous relationship with Rekhele [132, 134 f., 143] .

After Shabbatai Zvi's conversion to Islam in September 1666 those who still held fast to their belief in Shabbatai Zvi's messianic mission, were divided into two factions, a "moderate" and a "radical", "antinomian" wing of the Shabbatean movement, which had by that time become a "spiritualist sect".¹⁹ The two factions of the Shabbatean sect after the apostasy are also described in *דער שטן אין גאריי*, where the emphasis is put on the ascetic behaviour of the "moderate" and the excessive, antinomian and consciously sinful behaviour of the "radical" wing of the "שבתיאים" (Shabbateans) – [158 f.].²⁰

4.4. The Role of Jewish Mysticism and Messianism in the Composition of

***דער שטן אין גאריי* as a Whole**

4.4.1. Jewish Mystical Motifs Connected to R. Itshe Mates and R. Gedalye, the Two Shabbatean Leaders in Goraj

The two diametrically opposed views about the state of the generation before messianic redemption attributed to the two groups of the Shabbatai Zvi sect after Shabbatai's apostasy in *דער שטן אין גאריי* go back to a discussion in the Talmud, where they are quoted in the name of one single rabbinic personality, Rabbi Yoḥanan: "ואמר רבי יוחנן (Rabbi Yoḥanan said: The son of David

¹⁹ Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 92, 100.

²⁰ For a more detailed treatment of Shabbateanism after Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy, see: Section 3.5, 106-110.

will only come in a generation which is completely virtuous or completely guilty.)²¹

Different verses from the Book of Isaiah are cited as a scriptural support (אסמכתא)

for these two ideas: “ועמך כולם צדיקים לעולם יירשו ארץ” (“Thy people also shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever”) – [Is 60, 21]. That is, if all the people of Israel became צדיקים (righteous), God could judge Israel with His attribute of Justice (מידת הדין) and would find His people deserving to be redeemed. On the other hand, if there was going to be a generation so full of evil and suffering, that it needed redemption, God would grant it out of His attribute of Mercy (מידת הרחמים), as it is written in Isaiah: “וירא כי אין איש וישתומם כי אין מפגיע” (“And he saw that there was no man, and was astonished that there was no intercessor”) – [Is 59, 16], and “למעני אעשה” (“for my own sake, will I do it”) – [Is 48, 11].²²

Both aspects of the “Messianic idea” can be found throughout rabbinic Judaism. They are referred to by Scholem as the “utopian” and the “catastrophic” idea.²³ In Bashevis’s novel these two ideas about messianic redemption are personified in two of the novel’s main characters, R. Itshe Mates and R. Gedalye, the two leaders of the Shabbatean movement in Goraj. A possible reason, why both of them initially succeed in gaining respect for their messianic message among the citizens of Goraj, is that each of them “dramatizes one of the two conditions for messianic deliverance”. Through his extreme forms of repentance, asceticism and “self-mortification” R. Itshe Mates seems to be attempting to “move the world toward righteousness”. Through his practices against Jewish law, his sexual licence and his “self-indulgence” R. Gedalye seems to be trying to “hurry the world toward sinfulness”.²⁴ Both attempts ultimately fail.

²¹ b Sanhedrin 98 a.

²² Ibid.

²³ Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 17.

²⁴ Cf. Irving H. Buchen, *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past*, 90 f.

R. Itshe Mates is obsessed with cleanliness and purity. At night, when everyone in Goraj is asleep, he goes out to the bathhouse, where he immerses himself 72 times in cold water, according to God's 72-letter name [71].²⁵ After that he goes home to pray "חצות", the midnight prayer, lamenting the destruction of the Temple. He sprinkles ashes on his head and recites the "תיקונים", the special prayers for the reunion of the exiled *Shekhinah* with the rest of the Godhead. He weeps for the destruction of the Temple and begs "קודש-ברוך-הוא" (the Holy One, blessed be He) to take back the *Shekhinah*, whom He has cast away into exile [71]. His way to affect תיקון (cosmic restoration), to restore the world to its original state of harmony, which has been lost with the "breaking of the vessels" according to Lurianic Kabbalah, is through prayer, fasting, extreme self-mortification, the study of kabbalistic literature and his activities with holy names: "א' גאנצן טאג שאַקלט ער זיך איבערן תיקוני-זוהר און איז עוסק אין שמות." (A whole day long he sways over the *Tikunei Zohar* and occupies himself with holy names.) – [70 f.].²⁶

When Rabbi Beynesh closes the bathhouse at night, R. Itshe Mates can no longer immerse himself in the מקוה (ritual bath) before "חצות", the midnight lamentation. Instead of this he goes out to the river behind the town, carrying the *Sefer Yezirah* to ward off evil spirits. There he chops a hole into the ice, immerses himself in the freezing water, and when he emerges again, he rolls himself in the snow, recounting his transgressions, among them the pain he has caused his mother, when he was lying in her womb [81 f.].

Before Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy Shabbatean leaders called their followers to repentance

²⁵ The English translator does not seem to understand the reason for the 72 immersions correctly, when he states that R. Itshe Mates immersed himself 72 times "according to the numerical signification of the letters Ayin and Beth" [English: 61]. In the Yiddish original the 72 immersions are "לויטן מספר פון שם ע"ב" (according to the number of God's 72-letter name) – [Yiddish: 71].

²⁶ The English translation of "אויז עוסק אין שמות" as "working out numerical combinations of the names of Yaweh" (!) is completely untenable [English: 60].

“to facilitate the transition to the coming redemption”. People flocked to Nathan of Gaza to receive their “individual penance”, and excessive fasts and “other ascetic exercises” “became the order of the day”.²⁷ Bashevis’s R. Itshe Mates accords with this tradition within Shabbateanism. But R. Itshe Mates’ extreme asceticism is, in fact, sterile. When he marries Rekhele, their marriage remains unconsummated, because it turns out that R. Itshe Mates is impotent [107-112]. His asceticism is exposed by Bashevis as a “secret hatred of life”. This is emphasized by the fact that throughout the novel R. Itshe Mates is “associated with death”.²⁸ When Rekhele receives the proposal of marriage from him, she is afraid, because she thinks, he has “טויטע אויגן” (“dead eyes”) – [73]. The bathhouse, to which R. Itshe Mates goes at night for his immersions, is situated between the הקדש (poorhouse) and the old cemetery, and in front of the poorhouse he sees a “טהרה-ברעט” (“purification board”), which is waiting for a new “בר-מינן” (corpse) – [71]. Even the חופה (wedding canopy) for R. Itshe Mates and Rekhele is put up at a place between the synagogue and the old cemetery, where school children have been killed by the Cossacks in 1648, and the song, intoned at their wedding, is a dirge, lamenting the massacres of Chmielnicki in a “חשעה-באב-גיגון”, the tune used for the reading of איכה (Lamentations) on Tisha b’Av [104 f.].

R. Itshe Mates’ unworldliness, his denial of the body and the sterility of his asceticism are also exposed in his vision of *Tikun*, of ultimate redemption, which he explains to the assembled Kabbalists in Goraj: After Shabbatai Zvi has led the last “spark of holiness” back to its source, all bodies would be transformed into pure “רוחניות” (spirituality). New souls would descend from the “עולם-אצילות” (“World of Emanations”). There would be no more eating and drinking, and instead of “פריה ורביה” (being fruitful and

²⁷ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 251.

²⁸ Cf. I.H. Buchen, *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past*, 91.

multiplying) human beings would be occupied with “יחודים”, unifications of letters and holy names, affecting unification within the Godhead [65].

R. Itshe Mates’ attempt to bring about redemption ultimately fails, because in terms of the traditional Jewish notion of the messianic age, he has “contracted its duality to singularity”, “its troublesome entanglement to simplified perfection”. What is really underlying his asceticism and his obsession with the soul, is sterility, impotence, a denial of the body and a “secret hatred of life”.²⁹

R. Gedalye personifies the opposite vision of messianic redemption. Whereas R. Itshe Mates envisions the messianic age as an “era of total spiritualization”, R. Gedalye argues that in the end of days all the strict “לאוין” (“Thou shalt not”) would be nullified, and each sexual union between a man and a woman, including “ערייות” (incest), would become a מצווה (religious duty) – [120].³⁰ This is, as he expounds in his sermon for שבת הגדול, the Shabat before Pessach, because according to him, with every sexual union a man and a woman unite a holy name and cause the יחוד (unification) of “קודש-ברוך-הוא” (the Holy One, blessed be He) and the exiled *Shekhinah*.

Therefore R. Gedalye holds that the redemption is delayed by leaving so many young men and girls unmarried. He also demonstrates to the congregation that “על-פי-קבלה” (according to the Kabbalah) all laws in the Torah and the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh* are only “רמזים אויף פריה-ורביה” (hints to the principle of being fruitful and multiplying) – [120]. This seems to him to be truly the “עיקר-העיקרים” (“principle of principles”), as the Shabbateans in Goraj call it, when they try to encourage the impotent R. Itshe Mates, whose marriage to Rekhele still remains unconsumated during the days of the

²⁹ Ibid., 91 f.

³⁰ Cf. Edward Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 30.

“שבע ברכות” (seven days of benediction) – [109]. This is probably the reason, why the Shabbateans are “delighted to transfer their allegiance” from the “melancholy and impotent” R. Itshe Mates to the “exuberant and fleshly” R. Gedalye, who soon becomes the “true spiritual leader” in Goraj [117, 119].³¹

When R. Itshe Mates and R. Mordkhe Yoysef leave Goraj to disseminate the news of Rekhele’s prophecy, R. Gedalye becomes the undisputed ruler of the town and issues new “תקנות” (enactments), which are against the rulings of the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh* [132].³² He soon settles Rekhele in his own house and feels free to have sexual intercourse with her, although she is a married woman [132, 143]. He is convinced that his union with Rekhele, the prophetess, reflects the union of the celestial “אבא-ואמא”, the two *Parzufim*, which have emerged out of the *Sfirot* of “חכמה” and “בינה”: “אל-פנים - רעכעלע, שטאַרק דיך ... ס’איז דער זמן פון יחוד ...” (“The Divine Parents are coupling face to face. Rechele, be of good cheer. This is the hour of union.”) – [Yiddish: 143; English: 121].

This is R. Gedalye’s way of effecting תיקון (cosmic restoration), and it is interesting to note that this is taking place exactly at the time of “חצות”, the midnight prayer, when R. Itshe Mates immerses himself in the ritual bath, sprinkles ashes on his head, laments the destruction of the Temple and prays for redemption from exile and the reunion of the *Shekhinah* with the rest of the Godhead. R. Itshe Mates’ “יחודים” are “unifications” of letters and holy names, with which he tries to effect unification within the Godhead. R. Gedalye’s “יחוד”, his “unification”, with the same purpose of effecting *Tikun*, is his sexual union with Rekhele, the prophetess.

³¹ Ibid., 30.

³² The idea that R. Gedalye’s rulings disagree with the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, is slightly problematic from a historical point of view, unless R. Gedalye is meant to represent one of the few “more antinomian” voices among the Shabbateans even before Shabbatai Zvi’s apostasy, since the great majority of Shabbatai Zvi’s adherents “saw in the messianic world a guarantee for the strictest observance of the Law”. Cf. G.Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 466 f.

R. Gedalye also abolishes the laws of “טהרה” (ritual purity). He advises young women, how to enflame their husbands and tells them that, since Shabbatai Zvi has been revealed, the laws against incest have been obliterated. It is rumoured that young men are exchanging wives, and that students in the house of study are secretly watching women, who immerse themselves in the ritual bath, as well as occupying themselves with “משכב-זכר” (lying with men) and “משכב-בהמה” (lying with animals) on the women’s balcony of the synagogue [134 f.].

All these examples show that, whereas R. Itshe Mates personifies the attempt to hasten the advent of the Messiah by “making the world perfect and pure”, R. Gedalye represents the opposite tendency of seeking to “hurry deliverance by committing every sin”.³³ While R. Itshe Mates personifies the “perversions of being a slave to the soul”, R. Gedalye embodies the “perversions of being a slave to the body”. R. Itshe Mates tries to be “more than human”, but his asceticism turns out to be “secret impotency”. R. Gedalye lives, as if he was “less than human”, but his sensualism turns out to be “idolatrous lust”, his rule in Goraj the triumph of “moral anarchy”. Through both attempts to bring about redemption the “dualistic center” of the messianic idea in Judaism (cited in the name of one single rabbinic authority in Tractate Sanhedrin) is broken into two “irreconcilable and antagonistic poles”.³⁴ Each of the two extreme characters “tries to pass off his half as a whole”, and “between such partial exclusivity” not only the “human image is impoverished”, but also the dualistic and paradoxical nature of the Jewish messianic idea.³⁵

³³ Cf. I.H. Buchen, *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past*, 92.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁵ Cf. I.H. Buchen, ‘The Devil and I.B. Singer’, in: D.Walden (ed.), *A Reconsideration*, 25.

Since Bashevis's literary compositions are as little one-dimensional and as complex as the Jewish messianic idea, yet another interpretation of the two characters R. Itshe Mates and R. Gedalye is possible. There were two seemingly contradictory character traits within the personality of Shabbatai Zvi, which manifested themselves in different periods of his life. As well as representing two opposed ideas of messianic redemption, Bashevis's characters R. Itshe Mates and R. Gedalye can also be said to "illustrate two aspects" of the "troubled personality" of the messianic claimant Shabbatai Zvi.³⁶

According to Scholem, Shabbatai Zvi suffered from a "manic-depressive psychosis", in which states of "excessive mental exaltation" and "joyful enthusiasm" alternated with periods of "dejection and melancholia".³⁷ After the beginning of Shabbateanism as a mass movement in 1666 both periods were interpreted as "divine dispensations" and were described in theological terms by Shabbatai's prophet Nathan of Gaza and other Shabbatean leaders. They speak of Shabbatai's states of exaltation as periods of "illumination", while his depressive states are referred to as periods of the "hiding of the face".³⁸ During his periods of "illumination" Shabbatai not only had visions of himself as the Messiah, but he also performed acts, which were "incompatible with his normal behavior" and which sometimes also transgressed either Biblical or rabbinic law. These outbreaks in periods of exaltation were later referred to by Shabbateans as "מעשים זרים" ("strange [or paradoxical] acts").³⁹ Examples of such "strange acts" are Shabbatai's uttering of the Ineffable Name, his dressing of a large fish like a baby and putting it into a cradle, his marriage ceremony with a Torah scroll and his celebration of the three pilgrim festivals in one week.⁴⁰ Apart from these periods, in which he performed such

³⁶ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 70.

³⁷ Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 126.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 147, 159, 161 f.

“strange acts”, Shabbatai led a life of “ascetic piety”, “indulging in fasts and ritual baths”, studying Torah and “struggling with himself”.⁴¹

In דער שטן אין גאָר the aspect of Shabbatai Zvi's personality, which manifests itself in periods of dejection and melancholia, is reflected in the character of R. Itshe Mates, who also indulges in fasts, ritual baths and self-mortifications and who is characterized by his ascetic melancholy. The other aspect of Shabbatai's personality, which manifests itself in his periods of “illumination”, is reflected in the character of R. Gedalye, who is characterized by his “joyful licentiousness”.⁴² He also transgresses against both Biblical and rabbinic law by living in an adulterous relationship with Rekhele and by issuing enactments, which disagree with the *Shulḥan 'Arukh*. Furthermore Shabbatai Zvi's wedding with a Torah scroll is reflected in R. Gedalye carrying Rekhele through the synagogue after her prophecy, as if she was a Torah scroll, and having four men hold up the פֶּרֶכֶת (curtain of the ark) on four poles over the heads of R. Gedalye and the prophetess, as if it was a חופּה (wedding canopy) – [128, 139].

Shabbatai Zvi's mysticism was an “erotic” one, in which he alternated between “semierotic and semiascetic rituals”.⁴³ This is reflected in R. Itshe Mates' asceticism and impotency and in R. Gedalye's eroticism and sexual licence in Bashevis's novel. Shabbatai Zvi had two unconsumated marriages, and his marriage to Sarah, his third wife, also remained unconsumated for a long time. One Christian author even suggested that Shabbatai was impotent.⁴⁴

Similarly R. Itshe Mates is claimed to have married several women, but not to have consummated these marriages because of his impotence [79], and his marriage to

⁴¹ Ibid., 147.

⁴² Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 70.

⁴³ Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 880.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 113, 413.

Rekhele remains unconsumated as well [107-112]. – When Shabbatai Zvi finally does have sexual intercourse with Sarah, he interprets this union as being “required for the messianic fulfillment”.⁴⁵ Similarly R. Gedalye sees his sexual union with Rekhele at the time of “חצות”, the midnight prayer, as a way towards effecting “יחוד”, the “unification” within the Godhead, and thus as a way towards *Tikun* [143].

Within both possible interpretations of the literary significance of R. Itshe Mates and R. Gedalye the character of Rekhele plays an important role. Her relationship with R. Itshe Mates and R. Gedalye reflects the relationship of Sarah with Shabbatai Zvi at different stages of his life. But even more significantly, Rekhele serves as the testing ground for two different models of messianic redemption, personified in R. Itshe Mates’ attempt to lead the world towards righteousness and R. Gedalye’s attempt to lead the world towards sinfulness. The catastrophic outcome of both Rekhele’s relationship with R. Itshe Mates and with R. Gedalye reflects the ultimate failure of both models of messianic redemption.

The significant role of Rekhele deserves further investigation.

4.4.2. Jewish Mystical Motifs Connected to Rekhele and Her Relationship to the Community, the *Shekhinah* and the *Klipah*

Rekhele, the novel’s central female character, is the only character in “דער שטן אין גאָר” whose life story is told from the beginning to the end. The year of her birth is 1648, the year of the Chmielnicki massacres. Thus she is born “at the very moment that catastrophe befalls the Jews”, a calamity brought about by cruel outside forces, and she dies as the result of an even greater catastrophe, which the Jewish community brings

⁴⁵ Ibid., 413.

upon itself by its readiness to trust in the false Messiah Shabbatai Zvi and in false models of redemption.⁴⁶

Rekhele's biography reflects the history of Goraj. Born at the same time, when calamity befalls the community, her upbringing is attended by blood and violence.⁴⁷ Her mother manages to escape from the massacres in Goraj with her child, but dies, when Rekhele is still young. Rekhele is brought up in Lublin, in the house of her uncle R. Zeydl Ber, a שוחט (ritual slaughterer), of whom she is terrified. His description is replete with images of blood and animal slaughter [52 f.]. But perhaps even more terrifying is the presence of Rekhele's grandmother, who scares the child with her constant talk about "גלגולים" (transmigrated souls), dybbuks, wild beasts and "פיפערנאָטערס" (dragons), and who touches her at night with her "dead" hands [54-56]. When her grandmother dies, the frightened Rekhele is left alone with the corpse on the night of *Kol Nidre* and has a terrible vision of the dead chanting the *Kol Nidre* prayers and of the pots on the stove flying through the room, which is filled with a scarlet glow. In addition to this, her grandmother appears to her in a dream wearing a headscarf soaked in blood. Her nightmarish experiences on that night leave Rekhele speechless and paralyzed [60-62]. She eventually regains her speech, but remains limping on her left foot, as well as being beset by mysterious illnesses, which some attribute to the work of demons [62]. After her illness she has another traumatic experience, when her blood-splattering uncle first wants to marry her and then suddenly dies. When Rekhele is reunited with her father R. Elazar Babad after R. Zeydl Ber's death and they return to Goraj, Rekhele is not the same person any more [62].

With all these details, Bashevis provides the psychological background which would

⁴⁶ Cf. Ruth Wisse's introduction to *Satan in Goray*, New York: Noonday, 1996, xxi.

⁴⁷ Cf. Lawrence S. Friedman, *Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988, 37.

make Rekhele capable of seeing visions and experiencing demonic possession at a later stage in her life, while at the same time through his narrative method, he gives concrete reality to Rekhele's visions and her demonic possession.⁴⁸

But more important than Rekhele's psychological background is her role as a "microcosm of the community".⁴⁹ Like the re-established town of Goraj after 1648, Rekhele is shaped by the Chmielnicki massacres and their aftermath, by experiences of calamity, of blood and violence, by an environment, in which both demonic forces and visions of redemption become believable. Like the community of Goraj she survives the calamities, but is forever altered by the experience: *פון דעמאָלט אָן איז רעכעלע געווען נישט* ("Thenceforth Rechele was one apart.") – [Yiddish: 62; English: 53]. *ווי אַלע אַנדערע.*

As for the town of Goraj, its altered state is described in detail in a chapter with the title *גאָרײַ פאַר גזירת ת"ח* (Goraj before the persecution of 1648) – [33-38], which in the English translation bears the title 'The Old Goray and the New' [English: 28-33]. In this chapter, the orderly fashion in which the affairs of the town proceeded before 1648, are contrasted with the chaos within the re-established community in 1666: *"נישט צו דערקענען איז געווען גאָרײַ, די אַלטע ייִדישע שטאָט."* ("The old Jewish town of Goray was unrecognizable.") – [Yiddish: 34; English: 29].

Rekhele's further experiences after her return to Goraj in 1666 reflect her downtrodden community's different visions of messianic redemption and their fatal consequences, as already mentioned above. As one critic puts it: "On Rechele's body and soul are imprinted the results of her community's various strivings for redemption."⁵⁰ When the community of Goraj follows the ascetic Kabbalist R. Itshe Mates and his purely

⁴⁸ Cf. Maximilian E. Novak, 'Moral Grotesque and Decorative Grotesque in Singer's Fiction', in: M. Allentuck (ed.), *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969, 59 f.

⁴⁹ Cf. L.S. Friedman, *Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 37 f.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

spiritual vision of messianic redemption, brought about by the attempt of making the generation before the redemption completely righteous, Rekhele serves as the testing ground of that vision through her marriage with R. Itshe Mates. The failure of this marriage through R. Itshe Mates' asceticism and impotence exposes the failure of R. Itshe Mates' model of redemption for the community. When the community consequently entrusts the fleshy and self-indulgent R. Gedalye with the leadership of the town and follows his path towards messianic redemption by the attempt of making the generation completely guilty, Rekhele again provides the testing ground of that messianic vision through her illegitimate union with R. Gedalye. As Rekhele's body is violated by her lustful seducer, as the "טומאה" ("profane") wins the battle over the "קדושה" ("sacred") in her soul, and as her whole being is invaded by demons, the community of Goraj also completely deteriorates as a result of following R. Gedalye's model of messianic redemption, and the "סטרא אחרא", the power of evil, triumphs in Goraj.

Since Rekhele serves as a microcosm of the community of Goraj after the massacres of 1648, and since the small town of Goraj serves as a microcosm of the whole Jewish community and its strivings for redemption after the persecutions in Bashevis's novel, thus Rekhele also serves as a microcosm of the people of Israel as a whole.

In Scripture, in several passages from various books of the Prophets, the relationship between God and Israel is represented by a marriage between a man and a woman.⁵¹

According to the traditional Jewish interpretation of שיר השירים (Song of Songs), throughout this book the male lover symbolizes God, whereas the female beloved symbolizes Israel. For the Kabbalists the marriage between God and Israel was "merely the outward aspect of a process that takes place within the secret inwardness of God

⁵¹ E.g. Jeremiah 3, 1; Hosea 1-3, especially 2, 21 f.; Amos 5, 2; etc.

himself".⁵² As mentioned above, a central idea in the *Zohar* is the idea of the "sacred marriage" between the two *Sfirot* of "תפארת" ("beauty") and "מלכות" ("kingdom").⁵³ The *Sfirah* of "מלכות", the tenth of the *Sfirot*, is nothing other in this context than the exiled *Shekhinah*, which is also the mystical community of Israel.⁵⁴

At R. Itshe Mates' and Rekhele's betrothal feast, Khinkele the Pious intones a song in which she connects the marriage of this couple to the coming of the Messiah and the sacred marriage of the *Shekhinah*:

"באשירעם, הארגאט, חתן-כלה פארוואַר,

משיח מעג קומען אין זייערע יאָר

און מעכט די שכינה הקדושה אַנטשפּוין,

גלייך יעצונד די-דאָ פרומע פאָר."

("Protect, Lord God, this bride and groom;

May we see the Messiah soon.

The Holy Presence, Lord God, wed

As these two seek the marriage bed.") –

[Yiddish: 84; English: 73].

In this song Rekhele is closely connected with the *Shekhinah*, her marriage to R. Itshe Mates with the "sacred marriage" between the *Sfirot* "מלכות" (the *Shekhinah*) and "תפארת" (her male counterpart) within the Godhead. By juxtaposing a prayer for "this bride and groom", a prayer for the sacred marriage of the *Shekhinah* and a prayer for the coming of the Messiah, Khinkele's song "strongly implies their interdependence".⁵⁵

As the marriage of Rekhele to R. Itshe Mates fails on account of his inability to join her

⁵² Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 138.

⁵³ See: Section 3.4.3, 96.

⁵⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 138.

⁵⁵ Cf. L.S. Friedman, *Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 39.

in the “holy sexual union”, Israel’s hope for messianic redemption remains unfulfilled.

Since the coming of the Messiah is said to be preceded by birth pangs, Rekhele’s

“sterile marriage” is the “metaphorical equivalent of unredeemed Israel”.⁵⁶ As an

unwilling partner in a sterile marriage the unfulfilled Rekhele becomes both a symbol of

unredeemed Israel and the exiled *Shekhinah*, whose reunion with the rest of the

Godhead remains impeded.

In fact, throughout the novel references are scattered, which associate Rekhele with the

Shekhinah, and at times explicit kabbalistic terminology is used in connection with her.

The description of Rekhele’s first encounter with R. Itshe Mates contains several

references to both historical and mystical analogues.⁵⁷ In this description Rekhele’s

appearance is associated with that of a “מכשפה” (witch) – [67]. She gives the impression

of someone not quite normal, half mad, but nevertheless rather attractive. Rekhele’s

description matches reports about Sarah, Shabbatai Zvi’s third wife, who was said to be

a “beautiful maiden” who does “strange things”. One author speaks about Sarah’s

madness, another about her “witchcraft”.⁵⁸

Rekhele’s face is described as consisting of two halves. One half of her face is red, the

other pale. This description could contain a hint at the ambivalent nature of the

Shekhinah. “Both as woman and as soul, the *Shekhinah* has its terrible aspect”, writes

Scholem.⁵⁹ The *Shekhinah* as the last of the *Sfirot* is the receptacle of both the powers

of mercy and of “stern judgement”, pouring down from the higher *Sfirot*. The power of

stern judgement, however, if it is unmediated by the power of mercy, contains in itself

the source of evil. There are times, when the *Shekhinah* is dominated by this power of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 40 f.

⁵⁷ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 68.

⁵⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 192 f., 197.

⁵⁹ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 106.

stern judgement, as it is expressed in the *Zohar*: “At times the *Shekhinah* tastes the other, bitter side, and then her face is dark”.⁶⁰

In her left hand Rekhele holds an earthen pot, in her right hand a straw whisk with ashes [67]. Ashes are usually associated with mourning, especially the mourning for the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the children of Israel. R. Itshe Mates puts ashes on his head, when he prays “חצוֹת”, the midnight prayer, lamenting the destruction of the Temple, the exile of Israel and the exile of the *Shekhinah* from the rest of the Godhead [71]. The exile of Israel is closely related to the exile of the *Shekhinah*. The idea of the *Shekhinah* accompanying the children of Israel into exile can already be found in the Talmud.⁶¹ But according to its kabbalistic interpretation, this means that “a part of God Himself is exiled from God”.⁶² The reunion of the exiled *Shekhinah* with the rest of the Godhead is the aim of “חצוֹת”, the mystical midnight lamentation. After Rekhele has told R. Itshe Mates that no-one wants to marry her, unless Satan would have her, she starts laughing and crying at the same time, and the earthen pot, which she holds in her hand, falls to the ground “און צעברעכט זיך אויף שאַרבנס” (and breaks into shards) – [68]. This scene is a parodic reference to “שבירת הכלים”, the “breaking of the vessels”. The reference is even more poignant, as Rekhele has just been speaking of the possibility of being taken by the power of evil, and it is from the “shards” of the “broken vessels” that the *Klipot* emerged, which are the “root of evil”.⁶³ Since Rekhele has started to become “ensnared” by the powers of evil, it is not surprising that the protective names of God, the “שם-הוייה” (the Tetragrammaton) and the name “שדי” (God Almighty) on her *mezuzah*, have been rendered powerless for her

⁶⁰ Ibid., 107.

⁶¹ b Megillah 29 a.

⁶² Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 107.

⁶³ Ibid., 139.

[67].⁶⁴ The reference to the letter ϖ in “שדי”, of which a crown is missing, could be an allusion to the fact that Rekhele as a portrait of the community of Israel is in the process of replacing faith in the real “שדי” (God Almighty) by faith in the false Messiah Shabbatai Zvi, who presented himself as “the new SHADDAY”, a faith, from which an important dimension (like a crown) is missing.⁶⁵ Indeed God’s Name (the Tetagrammaton) is blotted out completely on Rekhele’s *mezuzah* [67]. The emphasis on the letter ϖ could also hint at the forces of evil, personified by “שטן” (Satan), to whom Rekhele is referring herself, in the process of gaining power over Rekhele, the community of Goraj and the community of Israel. If the community is ensnared by the forces of evil, the *Shekhinah* remains exiled from the rest of the Godhead and there is no possibility for *Tikun*.

After the earthen pot slips from Rekhele’s hand and breaks into shards, R. Itshe Mates remains shocked and speechless for a while, until he suddenly understands the “סוד” (“secret”) behind this. Immediately he looks at his pale nails, as one does during the *Havdalah* ceremony, and says to himself: “די זאך איז מן השמים” (“This is from Heaven”) – [68].⁶⁶ The plain meaning of this is obviously R. Itshe Mates’ intended union with Rekhele, which he suddenly understands to be predestined. But on a deeper level this could also allude to the “breaking of the vessels” itself. Supporting such an interpretation is the emphasis on the fact that it is “ר' איטשע מאטעס דער מקובל” (R. Itshe Mates, the Kabbalist), who understands the “סוד”, the “secret” behind this. In the study of the Torah “סוד” is one of the four methods of exegesis. It is the uncovering of the mystical meaning of the Torah. Thus the “סוד”, which R. Itshe Mates, the Kabbalist understands here, could well be the mystical meaning of “שבירת הכלים”, the “breaking

⁶⁴ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 69.

⁶⁵ Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 390.

⁶⁶ The reference to the *Havdalah* ceremony is missing in the translation [English: 58].

of the vessels". It could even mean that R. Itshe Mates suddenly realizes that the cosmic catastrophe of the "breaking of the vessels", which brought evil into the world, was in reality "מן השמים" ("from Heaven"), was part of God's original plan.⁶⁷ The reference to "הבדלה" (*Havdalah*), which is a separation between קודש (holy) and חול (profane) could be understood in this context to refer to the separation between holy and profane, brought about through the cosmic incident of the "breaking of the vessels".

During the description of Rekhele's and R. Itshe Mates' wedding there is another reference to the "breaking of the vessels". After the little shoemaker has sung his dirge about the horrors of the Chmielnicki massacres, a woman faints, a boy starts to scream, because he feels he is suffocating, someone stumbles over the water tun, and:

"א' כלי וועט צעבראָכן." (A vessel breaks.) – [105]. The word used here is "כלי" (vessel), exactly the same word as in "שבירת הכלים", the "breaking of the vessels", which makes the reference obvious. Here again the allusion to the "breaking of the vessels" occurs in connection with the union between Rekhele and R. Itshe Mates. The reference to the "breaking of the vessels", which caused the emergence of evil in the world, is also connected here with a dirge, lamenting the evil and the atrocities brought about by Chmielnicki and his soldiers.

As the "breaking of the vessels" has to be followed by *Tikun*, by a cosmic restoration of the broken unity within the Godhead on the Divine plane, so the calamities of the Chmielnicki massacres, which were interpreted by many as the birth pangs of the Messiah, were hoped to be followed by a messianic redemption of Israel on the human

⁶⁷ On the "teleological" interpretation of the "breaking of the vessels" and its use in Bashevis's writings, see: Section 3.4.2, 89-91.

plane.⁶⁸ The union of Rekhele and R. Itshe Mates, which is linked here to both the Chmielnicki massacres and the “breaking of the vessels” is fraught with hope for messianic redemption for Israel and the reunification between the *Shekhinah* and the rest of the Godhead. Rekhele is connected to both Israel and the *Shekhinah*, as explained above. As her marriage to R. Itshe Mates fails, so also the hope for messianic redemption and for *Tikun*. What remains is the image of the “breaking of the vessels”, the root for the emergence of evil, in this scene again connected with the *Havdalah* ceremony, when burning *Havdalah* candles are brought to the חופה (wedding canopy), another hint at the separation between the holy and the profane.⁶⁹

Another scene, in which kabbalistic terminology is used in connection with Rekhele, is R. Gedalye’s *Seder* for the group of Shabbateans in Goraj, at which R. Itshe Mates and Rekhele are also present. R. Gedalye seats Rekhele at his right hand and tells her about the beauty of Sarah, Shabbatai Zvi’s wife, whom he calls “משיח וייב שרה” (“the Messiah’s wife, Sarah”), and of whom he says that she has spent some time among prostitutes in Rome. R. Gedalye also tells Rekhele that she herself has a “גרויסע נשמה” (exalted soul), that she is “משורש רחל” (from the root of Rachel), “תפארת שבהוד” (beauty, which is in majesty) – [122]. R. Gedalye’s remark connects Rekhele to three of the *Sfirot*: “מלכות” (kingdom), i.e. the *Shekhinah*, connected to Rachel, “תפארת” (beauty) and “הוד” (majesty).

When the *Zohar* speaks of the *Shekhinah*, it frequently employs the term “עלמא דנוקבא” (“world of the female”). In her “mystery are rooted all the females in the earthly world”. According to Joseph Gikatilla, the “*Shekhinah* in Abraham’s time was called Sarah, in

⁶⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 140.

⁶⁹ The reference to the *Havdalah* ceremony is obscured in the translation, which only speaks of “braided candles” [English: 91].

Isaac's time Rebecca, and in Jacob's time Rachel".⁷⁰ The Lurianic rite for "חצויות", the midnight lamentation, consists of two parts, the "rite for Rachel" and the "rite for Leah", because according to Lurianic Kabbalah, "Rachel and Leah are two aspects of the *Shekhinah*, the one exiled from God and lamenting, the other in her perpetually repeated reunion with her Lord".⁷¹ Rachel, of whose root Rekhele is said to be, is the aspect of the *Shekhinah*, which is exiled from the rest of the Godhead, waiting for the reunion. The second *Sfirah*, with which R. Gedalye connects Rekhele, is "תפארת" (beauty), which is usually understood as the *Shekhinah*'s male partner in the "זיווג קדישא" or "sacred marriage". "תפארת" is the sixth and central *Sfirah* and is symbolized by Jacob, Rachel's husband.⁷²

The third of the *Sfirot*, with which Rekhele is connected here, is "הוד" (majesty), the eighth *Sfirah*, which is represented as the left leg of the '*Adam Kadmon*'.⁷³ This connection is especially interesting, as it is Rekhele's left leg, which remains paralyzed since her traumatic experiences in Lublin [62].

Shortly after this scene there is another passage, in which Rekhele is linked to both historical and mystical parallels. When Rekhele comes running into the synagogue and starts prophesying, R. Gedalye carries her through the synagogue, as if she was a sacred Torah scroll. The community makes way for her, and some even touch her with their fingertips, which they kiss in turn, as if they had just touched a Torah scroll taken out from the ark [128]. Four men then take the curtain from off the ark and hold it up on poles over the heads of R. Gedalye and Rekhele, as if it was a wedding canopy [130]. As mentioned above, Shabbatai Zvi had once erected a wedding canopy, had a Torah

⁷⁰ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 183.

⁷¹ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 149.

⁷² Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 183.

⁷³ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 107, 109.

scroll brought in and had performed a marriage ceremony between himself and the Torah.⁷⁴ This scene in Bashevis's novel is clearly an allusion to Shabbatai Zvi's marriage ceremony with a Torah scroll. In Shabbatai Zvi's "mystical marriage to the Torah" the symbolism of the Torah had been implicit. Shabbatai Zvi saw himself as a "bridegroom coming out of his chamber, the husband of the beloved Torah", which was in this context "none other than the divine Shekhinah herself".⁷⁵ At this point not only the historical, but also the mystical parallel becomes clear. Rekhele is here once again associated with the *Shekhinah*, the female aspect of God, whose reunion with the male aspect within the Godhead is sought for. The identification of the *Shekhinah*, the last of the ten *Sfirot*, with the Torah "in its total manifestations, embracing all its meanings and levels of meaning" already appears in the *Tikunei Zohar*. The author of the *Tikunei Zohar* thus calls the *Shekhinah* "פרדס התורה" ("paradise of the Torah").⁷⁶ "פרדס" refers here to the four different levels of meaning of the Torah, "פשוט" (the plain meaning), "רמז" (the allegoric interpretation), "דרש" (the midrashic interpretation) and "סוד" (the mystical interpretation), which are often referred to by the acronym "פרד"ס". After R. Gedalye has carried Rekhele through the crowd like a Torah scroll, he even says explicitly: "וואויל איז צו אונדז, וואָס די שכינה הקדושה האָט צוריקגעקערט, און וואויל איז צו " ("Happy are we, for the Divine Presence has returned to us, and happy art thou, for she has chosen thee!") – [Yiddish: 128; English: 109]. As Rekhele is in this scene clearly associated with the *Shekhinah*, her union with R. Gedalye, foreshadowed here by their mock wedding ceremony in the synagogue after Rekhele's prophecy, is thus linked to the long desired reunion of the *Shekhinah*, the tenth *Sfirah*, symbolized by Rachel, with her male counterpart within the Godhead,

⁷⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 159.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 400.

⁷⁶ *Zohar Ḥadash* 102 d. Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 58.

“תפארת” the sixth and central *Sfirah*, symbolized by Jacob, her husband.

In another scene the sexual union between R. Gedalye and Rekhele is loaded with kabbalistic allusions, as described above.⁷⁷ When Rekhele is lying in the dark, her body is shining like an “אבן טוב” (precious stone), and her skin is emitting “פונקען” (“sparks”) – [143]. This is one of many references throughout Bashevis’s work to “sparks” of light, appearing in an otherwise dark and evil context, alluding to the “sparks of holiness” of the Lurianic Kabbalah, as explained above.⁷⁸

As Rekhele and with her the community of Goraj and the community of Israel are falling more and more into the power of evil by following the false Messiah Shabbatai Zvi and false models of redemption, there are still some possibly redemptive “sparks” of good left within an otherwise evil context. Later in the novel, when the “profane” completely gains power over the “sacred” within Rekhele and her community, these “sparks of holiness” disappear.

The battle between the voices of the “קדושה” (“sacred”) and the “טומאה” (“profane”) takes place within Rekhele, after she has heard the news of Shabbatai Zvi’s apostasy [163]. The voice of the “sacred” prays and speaks with zeal, like Rabbi Beynesh, when he was still leading the community of Goraj. With a tune from the *Hagadah* the “sacred” declares: “אני ה'! אני הוא ולא אחר!” (“I am the Lord! I am He, and no other!”) – [Yiddish: 165 f.; English: 140]. – The “profane” makes lewd remarks, uses vulgar and obscene language, pronounces holy names and blasphemes them. The main declaration of the “profane” is: “גאט איז געשטארבן! ... די קליפה וועט קיניגן לעולם ועד!” (“God has died! The Husk shall reign forever and ever!”) – [Yiddish: 165 f.; English: 140]. – Slowly the “sacred” recedes. It becomes smaller and smaller, until it disappears

⁷⁷ See: Section 4.4.1, 129.

⁷⁸ See: Section 3.4.2, 88 f.

completely, and the “profane” gains power over Rekhele [167 f.].

As Rekhele is so closely associated with both the community of Goraj and with the community of Israel at large, the battle taking place within her epitomizes the battle between the sacred and the profane within Goraj and within the community of Israel, which have followed a false Messiah and false models of redemption, and have permitted themselves gradually to be taken over by corrupt leaders and by evil ideas. The *Shekhinah*, with whom Rekhele has also been closely associated through various allusions throughout the novel, as shown above, has not become reunited with the rest of the Godhead. Instead of a *Tikun* within the Godhead and messianic redemption for the community of Israel, there is an eruption of evil, coming from within the community, much worse than the evil, coming from without, which Chmielnicki and his soldiers have brought about. Instead of developing her full potential as the *Shekhinah* reuniting with the rest of the Godhead, which is hinted at in various passages in the novel, Rekhele at the end comes to embody the “קליפה” (“Husk”), the “shell into which evil finds its way”.⁷⁹ Thus the declaration of the “profane” that the “קליפה” or “Husk” will reign forever, has become true for Rekhele and for her community. This becomes even more obvious in the next chapter, where it is said that every visitation has fallen upon Goraj, and – parallel to it – that in Rekhele’s and R. Gedalye’s house the “קליפה” (“Husk”) reigns [170 f.].

Rekhele, the prophetess, who represents a microcosm of her community, who had the potential of becoming a metaphysical portrait of the *Shekhinah* reuniting with the rest of the Godhead, once she lets the Shabbatean heresy enter her heart, becomes a

⁷⁹ Cf. David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995, 277.

“metaphysical portrait” of the “קליפה”, the “shell”, into which a dybbuk can enter.⁸⁰

In fact, in the moral parable, which concludes the novel, the dybbuk is asked how he was able to enter the body of Rekhele and gain power over her. He answers that Rekhele had already been defiled by R. Gedalye with “כמה טומאות” (“many defilements”), and thus it was easy for the dybbuk to gain the “שליטה” (“ascendancy”) over her.

Interesting in this context is also the moment when the dybbuk entered Rekhele: When she was trying to light a fire with two flintstones and the “פונקען” (“sparks”) could not light the wick, she called out the name of “שטן” (“Satan”), and the dybbuk entered her [Yiddish: 180; English: 152]. This is the second and last time in this novel, when “פונקען” (“sparks”) appear, hinting at the “sparks of holiness”. At this point the possibly redemptive sparks of light, which appear in a context of darkness and evil, are not able to kindle the fire, to bring light and break the surrounding darkness and evil. The “sparks” of Divine light instead remain captured among the *Klipot*, the forces of evil. As Rekhele and her community allow the power of evil to enter their hearts completely, which is epitomized here by Rekhele’s calling out the name of “שטן” (“Satan”), both the community of Israel and the *Shekhinah* remain unredeemed, even worse, they become defiled by evil, and the *Klipah* reigns indeed “לעולם ועד” (forever and ever) – [165].

4.5. Conclusion

Bashevis’s first novel *דער שטן אין גאָרײַ* is an account of the consequences of Shabbatean messianism on Eastern European Jewry in the late seventeenth century, exemplified by the small *shtetl* Goraj in Poland. The rise of the Shabbatean movement, the unsuccessful struggle of its opponents, the “surge of emotions” and expectations among the population and the situation after the shock about Shabbatai Zvi’s apostasy are narrated by Bashevis

⁸⁰ Ibid., 277.

with “deep psychological insight” and “knowledge of historical detail”.⁸¹

According to David Roskies, Bashevis wrote *דער שטן אין גאָר* as a response to Sholem Ash’s *קידוש השם* (*Kidush ha-Shem*) – (1919), which also deals with the time of the Chmielnicki massacres, but presents it in a very positive, optimistic light with a great amount of “faith in the future”. Bashevis took the same idea of messianic faith and the same historical setting and turned it into a “horrifying vision of apocalypse”.⁸²

The novel can also be compared to the famous prologue of Jakob Wassermann’s *Die Juden von Zirndorf* (1897), which is set in the same period of Shabbatai Zvi’s messianic claims, when the news of the coming messianic redemption ignites a “tremendous excitement” among the “long suffering Jewish-Ashkenazi community”.⁸³

Only the geographical setting is different. In Jakob Wassermann’s novel the entire Jewish community of the town of Fürth in Southern Germany is seized by messianic fervour and sets out on a journey to the land of Israel, which soon turns into a disaster and ends in despair. In *Die Juden von Zirndorf*, however, the destruction is followed by a renewed vision, the vision of a “Jewish integration” within a “liberal European culture”, as embodied in the character of the hero Agathon Geyer and in the village of Zirndorf, founded by the survivors of the Fürth Jews after the collapse of their “messianic journey”.⁸⁴

In Bashevis’s *דער שטן אין גאָר* the destruction of the community of Goraj after the failure of Shabbatean messianism is not followed by any vision of redemption. Instead the novel ends with Bashevis’s retreat into the stylization of a “moral parable”, reminiscent of a seventeenth century *“מעשע-ביכל”* (chapbook) and with the reiteration of Rabbi Beynesh’s

⁸¹ Cf. Ch. Shmeruk, ‘Isaac Bashevis Singer 1904-1991’, in: *The Jewish Quarterly* 39:1 (145) – (Spring 1992), 36.

⁸² Cf. D. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 292.

⁸³ Cf. D. Miron, ‘Passivity and Narration’, in: G. Farrell (ed.), *Critical Essays*, 158.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 158.

unheard plea as the “moral of this tale”, that no-one should attempt to force God.⁸⁵ The Messiah would come in God’s own time [Yiddish: 189; English: 159].

Or, as it is expressed in a different context by Pinkhes-Mendl Zinger in Bashevis’s

[המשכים-זאמלונג] מיין טאטנס בית-דין-שטוב (*My Father’s Court [Sequel-Collection]*):

“אייל דיך נישט, דער רבנו-של-עולם האָט צײַט...” (Do not rush. The Master of the Universe has got time...).⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Cf. D. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 277 f.

⁸⁶ המשכים-זאמלונג, 102.

5. The Role of Jewish Mysticism and Messianism in די פאמיליע מושקאט

(The Family Moskat)

5.1. Introduction: The World of the *Klipot*

ר' דן איז געזעסן צווישן שטרוי א פארגליווערטער. ער האט אלעמאל געוואוסט, אז דאס פאלק ישראל איז א שעפעלע צווישן וועלף, ארומגערינגלט פון עבודה-זרהניקעס, רוצחים, גנאפים, שיכורים. דער עולם העשייה איז דער עולם הקליפות. וואו-דען זאל האבן דער שטן זיין אנהאלטעניש? וואו דען זאל רוען די סיטרא-אחרא? [...] ר' דן האט זיך אבער געטרייסט וואס אין תוך איז אלץ אלקות, אפילו די קליפה האט איר ווארצל אין אין-סוף. דער תכלית איז בחירה.¹

Rabbi Dan sat stiffened between the straw. He always knew that the people of Israel is a lamb among wolves, surrounded by idolaters, murderers, lechers, drunkards. The World of Action is the world of the *Klipot*. Where else would Satan have his refuge? Where else would the *sitra 'ahra* rest? [...] But Rabbi Dan comforted himself [with the thought] that in its essence everything is Godliness, even the *Klipah* has its root in 'Ein-Sof. Its purpose is free will.²

This is one of many passages from the Yiddish original of Bashevis's די פאמיליע מושקאט (*The Family Moskat*), in which kabbalistic terminology is employed and kabbalistic, mainly Lurianic ideas are interpreted. Apart from these explicit references, various hints at kabbalistic undercurrents can be found in Bashevis's use of imagery, particularly in the recurrent motive of "פֿונקען" or "sparks" of light in contexts of darkness, which are connected to the Lurianic concept of the "sparks of holiness".

¹ יצחק באשעוויס, די פאמיליע מושקאט, 324. All page numbers within the text of this chapter refer to the Yiddish original, unless otherwise stated.

² This translation is my own. The existing English translation by A.H. Gross does not reflect the kabbalistic terminology of the Yiddish original in this particular paragraph: I.B. Singer, *The Family Moskat*, London: Penguin, 1980 (first ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 279. It will be quoted, though, during the course of this chapter, wherever it does not significantly differ from the Yiddish.

After Bashevis's emigration from Poland to the United States, in 1935-36 the פֿאַרווערטס had serialized another novel of his, דער זינדיקער משיח (The Sinful Messiah), a fictional biography of Jacob Frank. But Bashevis himself did not consider this novel successful, and it was never published in Yiddish book form or translated into English.³ After his disappointment with this work, Bashevis found himself unable to write another novel, until after his brother's death in 1944. His next major novel, די פאמיליע מושקאט, was initially serialized in the פֿאַרווערטס from 1945 to 1948, and subsequently published in book form in two volumes in its original Yiddish edition of 1950 and in the one-volume English translation by A.H. Gross in the same year. In both the Yiddish and the English Bashevis dedicates this work to the memory of his brother Y.Y. Zinger. Like his brother's די ברידער אַשכנזי (*The Brothers Ashkenazi*), which is mentioned explicitly in the dedication of the English edition of *The Family Moskat*, Bashevis's novel is a family chronicle, in which the protagonists' lives are seen against a panorama of Polish-Jewish history. In די פאמיליע מושקאט the individual stories of members of the Mushkat, Banet and Berman families are interwoven with an account of the history of Polish Jewry from the beginning of the twentieth century until the moment of Hitler's bombing of Warsaw in 1939.⁴

An important theme in this family chronicle, which will be explored in this chapter, is constituted by messianism and its secular alternatives. Furthermore kabbalistic references, concepts and allusions to kabbalistic ideas will be investigated. In this context it is essential to analyse the use of Jewish mystical works for study, for magic purposes and for superstitious practices. Ideas about life and death, גילגולים (transmigrated souls) and mystical thoughts and images in descriptions of death and dying will be examined, as well as mystical ideas about Creation from the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and references to

³ I.B. Singer, *Love and Exile*, 278 f., 282. Cf. Ch. Shmeruk, 'Isaac Bashevis Singer 1904-1991', in: *The Jewish Quarterly* 39:1 (145) – (Spring 1992), 36.

⁴ Cf. E. Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 39.

Sefer Yezirah. In addition to this there is the recurrent motive of “sparks” of light in contexts of darkness, connected to the Lurianic concept of the “sparks of holiness”. In the descriptions of some of the women characters of the novel there are also various allusions to Lurianic ideas, similar to those connected with the character of Rekhele in “דער שטן אין גאָר” which will be explored. Finally the role of the Lurianic concepts of *Zimzum*, the “breaking of the vessels” and the emergence of the *Klipot* and the particular interpretation of these concepts by several of Bashevis’s characters in די פאָמיליע מושקאט will be analyzed.

One example of this important theme is the quotation cited at the beginning of this chapter. This quotation already contains some of the major ideas of the whole novel in a nutshell. Although set in the context of the First World War, the experience of Israel being a “lamb among wolves”, surrounded by idolaters and murderers, is even more poignant in the context of the Second World War, in which the whole novel culminates. The passage reflects the theme of Jewish suffering and the question: What is the root of such evil, and where is God in all of this? Rabbi Dan’s answer to this question in this paragraph and the answer of a few other characters in the novel, is a particular interpretation of the Lurianic concept of the “breaking of the vessels”. In the course of this chapter the meaning of this interpretation for the novel as a whole will be analyzed in the context of all the other kabbalistic references and allusions in די פאָמיליע מושקאט.

5.2. The Storyline of די פאָמיליע מושקאט

The novel opens at the beginning of the twentieth century with the third marriage of R. Meshulem Mushkat (Reb Meshulam Moskat in the English) and his return from Karlsbad to his Warsaw residence with his new wife, Royze-Frumetl (Rosa Frumetl), and her daughter Eydl (Adele) – [5-15].

R. Meshulem, the wealthy patriarch of the Mushkat family, is already an old man at the time, the father of seven children from two previous marriages, all of whom have families of their own. His children and their spouses act as administrators of R. Meshulem's various properties. But the only person who is really informed about R. Meshulem's business affairs is his "משורר" ("bailiff") Kopl Berman (Koppel Berman), who acts as his manager and advisor [17, 19].

Shortly after R. Meshulem Mushkat's return to Warsaw, another traveller arrives in the big city: Oyzer-Heshl Banet (Asa Heshel Bannet), the grandson of the saintly Rabbi Dan Katsenelenboygn from Kleyn-Tereshpol (probably Terespol-Zygmunt, c. 15 km NE of Bilgoraj) – [23]. Following a chance encounter with Avram Shapiro (Abram Shapiro), a son-in-law of R. Meshulem Mushkat, Oyzer-Heshl is introduced to the Mushkat family. Very soon he falls in love with Nyunye Mushkat's daughter Hadase (Nyunie Moskat and Hadassah), who tutors him in Polish [40-62]. Oyzer-Heshl is also employed by Royze-Frumetl to prepare her first husband's manuscript for publication and spends some time with her daughter Eydl [78-83].

When Oyzer-Heshl hears R. Meshulem's announcement of Hadase's forthcoming marriage to a certain Fischele Kutner (Fishel Kutner), he is shocked [80 f.]. But he continues to meet her secretly and they decide to run away to Switzerland together [172-181]. However, during their attempt to cross the Austrian border, Hadase is arrested and is brought back to her parents' house [224-233].

Meanwhile R. Meshulem is taken seriously ill [186-201]. His whole family gathers at his house, worried about the inheritance. But Kopl, the bailiff, succeeds in opening the old man's safe and escapes with R. Meshulem Mushkat's fortune [202-215]. Soon after R. Meshulem dies [242, 250].

Oyzer-Heshl has meanwhile reached Switzerland, not knowing, what has happened to

Hadase. In Berne Oyzer-Heshl meets Eydl. Having given up all hope of being reunited with Hadase, Oyzer-Heshl agrees to marry Eydl [260-279]. On hearing the news of Oyzer-Heshl's marriage, Hadase in turn agrees to marry Fishele [265 f.]. – As is to be expected, neither of the two young couples leads a happy married life, and after some time Oyzer-Heshl decides to return to Warsaw, where he finally meets Hadase again [308-318]. It is the year 1914, the beginning of the First World War. Jews are ordered to leave the small towns and villages in the vicinity of Warsaw, among them Oyzer-Heshl's family from Kleyn-Tereshpol [318-325]. As the war progresses, Oyzer-Heshl is conscripted into the Russian army [403-412]. Eydl, meanwhile, gives birth to her and Oyzer-Heshl's son [412-416]. – With this event the first volume of the Yiddish edition comes to a close.

The second volume opens with a double funeral in the Mushkat family. R. Meshulem's oldest son and Hadase's mother have died on the same day [426].

R. Meshulem's youngest daughter Leye (Leah) has divorced her husband and is preparing to marry Kopl, her father's bailiff, and to go to America with him [445].

Oyzer-Heshl survives the war in the Russian army and witnesses the October Revolution. After the war he escapes from Communist Russia and returns to Poland, which has just reasserted its independence [469-474]. In Warsaw Oyzer-Heshl soon becomes reunited with Hadase, who is getting divorced [493, 497-506]. Oyzer-Heshl also divorces Eydl [506-512] and Oyzer-Heshl and Hadase get married. They have a little daughter, who is constantly ill. Oyzer-Heshl has difficulty in supporting his family, and he and Hadase start to quarrel frequently [577-586]. At a Chanukkah masked ball Oyzer-Heshl is introduced to the communist Barbara Fishelzon (Fishelsohn) – [605-612]. Not long after the ball Oyzer-Heshl starts carrying on a love affair with Barbara [670 f.].

Again years pass by. In the late 1930s only three of R. Meshulem's children are still alive.

An entire path of graves has developed from the cemetery plots of the Mushkat family [674]. One year around Pessach various guests arrive in Warsaw from abroad, Kopl and Leye from America and Leye's son Arele from Palestine. The newspapers are full of news about the impending war with Hitler. Yet the visitors from America and Palestine are in no hurry to leave Poland [712 f.]. – Eydl tries to emigrate to Palestine, but without success [708-712].

Oyzer-Heshl spends the summer vacation in a village in the mountains with Barbara [720-733]. When the news reaches them that the war has begun, they return to Warsaw immediately [733-735]. In Warsaw Oyzer-Heshl is informed that Hadase has been killed by a bomb [740-746]. Barbara has made up her mind to try to escape, but Oyzer-Heshl, who has never cared much about his family before, decides to stay in Warsaw with the rest of the family [747 f.]. Wandering through the streets of Warsaw, Oyzer-Heshl and Barbara meet the mystical scholar Herts Yanover, who informs them that the Messiah will come soon: “דער טויט איז משיח. דאָס איז דער ריינער אמת!” (“Death is the Messiah. That’s the real truth.”) – [Yiddish: 748; English: 636].

While this is the closing statement of the English edition, the Yiddish continues for another chapter, describing the activities of the ḥasidic communities on Rosh Hashanah during the bombing. Oyzer-Heshl remains alone at his sister's house, starts reading the Torah and the Prophets and rediscovers the power and the validity of these words [749-758]. The last chapter also recounts the attempt of a group of Zionist pioneers to reach Palestine, which the narrator puts into the context of Jewish history. The chapter ends with an affirmation of the words of the Torah and the Prophets and of the traditional Jewish messianic hope [758-760].

5.3. Traditional Jewish Messianism and Its Secular Alternatives

Both the Yiddish and the abridged English edition of *די פאמיליע מושקאט* conclude with statements about “משיח” (the Messiah). While the Yiddish ending reflects the traditional Jewish hope of a future messianic redemption, the English version ends with a modern Jewish intellectual’s resigned response to the impending catastrophe, seeing messianic redemption only in death.

The novel’s first statement about the Messiah and false Messiahs, is uttered by the *rebe* of Białodrewna and is based on the traditional Talmudic view that the Messiah would only come “בדור שכולו זכאי או כולו חייב” (in a generation which is completely virtuous or completely guilty).⁵ The *rebe* of Białodrewna is also “the book’s first general critic of modern tendencies” within Polish Jewry at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution.⁶ “דאָ אין פוילן טאַנצט דער שטן איבער די גאַסן.” (Here in Poland Satan is dancing in the streets), he says. He is worried about all the young men who run away from the houses of study, shave off their beards and eat non-kosher food, and the young women who wear short sleeves, go to the theatre and carry on love affairs. He thinks that such things have never happened before, not even in the times of Shabbatai Zvi and Jacob Frank, and that, unless this “plague” is brought to an end, no remnant of the Jewish people would remain: “וואָס וואָרט ער, השם יתברך? וויל ער טאַקע ברענגען משיחן צו אַ דור, וואָס איז כולו חייב?” (What is He waiting for, He, whose Name shall be blessed? Does He really want to bring the Messiah to a generation which is completely guilty?) – [103]. In this passage the *rebe* likens the behaviour of the Jewish youths in Poland in his time to the events in the times of the false Messiahs Shabbatai Zvi and Jacob Frank. He even deems the modern tendencies within Polish Jewry worse than the conscious attempts

⁵ b Sanhedrin 98 a. See the discussion of this Talmudic statement in the chapter on *דער שטן אין גאָר*, Section 4.4.1, 124 f.

⁶ Cf. E. Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 42.

of the followers of the two false Messiahs to hasten the coming of the Messiah by transforming their generation into one which is completely guilty. As a Jewish traditionalist – like Rabbi Beynesh in *דער שטן אין גאָר* – the *rebe* of Białodrewna is opposed to any such attempt of hastening the advent of the Messiah, which can be seen clearly in the choice of epithet he uses for Shabbatai Zvi and Jacob Frank: “ימח שמם” (May their names be blotted out!) – [103]. This leaves him to wonder, whether the Almighty intends to send the Messiah to a generation, which is even more “כולו חייב” (completely guilty) in his eyes than the generations of the two false Messiahs.

The second main representative of traditional Jewish messianic beliefs in the novel is Rabbi Dan Katsenelenboygn, Oyzer-Heshl’s grandfather. Like the *rebe* of Białodrewna, the rabbi of Kleyn-Tereshpol also bewails the fact that the Messiah still tarries, and criticizes the conduct of Polish Jews who are not interested in “תשובה” (repentance), but only in what he considers to be “אפיקורסות” (heretical beliefs), in secular literature and in the theatre, which Rabbi Dan considers to be unacceptable [285].⁷

With this statement Rabbi Dan connects the tarrying of the Messiah with the conduct of Polish Jewry, that is deplorable and sinful in his eyes. Thus he apparently subscribes to one of the two above-mentioned Talmudic views, according to which the Messiah would only come in a generation which is completely virtuous.

Another traditional Talmudic view on the coming of the Messiah is expressed by R. Volf Hendels (Reb Wolf Hendlers in the English), Royze-Frumetl’s third husband. When Eydl starts to suffer from labour pains, he comments: “אַלץ קומט דורך יסורים! חבלי-לידה, חבלי-משיח!” (Everything is brought about through pain! The pangs of birth, the birth-

⁷ In the English translation most of these details are omitted. It only says: “the people chosen of God were still ground into the dust; Israel’s people, instead of living a life of penance, were turning to heresy.” [English: 245]. Even the Yiddish original’s reference to “משיח” (the Messiah) is not accounted for in the English.

pangs of the Messiah!) – [413]. This expression goes back to statements in the Talmud about a generation overwhelmed by many troubles, referred to as the “חבלו של משיח”

(birth-pangs of the Messiah), which is expected to precede the advent of the Messiah.⁸

The First World War is interpreted by many traditional Jews as the “מלחמת גוג ומגוג” (War of Gog and Magog), which is believed to precede the coming of the Messiah.⁹ Rabbi Dan has heard people say that the “חבלי-משיח” (birth-pangs of the Messiah) have started already. He himself does not comment publicly on such interpretations, but secretly he holds that the Messiah might still come in his life time [431].¹⁰

Like the First World War, the beginning of the Second World War with its bombing of Warsaw is interpreted by many ḥasidic Jews as the War of Gog and Magog. Thus we find, for example, Oyzer-Heshl’s brother-in-law, Menashe-Dovidl (Menassah David in the English), a follower of the Bratslav *ḥasidim*, informing Oyzer-Heshl during the bombing: “חייב אדם לברך על הרע כשם שמברך על הטובה [...] ס’איז חבלי-לידה ... מלחמת גוג ומגוג! ... ס’הויבט זיך שוין אָן. ווי ס’שטייט אין דניאל...” (“It is man’s duty to bless God for the evil that befalls him, as well as for the good. [...] These are the pangs of the Messiah – the wars of Gog and Magog. ... It is beginning, just as the Book of Daniel says.”) – [Yiddish: 746; English: 633].¹¹

Apart from traditional Judaism with its views on messianic redemption, the novel shows alternative modern secular models of redemption, as they present themselves to a young intellectual like Oyzer-Heshl, who leaves the traditional Jewish context of his childhood

⁸ Cf. b Sanhedrin 98 a and b.

⁹ Cf. Ezekiel 38, 2 ff.; m Eduyot 2, 10 ; b Berakhot 13 a.

¹⁰ The whole 33rd chapter of the Yiddish original, which includes Rabbi Dan Katsenelenboygn’s reflections on messianic redemption, mentioned above [430-434], is omitted in the translation [English: 370 f.].

¹¹ The first part of this statement is derived from the Mishnah: m Berakhot 9, 5. Concerning the remainder of the statement, there is a difficulty: Although there are many visions of the End of Days in the Book of Daniel, e.g. Daniel 7-12, the reference to the War of Gog and Magog is taken from Ezekiel 38-39.

behind in his pursuit of secular knowledge, “secular metaphysics” and new visions of redemption.¹² Foremost among these secular models of redemption in the novel are Communism and Zionism.

Gine-Gendl’s house, where Oyzer-Heshl takes lodging, when he first comes to Warsaw, is a gathering place for modern Jewish intellectuals, particularly socialists and communists. A significant critique of communist ideology is delivered by an anti-communist character named Lapidés (Lapidus in the English), who disturbs the gathering of Jewish leftists with his arguments. He points out that Jewish communists care about “יעדן אייראן, יעדן טאַטער” (every Ivan, every Tatar), about every nation except their own [65]. But more than any ideological arguments, it is Oyzer-Heshl’s witnessing of the October Revolution and its aftermath, which convinces him that Communism is a false model of redemption. This becomes clear from the answer he gives to the communist Barbara Fishelzon, when she asks him about the Revolution he has witnessed: He states that the Revolution has only brought hunger and foolish speeches, and therefore he holds that the capitalist system, although it is cruel, is still far superior [609 f.].

Although Zionism fares much better in the novel than Communism, it is also rejected by Oyzer-Heshl in the end. When he returns to Kleyn-Tereshpol from Switzerland, Oyzer-Heshl still expresses Zionist ideas in a conversation with his grandfather. He says that Jews are a people like other peoples and should have their own country in the Land of Israel. Rabbi Dan contradicts him, saying that, as long as one does not believe in the Torah and God’s covenant with Israel, the desire to return to the Land of Israel does not make any sense. Furthermore the nations of the world would always be stronger than the Jews and would never allow them to establish their own state, until the day, when the Messiah came

¹² Cf. I.H. Buchen, *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past*, 63.

[296].¹³ – A few years later, after having witnessed the brutalities of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, Oyzer-Heshl has also lost his faith in Zionism, and echoes some of his grandfather's opinions in a conversation with Barbara, saying that the ruling Gentile nations would never give the Land of Israel to the Jews [609].

Apart from these communal models of redemption Oyzer-Heshl has been drawn to Herts Yanover's private "metaphysical society" for some time, and is continuously occupied with his own metaphysical speculations.¹⁴ At Herts Yanover's house a group of people gathers regularly for psychic research, spiritualistic experiments and the search for "דעם אמת" (the truth) – [94].¹⁵ In his work "די פילאָזאָפֿיע פֿון אויטאָמאַטיזם" (The Philosophy of Automatism) Herts Yanover argues that by sending one's intelligence to sleep, one could reach such a level that one would be able to create "יש מאין" (something out of nothing), like those knowledgeable in Kabbalah, who have supposedly created doves and drawn wine from a wall.¹⁶ He holds that redemption could only come in a state of unconsciousness, when a person could become united "מיטן אויטאָמאַטישן אַלױסן" (with the automatic omniscience), which runs through the whole of nature. – Some of Herts Yanover's critics have commented that he teaches a crippled form of the Kabbalah, which he has studied in his youth [136].¹⁷

During his years in Warsaw Oyzer-Heshl has read various books on philosophy, psychology, hypnotism and occultism and finds that the reports about poltergeists, clairvoyance and the spirits of the dead are completely in accordance with the stories

¹³ The 4th section of the 19th chapter in the Yiddish original, which contains a long dialogue between Oyzer-Heshl and his grandfather [294-298], is considerably abridged in the English version, and the Yiddish original's references to the Kabbalah, the creation of the world and the Messiah are altogether omitted in the English [English: 253 f.].

¹⁴ Cf. I.H. Buchen, *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past*, 68.

¹⁵ In the English edition: "for new truths" [English: 119].

¹⁶ On the magical experiments of creating doves and tapping wine from the wall, see: Section 3.2, 66-70.

¹⁷ The 2nd section of the 9th chapter in the Yiddish original, dealing with Herts Yanover and his metaphysical speculations [133-137], is altogether omitted in the translation [English: 132].

about demons and dybbuks which he has heard in his youth. Even the system of his philosophical guide Spinoza does not exclude such phenomena: If the Divine has an infinite number of attributes, there is also an infinite number of possibilities [383].¹⁸

During the course of the years Herts Yanover's society for psychical research eventually disintegrates [601 f.], and in the face of Hitler's approach and the bombing of Warsaw at the beginning of the Second World War, Herts Yanover realizes the futility of his spiritualistic endeavours and metaphysical speculations and comes to the conclusion that in such a historical context the only Messiah, the only possible redemption is death [748].

After showing the failure of all the "new secular metaphysics and messiahs" advanced by modern Jewish intellectuals as alternatives to traditional Judaism with its teachings on messianic redemption, Bashevis leaves the reader of this novel with two possible solutions, reflected in the two different endings of the Yiddish and of the English edition.¹⁹

The English ending expresses utter nihilism and despair in the face of the impending catastrophe, awaiting Polish Jewry, traditional Jews and modern Jewish intellectuals, Jewish communists and Zionists alike. In the English the last word is given to a "view of the Messiah that has never before been expressed" throughout the novel, neither by traditional Jews, nor by Jewish communists or Zionists. Herts Yanover's final statement that death is the Messiah, reflects a view "which sees no apocalypse in disaster, no future beyond the abyss of the immediate present".²⁰

The Yiddish edition, whose final chapter is omitted in the English opts for neither despair nor hope, as the English does by its omission, but places them side by side. The despair in

¹⁸ This passage of the Yiddish original [382 f.] is omitted in the English, which instead contains a few lines about Oyzer-Heshl's unfinished doctoral thesis, entitled "The Laboratory of Happiness" [English: 334].

¹⁹ Cf. I.H. Buchen, *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past*, 63.

²⁰ Cf. E. Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 59.

the face of the impending death and destruction does not exclude a return to traditional Judaism with its messianic hopes, nor does the return to traditional Judaism attenuate the despair of the impending destruction of European Jewry.

5.4. Kabbalistic References and Allusions to Kabbalistic Ideas in די פאמיליע מושקאט

5.4.1. The Study of Jewish Mystical Works, Magic and Superstition

During the course of the novel there are several direct references to the Kabbalah, and various mystical works are mentioned explicitly as being studied by certain characters, as being found on their bookshelves or as being used by them for magical purposes.²¹

Occasionally in the course of the novel kabbalistic literature is also referred to in general terms without particular works being specified. Thus the reader is informed towards the beginning of the novel that Oyzer-Heshl's paternal grandfather was a Kabbalist and an ascetic, who spent his time fasting, immersing himself in cold water and sitting alone in his attic, studying "ספרי-קבלה" (kabbalistic works) – [29].

Oyzer-Heshl's maternal grandfather, Rabbi Dan Katsenelenboygn, is reported to have fallen into a state of melancholy, which some *hasidim* ascribe to his brooding over "חקירה" (philosophy), others to his study of "קבלה" (Kabbalah) – [284].²² When he is struggling with his "יצר-הרע" (evil inclination), "מחשבות-זרות" (strange thoughts) and doubts concerning his belief, he enters the house of study, takes a look at some religious works and, drawing in the letters of these books, his faith returns.

Occasionally kabbalistic works are also mentioned in the novel in connection with magical and superstitious practices. When Akive, Gine-Gendl's first husband, dreams

²¹ The mystical works referred to in די פאמיליע מושקאט are listed in Section 2.5, 43-46, 48-51.

²² Instead of this general reference to philosophical and kabbalistic study in the Yiddish, the English translation states: "The Chassidim said that too much poring over the philosophy of Maimonides had driven the rabbi into a melancholy." [English: 244]. Maimonides is not referred to in the Yiddish at all [284].

that he is flying, he wonders whether this comes about through the power of “קבלה מעשית” (practical Kabbalah) or through “שמות הטומאה” (names of impurity) from the “סטרא-אחרא”, the dark forces of evil. On awakening he decides to check his *mezuzah* and to put the *Sefer Yezirah* underneath his pillow. Furthermore he plans to ask his scribe to examine his grandfather’s “קמיע” (amulet), which he is wearing around his neck in a small linen bag together with the tooth of a wolf. He thinks that a letter might possibly have been erased on the amulet and, dealing with “שמות” (holy names), one needs to be careful about each little crownlet, because, if one does not take heed, the whole world might be destroyed [129].²³

All these practices testify to the popular belief in the power of Hebrew letters and holy names, as explained previously.²⁴

The *Hasidei 'Ashkenaz* in the thirteenth century had advanced the concept of the “mysterious powers inherent in the letters of the Hebrew alphabet” and developed a technique of combining these letters “to evoke from them their highest potencies”. The powers ascribed to holy names were so immense that the handling of such forces was believed to be highly dangerous.²⁵ This also explains Akive’s urge to examine his *mezuzah* and his grandfather’s amulet, as well as his superstitious belief that it might even lead to the destruction of the world, if a letter had been erased in either of them. The *mezuzah*, in fact, had come to fulfill the function of an amulet in the popular imagination during the Middle Ages. Like an amulet it was supposed to afford protection from demons and “its powers were extended to cover even life and death”.²⁶

The *Sefer Yezirah* in this paragraph is not studied by Akive as it is by Rabbi Dan [294],

²³ The whole 1st section of the 9th chapter, in which these references can be found in the Yiddish original [128-13], is omitted in the English translation [English: 132].

²⁴ See: Section 3.2, 66-68.

²⁵ Cf. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 82 f.

²⁶ Ibid., 146 f.

but used for a similar purpose as the amulet and the *mezuzah*.

There is one other instance, in which a mystical work is put underneath someone's pillow for the sake of protection. When Eydl is about to give birth, "שיר-המעלות" (amulets hung up in a lying-in chamber) are prepared for her in her room and a "רזיאל המלאך" (Angel Razi'el or *Sefer Razi'el*) is placed underneath her pillow together with a knife [412]. As mentioned previously, all these superstitious practices are supposed to ward off demons.²⁷ Considering the powers ascribed to all the Divine and angelic names and texts of amulets found in *Sefer Razi'el*, the fact that it is placed underneath the pillow of a woman in childbirth in די פאמיליע מושקאט, accords with all the other superstitious practices, described by Bashevis as being employed by his characters to protect them from demons.

On closer examination one can establish that all the characters in די פאמיליע מושקאט, who are reported to be studying kabbalistic works, keeping them on their bookshelves or employing them for magical practices, hail from a traditional Jewish background, as against the many more secular characters, also found in the novel. Those occupied with Jewish mystical works are either *ḥasidim*, like the *rebe* of Białodrewna and R. Moyshe-Gavriel, another prominent Białodrewna *ḥasid*, Akive, the son of the Sęcymin *rebe*, and Menashe-Dovidl, a follower of the Bratslav *ḥasidim*. Or they are *mitnagdim*, like Rabbi Dan Katsenelenboygn, the distinguished rabbi of Kleyn-Tereshpol. There is also a character like Avram Shapiro, who, although he expresses some modern, especially Zionist ideas and leads a more worldly and dissipated life, still comes from a traditional background and is a follower of the Białodrewna *ḥasidim*. As a closing remark on this subject, it is also interesting to note that the magical and superstitious practices described above are not only employed by a superstitious, *ḥasidic* character

²⁷ See: Section 3.2, 66 f., 70 f.

like Akive, but also, during the last days of Eydl's pregnancy, by her traditional, but not hasidic mother and stepfather, although Eydl herself has enjoyed a completely enlightened Western education.

5.4.2. Mystical Ideas and Images Related to Death and Dying

The birth of Eydl's child, which marks the end of the first volume of the Yiddish edition, is one of the very rare occasions, in which we can discern a glimpse of new life in this novel, whose "dominant leitmotif" is death.²⁸

The second volume significantly opens immediately with the death of Hadase's mother Dakhe and the double funeral of Dakhe and Yoyel Mushkat [421-426].²⁹

In fact, at the beginning of the first volume two generations of the Mushkat family are already old, and soon after R. Meshulem's third marriage, with which the novel opens, the octogenarian patriarch already senses that his hour of death is approaching [114].

This frightening realization occurs one night, when R. Meshulem takes out a volume from his bookshelf at random, tries to read, but finds his vision getting blurred and the letters seemingly changing colour. When he regains his vision, he recognizes the book as the "מעבר יבוק" (*Ma'avar Yabok*, Crossing of the Yabbok).³⁰ A paragraph of this work is presented here as being read by R. Meshulem. It is said that the "מלאך-המوت" (angel of death) will visit a person who lies dying, with his sword and attempt to convince him to blaspheme against God. Therefore a person who is critically ill, should call in ten witnesses to annul the words he would speak before his "ציאת נשמה", the parting of his soul, and the evil thoughts coming from "שטן" (Satan). R. Meshulem considers it as a

²⁸ Cf. Max F. Schulz, 'The Family Chronicle as Paradigm of History: *The Brothers Ashkenazi* and *The Family Moskat*', in: M. Allentuck (ed.), *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 83.

²⁹ The one volume English edition does not reflect this significant division of the Yiddish at this particular point [362]. It does not even begin its "Part Six" here, but two chapters earlier instead [English: 352].

³⁰ On the *Ma'avar Yabok*, see: Section 2.5, 43, 45.

bad sign that he has happened to pick the *Ma'avar Yabok* out of all the volumes on his shelves [114].

Not long after this R. Meshulem is lying in his sickroom, sleeping or occupied with a “נישט-דער-וועלטיק טועניש” (other-worldly activity). Sometimes he emits a sound, but to those around him it is not clear, if this sound is not produced by the “נישט-געזעענע” (unseen ones), that surround a person who is dying [202].³¹ This description reflects the superstitious folk belief, according to which a dying person is surrounded by demons, who “were held responsible for the anguish that he suffered”.³²

Other similar folk beliefs appear in the novel in connection with the last Purim celebration, which R. Meshulem attends before his death. He realizes that his whole striving to accumulate wealth during his lifetime was just vanity, as it is said in the Book of “קהלח” (Ecclesiastes).³³ He would have done better to travel to the Land of Israel in his old age. Had he done so, he would have spared himself the process of “גלגול-מחילוח”, the rolling through caves, after his death. This expression refers to the popular belief that the dead will migrate underground to the Land of Israel at the time of the resurrection. Another idea expressed here concerns the “מלאך דומה”, the angel of the realm of the dead, who is believed to knock at the grave with a fiery rod and open the “דין-וחשבון”, the judgement of the dead, with the question: “מה שמך?” (What is your name?) – [241].³⁴

These ideas are bound up in this passage with the use of light imagery, which lends a mystical atmosphere to the scene. In the light of the setting sun the clouds are said to look like “פלאַמענדיקע זעגל-שיפן, פלאַקערנדיקע בעזימס, פורפורנע פֿענסטער” (“fiery sailing

³¹ In the English these details are omitted from the description of R. Meshulem's sickroom [English: 179].

³² Cf. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 174.

³³ Cf. Ko 1, 2-4.

³⁴ These ideas about the rolling through caves and the angel of the realm of the dead are omitted in the translation [English: 207].

ships, flaming brooms, purple windows”), and a mysterious hand of light, fog and air seems to weave, paint and write something “מיט אַ פֿאַרהוילענער שרייבֿט” (in a concealed script), which no human being could understand [Yiddish: 241; English: 207]. Back in his sickroom R. Meshulem continues to contemplate the nocturnal sky, in which stars have appeared, and he recognizes the “פנים פֿון יהושע” (face of Joshua) in the yellow moon, as he did in his childhood. By now he has only one desire, to reach the “עולמות העליונים” (upper worlds) as soon as possible, which are hovering “סודותדיקע און ליכטיקע” (mysteriously and full of light) over the roofs of the Grzybowska [242]. As in several other places throughout Bashevis’s works, the majesty of the nocturnal sky is here associated with the higher spheres.³⁵ In addition to this in this passage it is also connected with one character’s longing to die and to understand the mysteries of the higher worlds. In the novel this is the last occasion, on which we encounter R. Meshulem alive.

There is another description of a person’s experiences in his dying hour, which is replete with mystical imagery. When the *rebe* of Białodrewna awakes from a bad dream one night, he realizes that his time has come [555 f.]. In his mind dream mingles with reality. He remembers long-forgotten passages from the Talmud, the *Zohar*, the *‘Ez Hayim* and other works. He constantly reflects on the situation of the Jews and asks himself, whether God wants the generation before the final redemption to be “כולו חייב” (completely guilty) or “כולו זכאי” (completely virtuous), or whether there would be a Messiah at all [556].

As death is drawing nigh, the *rebe* dreams about the parting of his soul and realizes that there is indeed “השארת-הנפש” (immortality of the soul), which he had come to doubt

³⁵ In this novel see also: 350 f., 541. This association can be found in other works of Bashevis as well. See for example: דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין, 21, 29, 69. – See also: Section 2.3, 28 f.

at times. He can hear the flapping of wings, and again we find a reference here to the angel of the realm of the dead. In this passage the *rebe* then experiences the angel lifting him up and flying with him through the “זיבן הימלען” (seven Heavens). He sees the sun, the moon and the “מזלות” (planets / stars). The higher he ascends, the more light and purity he senses. He has left the “עולם-הקליפות” (world of the *Klipot*) far behind, and the “גיהנום” (Gehenna) looks small and insignificant from his perspective [558 f.]. On awakening the *rebe* longs to reach the higher worlds full of light, which he has seen in his dream, and on his eyelids shining “פֿינקען” (sparks) remain.

He has merited glimpses of Divine light in his dream of the higher spheres shortly before his death, and they remain with him as a foretaste of what he expects to experience soon in reality in the World-to-Come. From this moment the *rebe* does not pray for healing anymore. He is filled with longing for the “זיו השכינה” (brilliance of the *Shekhinah*), a glimpse of which he has already seen in his lifetime. Shortly after this the *rebe* dies [559].³⁶

As in the paragraph describing R. Meshulem’s experiences before his death, in this account of the dying hour of the *rebe* of Białodrewna mystical images of the higher spheres are also bound up with the closeness of death and with a person’s longing to have a part in the life of the World-to-Come. This world is seen by these two characters as the world of impurity, the world of the *Klipot*, while the higher worlds present themselves to them in images of purity and light.

³⁶ The whole 45th chapter of the Yiddish [555-562], in which all these mystical images connected to the death of the *rebe* of Białodrewna appear, is omitted in the translation [English: 477]. The death of the *rebe* and the induction of Arele as his successor are not even mentioned at this point in the English. These facts are stated in a short paragraph many chapters later and in a completely different context, with the following words: “The Bialodrewna rabbi died at his evening prayers. The Chassidim wanted Reb Moshe Gabriel to become their rabbi, but Reb Moshe Gabriel refused. After much persuasion Aaron consented to take the holy burden on his shoulders. It was not for long. Aaron was planning to go to Palestine with a group of young Chassidim. The Bialodrewna court was as good as finished.” [English: 571 f.].

Another important idea connected to death, which appears throughout the novel, is the concept of “גלגול” (*gilgul* – the transmigration of the soul).

There are a number of instances, in which various characters express the idea that either they or other characters connected to them are *gilgulim* of souls that have had a previous existence in this world. When Hadase comes to visit Oyzer-Heshl and he looks into her mysterious-looking eyes, he has the feeling that he has experienced all of this before “אין אַ פֿריערדיקן גלגול” (in a previous *gilgul*) – [87].³⁷ Another time, when Oyzer-Heshl spends the night at Avram’s place and finds himself unable to sleep, it seems to him that he is not really himself anymore, but “אַ גלגול פֿון זיך” (another *gilgul* of himself) – [168].³⁸ When Fishele reflects on the love affair between Hadase and Oyzer-Heshl, he thinks that Hadase is “אַ פֿאַרלירענע נשמה” (a lost soul), who does not have any part either in the life of “עולם הבא” (the World-to-Come) or of “עולם הזה” (this world). He even suspects that she might be “אַ גלגול פֿון אַ צדיק” (a *gilgul* of a saint), who needs to purify himself in this existence [428].³⁹

There are also two instances, where Avram experiences himself as a *gilgul* in his dreams. One night Avram dreams that he has to carry a millstone and wonders, whether this is a punishment, or: “איז ער מגולגל געוואָרן אין אַ מילנער?” (Did he have a reincarnation as a miller?) – [592].⁴⁰ Another night Avram sees himself in a dream as an ox in a slaughterhouse. He thinks, he must be a “גלגול” (*gilgul*), and tries to shout that he is a human being, not an ox [613].⁴¹

The concept of *gilgul*, which is not referred to in the Bible or the Talmud, and which

³⁷ The English translates only: “It seemed to Asa Heshel that he had experienced all this before”, but omits the reference to the previous *gilgul* [English: 112].

³⁸ In the translation no mention is made of the idea of a *gilgul* at this point [English: 154].

³⁹ In the English this sentence is translated: ‘Maybe she is the vessel for the spirit of some holy man whose purification it is her lot to accomplish.’ [English: 369].

⁴⁰ The English translates this sentence as: ‘Had his soul transmigrated into a miller’s?’ [English: 504].

⁴¹ The translation mentions Avram’s dream, but omits the reference to the *gilgul* [English: 521].

was strongly opposed by the major mediaeval Jewish philosophers, is “taken for granted in the Kabbalah”, since it found its “first literary expression” in the ספר הזוהר (*Sefer ha-Bahir*, the Book of Illumination – Provence, late twelfth century). After its inclusion in the *Bahir*, the concept of *gilgul* became “one of the major doctrines of the Kabbalah”, although Kabbalists differed widely on various details.⁴² Transmigration is usually interpreted as a punishment for sins committed in a previous existence, and its purpose is supposed to be the purification of the soul. The Kabbalists of Safed advanced the doctrine of “transmigration into all forms of nature”, even into animals and plants, which was not universally accepted, but through them “this teaching became a widespread popular belief”.⁴³ This also explains the belief in *gilgulim* by Bashevis’s afore-mentioned characters, who are either *hasidim*, like Fishele and Avram, or hail from a traditional background and have been exposed to both superstitious popular beliefs and to kabbalistic literature, like Oyzer-Heshl.

There is one more passage connected to the concept of *gilgul*, which requires comment. When Eydl asks Oyzer-Heshl to translate a paragraph from her late father’s Hebrew manuscript for her, he chooses a comment on a verse from Kohelet: “סובב סובב הולך הרוח ועל סביבותיו שב הרוח” (“round and round goes the wind, and on his circuits the wind returns”).⁴⁴

The word “רוח” (wind / spirit) is interpreted to refer to the “נשמה” (soul), which after the death of a sinful person may become “מגולגל” (transmigrated) into different creatures, into a dog, a cat or a worm [78 f.].⁴⁵ This interpretation is also concordant with the doctrine of transmigration into all forms of life upheld by the Safed Kabbalists. But the

⁴² Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 344 f.

⁴³ Ibid., 346 f.

⁴⁴ Ko 1, 6.

⁴⁵ The first part of this comment on the verse from Kohelet also appears in the translation [English: 84 f.].

commentary goes on to explain that occasionally a light can shine out from an animal, which is caused by the human soul that has entered it in its new *gilgul*. According to this interpretation, the verse from Kohelet teaches that the “רוח” (spirit) has to transform itself constantly, and through its transformations it returns to its origin. The “נשמה” (soul) is a “סובב” (something which is turning), something which is constantly transformed. Only at the time, when all the “תיקונים” (restorations to the original state of harmony) occur and everything again becomes “אין-סוף, בלויז געטלעכקייט” (*'Ein-Sof*, pure Divinity), will all these transformations come to an end [79].⁴⁶

This comment by Eydl's father is in accordance with the kabbalistic teachings of Joseph b. Shalom Ashkenazi and his followers (early fourteenth century) that “transmigration occurs in all forms of existence” and that “everything in the world is constantly changing form”.⁴⁷ The comment that these changes of form will come to an end with the completion of *Tikun*, the restoration of the universe to its originally intended state of harmony according to Lurianic Kabbalah, and that then everything will become again *'Ein-Sof*, is an original idea of Bashevis, ascribed here to Eydl's father.

This comment by Eydl's father about *Tikun* and the envisaged return of the universe to a state of pure Divinity is, like the birth of Eydl's child at the end of the first volume, one of the few glimpses of hope in this novel, which is so dominated by images of decline, decay and death.

5.4.3. Letters Like Flames - The Mystical Significance of the Letters of the Hebrew

Alphabet

The mystical light imagery employed in the description of R. Meshulem Mushkat's dying

⁴⁶ The second part of this comment in the Yiddish original, including the reference to *'Ein-Sof*, is omitted in the English [ibid.].

⁴⁷ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 347.

hour includes the impression of a mysterious hand of light, fog and air writing something into the sky in a concealed script, incomprehensible to human beings, as quoted above [241].⁴⁸ This is one of several instances throughout the novel, where a mystical significance is attributed to writing or script and particularly, in most of these instances, to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Early in the novel an evening in Warsaw is described, as it is experienced by Oyzer-Heshl. He sees “עפעס יום-טובדיקס און סודותדיקס” (something festive and secretive), looking at the red-tinted sky. Everything seems imbued with “רמזים” (hints), “ווי די שטאָט וואָלט דורך עפעס אַ נס פֿאַרוואַנדלט געוואָרן אין אַ קבלהשער שרייבט” (as if through some kind of a miracle the street had been transformed into a kabbalistic script). This impression fills Oyzer-Heshl with the desire to stand still and to sing [68].⁴⁹

This description is one of many nocturnal landscapes (or here cityscapes, since this scene is set in Warsaw), filled with mystical imagery, which appear throughout Bashevis's works. These are descriptions of nature, usually including light imagery and impressions of the majesty of the nocturnal sky, which fill a certain character with a sense of awe for God's creation. Such a sense of awe also finds its expression in this passage in Oyzer-Heshl's desire to stand still and to sing as a response to the mystical nocturnal scenery he experiences.

Another description of a nocturnal landscape sheds some light on the mysterious kabbalistic script, which is mentioned here. After a long conversation with his grandfather, on whose desk a *Sefer Yezirah* can be found on top of other religious

⁴⁸ See: Section 5.4.2, 166 f.

⁴⁹ The English retains the sense of this scenery, although it does not provide an accurate translation. It states: “Something strange, secret, and Cabalistic seemed to pervade the atmosphere...”, but does not mention the street being transformed into a kabbalistic script [English: 74].

and philosophical works [294], Oyzer-Heshl goes out to look at the nocturnal sky, which appears to be immense and purified. A full moon can be seen within a foggy half-circle, which seems to shine in all the colours of the rainbow. There are trembling “גאָלדיקע פֿלעקן” (golden spots) on the window panes of the synagogue, but it is not clear, whether the light has its origins inside or outside the house of prayer. Against the indistinct glow it even seems to Oyzer-Heshl that the withered tree in the cemetery is blossoming.

As far as his eyes reach, there are glittering stars, looking like Hebrew vowel signs, “אותיות און נקודות, פֿאַרהוילן און אויסטערליש, ווי די שמות אין זיידנס ספֿר-יצירה” (letters and vowel-points, concealed and strange, like the holy names in his grandfather’s *Sefer Yezirah*) – [298].⁵⁰

In this passage the description of the majestic nocturnal sky is again combined with light imagery. Of particular interest here is Oyzer-Heshl’s question about the origins of the light he sees, after he has just had a discussion with his grandfather about traditional Judaism versus secular knowledge and scientific explanations of the formation of the universe. He cannot decide, whether these glimpses of light come from within the synagogue, symbolizing traditional Jewish religion, or from the majesty of nature outside. But independent of their origin, for a moment they fill him with so much hope for new life, that even the withered tree in the cemetery appears to be blossoming. This passage is also the third time, in which a character in the novel (once R. Meshulem Mushkat, and for the second time Oyzer-Heshl) detects a mysterious script in a nocturnal landscape. While this was referred to as a “concealed script” and a “kabbalistic script” in the two previous instances, here the script is specified as the

⁵⁰ In the translation the conversation between Oyzer-Heshl and his grandfather is abridged and the description of the nocturnal landscape, including the reference to *Sefer Yezirah*, is omitted [English: 253-255].

letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the Hebrew vowel-points, which seem to hover in the sky like the “שמות” (holy names) found in the *Sefer Yezirah*.⁵¹

There are two more passages in the novel, connected to this theme, which involve Oyzer-Heshl's grandfather, Rabbi Dan. When Rabbi Dan has to leave Kleyn-Tereshpol, he burns the manuscripts of all the religious works, which he has written, in the stove. But a yellowed sheaf of paper remains for a long time without burning. When it finally catches fire, the paper still does not fall apart and on its ruled lines the “פֿײַערדיקע אותיות” (fiery letters) still glow [320].

Like the previously discussed passage, this paragraph also expresses the idea of an inherent power in the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. But while previously the letters were connected with the light of the stars, here they are connected with the light of fire. This paragraph is also highly allusive to a passage in the Talmud, which describes the execution of Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon by the Romans. According to this Talmudic account, Rabbi Ḥanina was wrapped in a Torah scroll and burned together with the scroll. Before he died, his disciples asked him, what he was seeing. He replied that he saw sheets of parchment being burned, but the letters soared on high.⁵²

As in this Talmudic account, in the above-quoted paragraph from Bashevis's novel sheets of paper with Hebrew writing are also burning (although it is not a Torah scroll being burned here) and the letters also seem to withstand the fire.

After his arrival in Warsaw, Rabbi Dan is sitting in a house of study, feeling completely at ease again. He knows, he only needs to stretch out his hand and open one of the volumes on the shelves, and he can “איינזאַפֿן די רײד פֿון לעבעדיקן גאָט, די אותיות, וואָס מיט “איינזאַפֿן די רײד פֿון לעבעדיקן גאָט, די אותיות, וואָס מיט

“איינזאַפֿן די רײד פֿון לעבעדיקן גאָט, די אותיות, וואָס מיט (draw in the words of the living God, the letters,

⁵¹ On this passage see also: Section 3.3, 76 f.

⁵² b Avodah Zarah 18 a.

through which all worlds were created) – [351].

In this passage the above-quoted idea from *Sefer Yezirah* is reiterated that everything, which was formed, was created by means of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.⁵³ Thus, having been driven out of Kleyn-Tereshpol and having been confronted with the hostility of the Gentile peasants and soldiers on his journey to Warsaw, it is comforting to Rabbi Dan to be in a house of study among Jewish books and to become assured once again of the power inherent in the Hebrew letters contained in these volumes, the same letters, with which all worlds were created.⁵⁴

The same idea is expressed by the *rebe* of Białodrewna in a significant passage, which will be further discussed below. In this context it is sufficient to say that on his journey to Sęcymin the *rebe* is strongly impressed by the majesty of the nocturnal sky, which is covered with stars. He wonders, if this world, the “עולם העשייה” (World of Action) is already so immense, what the higher worlds will be like, “בריאה, יצירה, אצילות”, the World of Creation, the World of Formation, the World of Emanation. Furthermore, the *rebe* of Białodrewna reflects on the human being. How fortunate is the human being, he thinks, that he can study “די אותיות פן [!] דער תורה, וואס מיט זיי האט כביכול באשאפן די וועלט” (the letters of the Torah, with which God has created the world) – [541].⁵⁵

These reflections of the *rebe* again emphasize the idea that the world was created, or more accurately that all the worlds were created through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which was stated before in the novel in the name of Rabbi Dan. In addition to this the passage also expresses the well-known Midrashic idea of the pre-existence of the Torah, which God employed, according to this Midrash, for His creation of the

⁵³ ספר יצירה, 2, 2. See: Section 3.3, 74 f.

⁵⁴ See also: Section 3.3, 77.

⁵⁵ The whole 1st section of the 44th chapter, where these mystical ideas can be found in the Yiddish original, is omitted in the translation [English: 469 f.].

world in the same way, in which a “king of flesh and blood” employs an architect and his blueprint, when he wants to build a palace.⁵⁶

In the experience of the four characters referred to in this section, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet can be detected in the majesty of nature, which was created through them, according to the cosmogony of the *Sefer Yezirah*. Thus the Hebrew letters in all the Jewish religious works also have the power to sustain Jews against the adversities in the world around them. The same letters of the Hebrew alphabet, with which the universe was created, seem to be written in the nocturnal sky, glowing with the light of the stars, and they still glow in the light of the fire, which burns the parchment, on which they are written, but cannot destroy the mystical power within them.

5.4.4. Sparks of Light in Contexts of Darkness – Allusions to the Lurianic Concept of the “Sparks of Holiness”

The passage about the reflections of the Białodrewna *rebe* on the four worlds and on the creation of the universe through the letters of the Torah is also one of the instances in the novel, where an explicit reference to the Lurianic concept of the “sparks of holiness” can be found. The *rebe* does not only consider human beings fortunate, because they can study the letters of the Torah, but also because they are “א חלק אלוהי” (a part of God on high), created in the “צלם אלוהים” (image of God), and because they have been given the power, “מתקן צו זיין פגמויות” (to rectify cosmic defects) and to lead the “נציצות-דקדושה” (“sparks of holiness”) back to their “מקור” (source) – [541].

The reflections of the Białodrewna *rebe* are completely in accordance with the teachings of Lurianic Kabbalah, which ascribe to human beings the power to conclude the process of *Tikun*, to rectify the cosmic defects and to lead the “sparks of holiness” back to their

⁵⁶ Bereshit Rabah 1, 1.

source.⁵⁷ The hope that the mystic exile of the *Shekhinah* will also be overcome through these activities, is likewise expressed in this paragraph. As soon as the *rebe* has ended his reflections, he washes his hands in the snow and sings his grandfather's melody: "שכינתא בגלותא" (The *Shekhinah* is in exile!....) – [541].

Not long after this the *rebe* becomes ill and is preparing himself to die. The description of his dying hour also contains a reference to "פֿונקען" (sparks) of light, alluding to the Lurianic "sparks of holiness", remaining on his eyelids after a dream of the higher worlds, which he is longing to reach, as mentioned above [559].⁵⁸

Apart from these obvious references to the Lurianic idea of the "sparks of holiness", there are many more instances, where sparks of light appear in contexts of darkness, either physically or metaphorically, which are also highly allusive to this Lurianic concept.

One of these allusive images occurs already very early in the novel. When R. Meshulem returns to Warsaw at the beginning of the novel, his carriage moves slowly through the streets. The time of day is early evening, and the street lights have already been lit.

Occasionally a red-painted tramcar passes by, and the electric wires overhead emit blue flames. At the gates of the Saxon Gardens two policemen are watching to see that no Jews in long gaberdines enter the park. In the indistinct light of the evening it seems to R. Meshulem, "אַז עס בלייט דאָרט בעד" (literally: that lilac is blossoming there – However, there might be a pun intended here with the Yiddish word בייז, evil.).

When the carriage turns into the Grzybowska, the scenery changes. The street is filled with Jewish men in long gaberdines and women with wigs and headscarves. Street

⁵⁷ See: Section 3.4.3, 93-96.

⁵⁸ See: Section 5.4.2, 167 f.

peddlars are calling out their wares. Young boys return from *heder*, carrying prayerbooks and volumes of the Talmud under their arms. In the middle of the street horses are pulling over-loaded wagons, and the stomping of their hooves on the cobblestones causes “פֿונקען” (sparks) to fly [7 f.].

In this description the modern, non-Jewish part of Warsaw with its tramcars, electric wires and policemen guarding the Saxon Gardens, is contrasted with the Jewish Grzybowska and its seeming backwardness. Nevertheless it is in this street, crowded with Jews in traditional garments, noisy street peddlars and boys carrying volumes of the Talmud, that the image of “sparks” appears for the first time in this novel.⁵⁹ This occurrence of sparks of light is set against a background of darkness and an impression of evil blossoming in the Saxon Gardens, which seems to allude to the Lurianic concept of the “sparks of holiness” being found even in the world of the *Klipot*, the powers of evil.

The next appearance of “sparks” in the novel does not occur until about three hundred pages later. After having been insulted by Royze-Frumetl, Hadase runs away from her summer cottage in a state of panic. On her way to the station she is afraid that Royze-Frumetl might follow her. Her heart is pounding and “פֿייערדיקע פינטלען” (fiery spots) are moving in front of her eyes [305]. Travelling to Warsaw by train, Hadase notices a deserted river, on which a reflection of light seems to gleam. The forest is completely dark. But here and there “אָ פֿונק ליכט” (a spark of light) shines through [306]. The light image continues, when the train reaches the Vistula. The reflection of street lights can be seen in the water, forming lines of “פֿייערדיקע זיילן” (fiery columns). A “געטלעכע מנוחה”

⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that in the translation the electric wires of the tramcars in the non-Jewish part of Warsaw are also emitting “sparks”, just as the hooves of the horses on the Jewish Grzybowska [English: 13 f.]. Whether this is the result of a conscious decision by the English translator, is not clear.

(Divine calm) is hovering above the water, as in the days of the “וועלט-באַשאַפֿונג”
(creation of the world) – [307].⁶⁰

In this description images of light and darkness are contrasted again. As in many other instances throughout Bashevis’s works, fiery sparks, usually referred to as “פֿונקען” (sparks), but at times also as “פֿייערדיקע פֿינטלעך” (fiery spots) appear in front of a person’s eyes in situations of existential fear and nausea.⁶¹ Hadase’s dread and the darkness of the forest she passes on her journey, form the background for the spots of light in front of her eyes, the occasional “spark” of light shining through from the darkness of the forest, and later the Divine calm hovering over the Vistula. These are glimpses of light and hope, pointing at the possibility of redemptive good in a context of both inner and outer darkness.

Shortly after this Hadase meets Oyzer-Heshl in Warsaw. She takes him to an empty apartment in the house belonging to her husband. But all along Oyzer-Heshl fears that she might lead him straight to her husband. He looks at her pale face, and in the darkness he sees “גאָלדענע פֿונקען” (golden sparks) shooting out from her pupils [315 f.]. When they climb the staircase in a deserted building, Oyzer-Heshl is at first full of “פחד” (dread), then he experiences a silence, as in a “חורבה” (ruin), and “פֿייערדיקע קאָלירן” (fiery colours) are moving in front of his eyes [316].⁶²

This time we encounter neither fiery “spots”, nor “sparks”, but colours moving before the eyes of a person overcome by dread. The actual expression “פֿונקען” (sparks) is employed instead in describing Oyzer-Heshl’s impression of Hadase’s sparkling eyes.

These “sparks” appear again in a context of darkness and fear. But in addition to this, it

⁶⁰ The English only translates a part of the light imagery found in the Yiddish. Neither the fiery spots in front of Hadase’s eyes nor the “spark” of light in the dark forest are mentioned [English: 261 f.].

⁶¹ See for example: קונצנמאכער פון לובלין, דער, 158, 164, 198, 221.

⁶² In the English the sparks shining in Hadase’s eyes are called: “Golden points of light”. There are no fiery colours in front of Oyzer-Heshl’s eyes [English: 271].

is also a situation full of eroticism. There are a few instances throughout Bashevis's works, where "sparks" appear in situations filled with an erotic tension between two characters.⁶³ They may be interpreted as signs of warning concerning the dangers involved in certain amorous entanglements, particularly in a case like this, where both partners are still married to somebody else.

The next instance of "sparks" occurs, when Avram Shapiro visits Leye, after it has become known that she has divorced her husband and is preparing to marry Kopl, the bailiff. Avram remains standing in Leye's dark corridor, telling her that, although he thinks she is crazy, he envies her courage, while he himself feels like a coward, and even like a "לעבעדיקער מת" (living corpse). In the darkness Leye's eyes appear green and full of light. From Avram's glowing cigar "פֿוינקען" (sparks) fall onto his beard [446].

This scene contains again images of darkness, the dark corridor, Avram's feeling that he is nothing more than a living corpse. But within this darkness and despair there are "sparks" of redemptive good, when Avram comes to recognize Leye's courage and integrity, which could serve as a model for his own life and his own intricate relationships.

Two more instances of "sparks" in close proximity involve Oyzer-Heshl. While Oyzer-Heshl is serving in the Russian army during the First World War, suffering hardships and being exposed to the antisemitism of his fellow soldiers, he is still brooding over Spinoza's philosophies, asking himself, why God has created hatred, if hatred cannot be good, as Spinoza says. He thinks that God has "צוגעדעקט זיינע סודות" (covered up His secrets) and does not want anyone to uncover them [456]. Shortly after this Oyzer-

⁶³ See for example: קונצנמאכער פון לובלין, 111.

Heshl's regiment is ordered to withdraw. The soldiers have to march long distances and Oyzer-Heshl begins to wonder whether this is really him, who is able to withstand all these hardships and whether he is really Rabbi Dan's grandson, his mother's son, Eydl's husband and Hadase's beloved. Lying down in a field with the other soldiers, he looks up at the sky and at the blood-red moon, divided by a small stripe of a cloud. A pillar of fog ascends from a nearby river. Someone has lit a fire, and "פֿונקען" (sparks) are moving above the flames [459 f.].⁶⁴

In this context of darkness, war, the roughness of army life and the anti-semitism of fellow soldiers, Oyzer-Heshl still continues to reflect upon higher matters, Spinoza's philosophy, the purpose of God's creation, and is still able to preserve his humanity and find the strength to carry on. This warrants Bashevis's employment of the image of redemptive "sparks" of light rising out of the flames, against a context of war and violence, where even the moon appears in a blood-red light.

Some time later, having survived the war, Oyzer-Heshl decides to visit Hadase in her villa near Otwock. At night on the train he reflects on time and history: If time is no more than a mode of perception, then history only consists in turning the pages of a book, which has been written a long time ago. The locomotive of the train bellows like an ox and spits out smoke, and "מחנות פֿונקען האָבן זיך געוויגט, ווי פֿאלגנדיקע שטערן" (multitudes of sparks were swaying like falling stars). A Polish man starts cursing the Jews, and the curses are taken up by others. Oyzer-Heshl wonders why these Poles are so hostile towards the Jews and hold them responsible for every evil [492].⁶⁵

Here we encounter again a context of darkness, the dark night, the hostility of the

⁶⁴ The English provides an accurate translation of this paragraph, in which the "sparks" appear [396 f.], whereas in the earlier passage some details of Oyzer-Heshl's reflections on Spinoza are omitted [393].

⁶⁵ The English provides a more or less accurate translation, apart from the fact that it states: "Sparks flew through the air like shooting stars" [423 f.].

Gentiles towards the Jews, and within this context Oyzer-Heshl again reflects on more exalted philosophical questions, which accords with the Lurianic idea of the “sparks of holiness” that remain present among the *Klipot*, the powers of evil. This Lurianic allusion is emphasised by the fact that the “sparks” are compared to falling stars, since according to Lurianic cosmology, “sparks” of Divine light were falling down with the broken “vessels” at the time of the “שבירת הכלים” or “breaking of the vessels”.⁶⁶

Much later, when Oyzer-Heshl and Hadase are already a married couple, another instance of “sparks” occurs at their apartment, involving Avram Shapiro. When Avram comes to visit the couple to present them with tickets for a Chanukkah masked ball, the anti-semitic janitor refuses to give him the key to the elevator, and Avram has to climb up the stairs to the apartment in his state of ill health. When Hadase sees her uncle, she embraces and kisses him. But Avram is completely dazed. He falls into an armchair. His heart is pounding, his temples are throbbing, and “טונקעלע פלעקן” (dark spots) and “גאלדענע פונקען” (golden sparks) are moving in front of his eyes [582 f.].⁶⁷

For the third time in this novel “sparks” appear in a situation, in which a Jew experiences antisemitism from his Gentile environment. It is a context, in which the existence of the *Klipot* as the forces of evil is perceptible. But together with the “dark spots” caused by the hostile environment, “golden sparks” are also visible, which accord with the love and genuine friendliness, with which Avram is welcomed here, particularly by Hadase, and allude to the “sparks of holiness”, whose light remains noticeable even in the world of the *Klipot*.

A more obvious reference to the concept of the “sparks of holiness” can be found in the

⁶⁶ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 138.

⁶⁷ The reference to the dark spots and golden “sparks” is omitted in the translation [English: 494 f.].

description of one of Oyzer-Heshl's visits at his mother's and sister's apartment. On awakening, Oyzer-Heshl sees Menashe-Dovidl, his sister's husband, standing at the threshold of the bedroom. He reproaches Oyzer-Heshl for sleeping, telling him that he should not fall into "יאוש" (despair): פֿון איין סטרא אחרא. פֿון איין "אלע מרה-שחורות קומען פֿון דער סטרא אחרא. פֿון איין טראָפּן שמחה איז שקול קעגן אַ ים מיט עברות!..." (All melancholies come from the *sitra 'ahra*. From one spark a blazing fire can come into being. One drop of joy is equal to an ocean of sadness!...) – [666].⁶⁸

In the *Zohar* the terms *sitra 'ahra* and "קליפות" ("shells" or "husks" of evil) are closely connected. According to the *Zohar*, "there is a spark of holiness" even in the domain of "the other side", and the fulfilment of a commandment strengthens the "side of holiness", just as a sinful act revitalizes the *sitra 'ahra*.⁶⁹ In Ḥasidism sadness is a great sin; it is, in fact, "the very embodiment of Sin". Three imperatives are intertwined in Ḥasidism: "never to despair, to be sad, or to be regretful". Surrender to "יאוש" (despair) is considered as "surrender to the Evil Urge".⁷⁰ Menashe-Dovidl, a follower of the Bratslav *ḥasidim*, echoes this ḥasidic opposition to despair and sadness and their association with evil.

Ḥasidism also makes use of the Lurianic concept of the "sparks of holiness". The Lurianic idea, according to which the "principal task of the Jew in the world" is to raise up the "fallen sparks of Divinity", is employed to justify the ḥasidic concept of "עבודה בגשמיות", the worship of God in the corporeality of life in the world.⁷¹ Thus Menashe-Dovidl's use of the term "פֿונק" ("spark") in this context can be seen as an

⁶⁸ The reference to the "spark" is also found in the translation, but "סטרא אחרא" is inaccurately translated as "uncleanliness", and the last sentence quoted here from the Yiddish, is omitted in the English. It is also interesting to note that the English adds a few paragraphs at this point, in which Menashe-Dovidl sermonizes on repentance, redemption and joy, while Dinele complains that he only "prattles his sermons", while his family does not have enough to live on [English: 564].

⁶⁹ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 125.

⁷⁰ Cf. Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 93, 95, 102.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

allusion to this ḥasidic interpretation of the Lurianic idea of raising the fallen sparks of Divinity through a joyful worship of God, which is able to overcome all sadness and despair.

When Eydl tries to emigrate to Palestine, Oyzer-Heshl accompanies her to the port. The two of them are travelling by train at night, passing dark forests, houses and chimneys of factories. The locomotive of the train spits out smoke and “מחנות פֿונקען” (multitudes of sparks), which fall down onto the grain in the fields. God’s world is not asleep. Every tree, flower and corn stalk is sucking nourishment from the earth [709].⁷² On arrival Oyzer-Heshl sees the ocean for the first time. The sea seems to mingle with the sky. A “שבתדיקע מנוחה” (Sabbath-like stillness) is hovering over the open spaces, which seem to have remained unchanged since the “ששת-ימי-בראשית” (six days of creation) – [710]. Looking at the movements of the sea, it seems to Oyzer-Heshl, as if Divinity had assumed the form of water [711].

In this passage “sparks” appear again in a context of darkness, the dangerous situation in Poland, from which Eydl is attempting to escape to Palestine, her journey at night with Oyzer-Heshl, the dark forests and the ominous chimneys of factories that they pass. Within this context of darkness and despair we encounter falling “sparks” of light, reminiscent of the “sparks” of Divine light, which, according to Lurianic Kabbalah, fell on the occasion of the “breaking of the vessels”.

The appearance of these “sparks” is connected here with descriptions of nature, references to God’s creation and the experience of God as manifest in nature. According to Lurianic cosmology, the “עולם העשייה” (World of Action), that is our terrestrial world, is filled with “holy sparks”, sparks of Divinity, which are manifest in nature, embodied in

⁷² In the translation the reference to the sparks is omitted [English: 604].

the “mineral”, “vegetable”, “animal” and “human world”.⁷³ This Lurianic idea finds its expression in this passage from Bashevis’s novel, where a reference to “sparks” of light is so closely connected with the manifestation of Divinity in nature.

The last instance of sparks occurs towards the end of the novel, when the war with Hitler has already begun, and Oyzer-Heshl has returned to Warsaw from his trip to the countryside with Barbara. The two of them have reached Barbara’s apartment in Warsaw in the middle of the bombing. Oyzer-Heshl is extremely weak and seems to lose his memory. He stumbles against the furniture and falls asleep, whilst still standing. He sees himself in a dream as a little boy, stepping outside and noticing a chimney-sweep on a low roof. “פֿויקען” (sparks) are flying from the chimney, and someone is letting down a broom, a rope and a cloth – something unclean and frightening. Oyzer-Heshl awakes with a start. Barbara asks him to lie down and leads him to the bed. Sinking into the soft pillow, Oyzer-Heshl is overcome by a long-forgotten bliss, as if he was a little child, and his mother was taking care of him [739].⁷⁴

The last occurrence of “sparks” takes place in the darkest context as yet in the novel, the beginning of the Second World War, the bombing of Warsaw, the lurking danger for all the Jews, who have not been able to escape in time, and again the ominous image of a chimney, this time appearing in Oyzer-Heshl’s dream, together with another image of something unclean and frightening. This context, combined with these terrifying images, can be seen as the embodiment of the *Klipah*, the power of evil. In such a context the raising of those few “sparks” of Divine light, which are still perceptible, seems to have

⁷³ Cf. R. Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 361, 364.

⁷⁴ In the translation no mention is made of Oyzer-Heshl’s dream, the chimney-sweep and the sparks [English: 626 f.].

become unattainable. Thus it is not surprising that soon after this Herts Yanover comes to the conclusion that the only possible redemption is death [748].

5.4.5. Lurianic Allusions in the Description of the Women Characters in

די פאמיליע מושקאט

Just as the recurrent motif of sparks of light in contexts of darkness can be seen as an allusion to the Lurianic concept of the “sparks of holiness”, thus the terminology and the images employed in the description of some of the women characters in the novel is also highly allusive to certain Lurianic ideas.

There are two instances, in which the term *Zimzum* is used in connection with different women characters. In a letter to Yekusyel, the watchmaker, his former teacher in Kleyn-Tereshpol, Oyzer-Heshl describes Hadase as a kind-hearted and intelligent young woman with a “לויטער און איידל נפש” (pure and noble soul), who refuses to marry a young man from a wealthy family and prepares herself for a life of “צמצום און מאַטערניש” (limitation and hardship), because she longs for learning and scholarship [196].⁷⁵

The second instance describes the preparations for Shabat at the apartment of Oyzer-Heshl’s mother and sister in Warsaw. In this context it is stated that Finkl and Dinele live their life “בצמצום” (in a state of limitation). But nevertheless they always usher in Shabat in a dignified way. Dressed in their most beautiful garments, they light the Shabat candles, having prepared the best possible food and having set the table in a Shabat-like manner [497].⁷⁶

The expression “צמצום” used in these two passages to describe both Hadase’s foreseen

⁷⁵ The translation omits Oyzer-Heshl’s letter to Yekusyel, the watchmaker, which takes up the entire 12th chapter in the Yiddish original [English: 175 f.].

⁷⁶ The English translates the sentence concerning Finkl and Dinele living a life “בצמצום” as: “Finkel and Dinah lived a thrifty life.” [English: 426].

living conditions in Switzerland and Finkl's and Dinele's actual life in Warsaw, in this context merely refers to a life of limitations, restrictions, a meagre, frugal or withdrawn kind of life. This obvious or literal meaning would be called the level of "פשוט" in rabbinical exegesis. But according to this rabbinical terminology, in this case another one of the four levels of interpretations is also very prominent, and this is the level of "סוד", the mystical interpretation, since the term *Zimzum* describes one of the key concepts of Lurianic Kabbalah. Throughout Bashevis's work the term "צמצום" is employed several times, referring to this Lurianic concept. In this novel, in addition to the two above-mentioned occurrences of the term "צמצום", there is one instance, in which we encounter the verb "זיך מצמצם זיך", derived from the same root, in a clearly Lurianic sense. Thus Arele, the new *rebe* of Białodrevne states in a sermon that for the sake of free will "הָאֵט אֵין-סוּף זיך מצמצם געווען" ('*Ein-Sof* has contracted Himself) – [754].⁷⁷

Since Bashevis usually employs the terms "צמצום" and "זיך מצמצם זיך" in this Lurianic meaning, it cannot be a coincidence that he chooses the word "צמצום", which is so heavily fraught with Lurianic allusions, in the two above-quoted instances. Looking at the characters, whose way of life is described by this term, one notices that they are three women, two of whom lead a traditional Jewish life, while the third is a more secular and modern character. Finkl and Dinele are presented in the novel as good and pious Jewish women, who in the above-quoted paragraph, where the term "צמצום" appears, are described as ushering in Shabat in a dignified manner, despite their own poor and limited living conditions. Hadase is a young woman, who has enjoyed a modern secular education and who is described by Oyzer-Heshl in the paragraph mentioned above as an intelligent and kind-hearted person with a pure and noble soul. That means that, despite their different relationship to Jewish tradition, all the three

⁷⁷ This sermon occurs during the last chapter of the Yiddish original, which is omitted in the English.

women are presented as good, kind-hearted, pure and noble human beings. Thus in choosing the term “צמצום”, when referring to these women characters, Bashevis could possibly be wishing to imply that by withdrawing from the world, by living a limited and withdrawn life and by not allowing their own goodness and nobility to set a shining example for others, these good-natured women enable the unfolding and thriving of more ambiguous or sinister characters.

There is another instance, in which terminology is employed in connection with Hadase, which is fraught with Lurianic allusions. When Hadase prepares herself for the Chanukkah masked ball, she invests so much energy that she soon becomes emaciated and pale. For the slightest reason she becomes excited and agitated, and “כלים” (vessels) are falling from her hands [596].⁷⁸

The reference to falling “כלים” or “vessels” is, of course, highly allusive to the Lurianic concept of “שבירת הכלים”, the “breaking of the vessels”. In Bashevis’s earlier novel *דער שטן אין גאָר* references to breaking or falling vessels occur in connection with Rekhele, the main female character of the novel, who is at times associated with the *Shekhinah*.⁷⁹ In *די פאָמיליע מושקאָט* it is again an important female character, with whom the “breaking of the vessels” is connected.

In this context it is interesting to note that another image, which occurs in connection with Rekhele in *דער שטן אין גאָר*, also appears in *די פאָמיליע מושקאָט* in connection with Hadase, as well as with two other women characters, Dinele and Ninotshke.⁸⁰

When Oyzer-Heshl is conscripted into the army, his mother, his sister and Eydl accompany him to the station. When his train starts to move, Dinele runs along the

⁷⁸ In the description of Hadase’s preparations for the masked ball in the English, the term “vessels” is not used. The translation given instead is: “Things she picked up would fall from her hands” [English: 506].

⁷⁹ See: Section 4.4.2, 138-142.

⁸⁰ See: Section 4.4.2, 138 f.

platform, waving her hand, as if there was something important, which she had forgotten to say to her brother. After this description we find the following statement:

“אײן האַלב פנים איז געווען ליכטיק, דאָס אַנדערע - פֿינסטער” (Half of her face was full of light, the other half – dark.) – [403].⁸¹

The same image is employed in connection with Avram’s young lover, the actress Ninotshke. When Avram visits Leye on hearing the news concerning her divorce and her forthcoming marriage to Kopl, Ninotshke waits for him outside. Having just made peace with the prospect of becoming Kopl’s brother-in-law, Avram sees Ninotshke waiting outside underneath a balcony. Her appearance is described in this paragraph as:

“אײן האַלב פנים איז געווען באַלויכטן, דאָס אַנדערע - פֿאַרשטאַנט” (Half of her face was illuminated, the other half – in shadow) – [448].⁸²

The last appearance of this image occurs in the last chapter of the novel in the Yiddish original. The remainder of the Mushkat Family is trapped in Warsaw during the bombing. Hadase has already been killed by a bomb. Her cousin Mashe thinks of her, sitting in an armchair at Pinyele’s house, when dusk begins to fall. In the “חלומדיקער” “האַלב-זוניק - האַלב-שאַטנדיק” (dream-like twilight) she sees Hadase’s face “(half of it sunny, the other half in shadow), with golden, fiery hair. Mashe envies her, because Hadase is already free, without pain, without fear and without worries [755].⁸³

As mentioned above in connection with Rekhele in גאַרײַן, the image of the divided face, ascribed to these three women characters in the novel, is allusive to the ambivalent nature of the *Shekhinah*.⁸⁴ Since the Kabbalah understands the *Shekhinah* as the female aspect of God, it is not surprising that Bashevis employs this imagery in the

⁸¹ In the translation this sentence is expanded: “Half of her face was lighted in the glow of the moving cars, the other half was in shadow” [English: 352].

⁸² Although the translation adds several paragraphs on Avram’s new affair with Ninotshke (Ninotchka in the English) at this point [384-386], the reference to her divided face is omitted [386].

⁸³ This image appears in the last chapter of the Yiddish, which is entirely omitted in the English.

⁸⁴ See: Section 4.4.2, 138 f.

description of his female characters in the novel. According to Lurianic Kabbalah, the “breaking of the vessels” caused the mystic exile of the *Shekhinah* from the rest of the Godhead. Thus it is also fitting that Bashevis employs the image of falling vessels in connection with a female character in the novel, who is at one point associated with the *Shekhinah*.

The Lurianic allusions in the description of the women characters in *די פאמיליע מושקאט* are not as clear and consistent as those employed by Bashevis in his description of Rekhele in *לער שטן אין גאָר*, but they are nevertheless present and need to be mentioned in the analysis of the role of Kabbalah in Bashevis’s second major novel.

5.4.6. The Interpretation of the Lurianic Concepts of *Zimzum*, the “Breaking of the Vessels” and *Tikun* in *די פאמיליע מושקאט*

Apart from the imagery of “sparks” of light, divided faces and falling “vessels”, which allude to Lurianic ideas, there are a few instances in the novel, in which Lurianic concepts are directly referred to and given a particular interpretation by some of Bashevis’s characters.

The passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter describes Rabbi Dan on his way to Warsaw with his family, after having been expelled from Kleyn-Tereshpol at the outset of the First World War.⁸⁵ Rabbi Dan reflects on the people of Israel being like a lamb among wolves, surrounded by idolaters, murderers, lechers and drunkards. He thinks that the “עולם העשייה” (World of Action), is the “עולם הקליפות” (world of the *Klipot*) and the resting-place of the *sitra ’ahra*. But he comforts himself with the thought that in its essence everything is “אלקות” (Godliness), and that even the *Klipah* has its root in *Ein-*

⁸⁵ See: Section 5.1, 150.

Sof. “דער תכלית איז בחירה” (Its purpose is free will). At the end every “פגם” (defect) will have its “תיקון” (cosmic restoration). The “טומאה” (profane) is in truth only a “פֿאַרבלענדעניש” (illusion). On his journey Rabbi Dan has the feeling that he is encountering the powers of darkness “פנים אל פנים” (face to face), and that the “ניצוץ אלוקים” (spark of Divinity) within him is being extinguished. He tries to pray “מנחה” (the afternoon prayer), but he cannot remember the words [324].

In this passage we find direct references to the Lurianic concepts of the “breaking of the vessels”, the formation of the *Klipot* from the “shards” of the broken “vessels” and the process of *Tikun*. In this paragraph Rabbi Dan’s reflections on the *Klipah* and the world of the *Klipot* occur in a context, where the rabbi is surrounded by evil, the beginning of the First World War, the expulsion of the Jews from Kleyn-Tereshpol and the hostility of the soldiers towards them. In fact, Rabbi Dan feels so threatened by the evil surrounding him, that he even considers the “עולם העשייה”, that is our terrestrial world, as the world of the *Klipot*.

In *די פאָמיליע מושקאַט*, which culminates in the Second World War, death and destruction, the powers of evil, Jewish suffering and unfulfilled hopes of redemption are major themes. The above-quoted passage, set in the context of the First World War, expresses these major themes of the novel and provides us with a possible answer to the question of the root of evil and of God’s intentions in allowing evil and suffering in our world. This answer, expressed in this passage by Rabbi Dan, is a particular interpretation of the Lurianic concept of the “breaking of the vessels”, which is bound up with the teleological interpretation of *Zimzum*, developed in the writings of Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, as explained above.⁸⁶

Rabbi Dan also refers to the Lurianic concept of *Tikun* in this passage, by expressing the

⁸⁶ See: Section 3.4.1, 84-87; Section 3.4.2, 89-91.

hope that in the end every fault will have its “תיקון”, meaning that everything will be restored to its originally intended state of harmony, which was upset by the “breaking of the vessels”. With the decline of Jewish life in Poland, growing destruction and the approach of the Second World War, with all it represents, this hope remains unfulfilled. Another passage, which presents the reflections of the Białodrewna *rebe* on the privileged status of the human being, who has the power “מתקן צו זיין פגימות” (to rectify cosmic defects) and to lead the “sparks of holiness” back to their source [541], has been mentioned previously.⁸⁷

This belief in the power of the human being to bring about *Tikun* or cosmic restoration is also upheld by Arele, the new *rebe* of Białodrewna. On a visit to Warsaw from Palestine, where he has settled, Arele informs his fellow *hasidim* about the situation in the Land of Israel: Although Jews do not rule in Palestine yet, they are not as downcast, as in the “גלות” (diaspora). A “קדושה” (holiness) seems to hover over every corn stalk, over every blade of grass. At the “הייליקע קברים” (holy graves) “מקובלים” (Kabbalists) are gathering, who are “מיחד יחודים” (literally: unifying unifications) and “מצרף צירופים” (literally: combining combinations) – [698 f.].⁸⁸

The word “צירופים” refers to combinations of letters and names, widely employed by Lurianic Kabbalists in their “כוונות” (“intentions” for prayer). Lurianic Kabbalah emphasizes the more active side of prayer in directing every prayer toward the “upraising of the sparks of light”. In Lurianic prayer a special place is reserved for “יחודים”, “acts of unification”, which are “meditations on one of the letter combinations of the Tetragrammaton” or on configurations of Divine names.⁸⁹ These unifications of Divine names were believed to effect unification within the Godhead. This means, they

⁸⁷ See: Section 5.4.4, 176 f.

⁸⁸ This paragraph is omitted in the translation [English: 598].

⁸⁹ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 178-180.

were supposed to work towards a re-unification of the exiled *Shekhinah* with the rest of the Godhead, from whom the *Shekhinah* was separated on the occasion of the “breaking of the vessels”, and thus they were supposed to effect *Tikun*.

Another passage elaborates on the subject of “יחוד” (unification). An old *hasid* remembers the time, when the late *rebe* of Białodrewna was still alive, and the *Shekhinah* seemed to rest upon him. He recalls the wedding of Akive and the *rebe*’s daughter Gine-Gendl. He thinks that from the beginning they were not a suitable couple. She should have married Herts Yanover, but since she could not have him “בהיתר” (in a permitted way), she acted “באיסור” (in a forbidden way). Everything can be understood “בבחינת זכר ונקבה” (in the sense of male and female). This is also the meaning of the principle “לשם יחוד קודשא בריך הוא ושכינתיה” (for the sake of the unification of the Holy One Blessed be He and His *Shekhinah*). Even in the higher spheres there must be “יחוד” (unification) – [705 f.].⁹⁰

The thoughts of this *hasid* reflect the idea of the “זיווג קדישא” or “sacred marriage”, which plays a central role in the *Zohar* and in all subsequent Kabbalah, as explained above.⁹¹ In Lurianic Kabbalah the fulfillment of every commandment is to be accompanied by the afore-mentioned formula, declaring that this action is performed for the sake of the unification of the Holy One Blessed be He and His *Shekhinah*.⁹²

Thus every prayer and every fulfillment of a commandment, performed with the intention of bringing about the unification of the *Shekhinah* with the rest of the Godhead, is believed to be a mystical action effecting *Tikun*.

One last passage should be referred to again in connection with the theme of Lurianic

⁹⁰ The whole 4th section of the 58th chapter, where this reference can be found in the Yiddish original, is omitted in the translation [English: 603].

⁹¹ See: Section 3.4.3, 96.

⁹² Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 275 f.

ideas expressed in the novel. In a sermon delivered on Rosh Hashanah at the beginning of the Second World War, Arele speaks about Rosh Hashanah being called “יום-הדין” (the day of justice), although on Rosh Hashanah the moon is hidden, which is supposed to represent “מידת הדין” (the attribute of justice), while the sun is supposed to represent “מידת הרחמים” (the attribute of mercy). But in reality, Arele says, “רחמים” (mercy) and “דין” (justice) are derived from one “שורש” (root). “דין”, that is “justice” or “judgement”, only exists for the sake of “בחירה” (free will). The “בעל-בחירה” (person possessing free will) has the choice between “טוב ורע” (good and evil) – [753]. The human being has been sent down to the “עולם העשייה” (World of Action), in order to earn his reward. The “תכלית הבריאה” (purpose of creation) is “בחירה” (free will). For the sake of free will “האט אין-סוף זיך מצמצם געווען” (*Ein-Sof* has contracted Himself). So that there should be free will, the *Klipot* were created [754].⁹³

Unlike in the reflections of the Białodrewna *rebe*, analyzed previously, in Arele’s sermon it is not the “breaking of the vessels”, but already the act of *Zimzum*, which is supposed to have occurred for the sake of free will. This is in accordance with Moshe Hayim Luzzatto’s teleological interpretation of *Zimzum*, as explained above.⁹⁴

Arele’s statement that “דין” and “רחמים” have the same origin, accords with Isaac Luria’s explanation of *Zimzum*. The connection, which Arele makes between “דין” and “בחירה”, is a combination of Luria’s explanation of *Zimzum* as originating in a concentration of the forces of “דין”, and Luzzatto’s interpretation, according to which the act of *Zimzum* enabled the creation of imperfect creatures, who were given the opportunity to perfect themselves and to choose between good and evil.⁹⁵

Arele also states that the *Klipot* were created for the sake of free will. This is exactly the

⁹³ This passage forms part of the last chapter of the Yiddish original, which is omitted in the English.

⁹⁴ See: Section 3.4.1, 84-86.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

same idea expressed previously by the *rebe* of Białodrewna in the context of the First World War. The time of Arele's sermon is Rosh Hashanah, in the autumn of 1939, and the context, in which this sermon is given, is the beginning of the Second World War, the bombing of Warsaw and the still greater evils in store for all the Jews, who had not been able to flee Poland in time. The extent of these evils is only known to the readers, not to the characters of Bashevis's *ד' פאמיליע מושקאט*, although the lurking danger is felt by them as well. In such a context the question of the root of such evil is predominant. The answer to this question, given by some of Bashevis's characters and expressed with Lurianic terminology in the reflections of the Białodrewna *rebe* and in Arele's sermon, is perhaps the only credible answer perceivable for a believer in God.

However, in Arele's sermon in the autumn of 1939 no mention is made anymore of the possibility of *Tikun*.

5.5. Conclusion

Bashevis's second major novel, *ד' פאמיליע מושקאט*, is a family chronicle, in which the individual stories of members of the Mushkat, Banet and Berman families are seen against the panorama of Polish-Jewish history from the beginning of the twentieth century until the outbreak of the Second World War.

In this novel, whose emphasis is on destruction, decay and unfulfilled hopes of redemption, the dominant leitmotif is death. In the descriptions of various characters' dying hours mystical imagery of the higher spheres is employed abundantly, inspiring a longing in these characters to leave this world, which is seen as the world of the *Klipot*. More kabbalistic terminology is employed in connection with ideas about death and life after death, espoused by several characters. Most prominently there is the belief in *gilgul*, the transmigration of the soul, which is one of the major kabbalistic doctrines, as well as a

wide-spread folk belief.

In the novel various kabbalistic works are mentioned explicitly as being studied by certain characters, as being found among the books on their bookshelves or as being employed by them for magical or superstitious practices. The superstitious practices described testify to the popular belief in the inherent power of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and particularly of holy names.

On several occasions throughout the novel a mystical significance is attributed to script, and in particular to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In the experience of some of the characters in the novel, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet can be detected in the majesty of nature, which, according to the cosmogony of *Sefer Yezirah*, was created through them. Thus the Hebrew Bible and all the other Jewish religious works composed with these letters also have the power to sustain Jews in all the persecutions and calamities they encounter.

Apart from the ideas about creation found in *Sefer Yezirah*, the mystical images and kabbalistic terminology employed in the novel are mainly connected to Lurianic Kabbalah. Throughout the novel we find the image of “sparks” of light in contexts of darkness, both physically and metaphorically, which is highly allusive to the Lurianic concept of the “sparks of holiness”, which are also present in the world of the *Klipot*, the powers of evil. Other Lurianic allusions can be found in the images of falling “vessels” and divided faces employed in connection with some of the women characters in the novel. These are the same images employed in the description of Rekhele, the central female character in “ער שטן אין גאָר”⁷, who is at times associated with the *Shekhinah*. Since according to Lurianic Kabbalah, the “breaking of the vessels” caused the mystic exile of the *Shekhinah*, who is always understood as the female aspect of the Godhead, it is no coincidence that Bashevis uses this allusive imagery in connection with some of the female characters in

ד. פאמיליע מושיקאט.

Apart from imagery alluding to Lurianic ideas, there are a few paragraphs, in which the Lurianic concepts of *Zimzum*, the “breaking of the vessels” and *Tikun* are directly referred to, foremost among them one passage set in the context of the First World War and another in the context of the Second World War. Both of these passages present the reader with the question of Jewish suffering, the root of evil in the world and God’s intention in permitting this suffering and evil. The answer to this question, advanced by two of Bashevis’s characters in the novel is an interpretation of the Lurianic concepts of *Zimzum* and the “breaking of the vessels” as having occurred for the sake of free will. Bashevis’s character Arele endorses a teleological interpretation of *Zimzum*, which is advanced in the writings of Moshe Hayim Luzzatto. Bashevis’s Rabbi Dan endorses an explanation of the “breaking of the vessels”, which is closely connected to Luzzatto’s teleological interpretation of *Zimzum*.

These ideas on the root of evil may provide scant comfort in the context of the Second World War, in which the novel culminates, but then nothing else does either. The hope for *Tikun*, the cosmic restoration of the universe to a state of harmony it has not enjoyed since the “breaking of the vessels”, is expressed several times in the novel and is closely connected to the hope for messianic redemption. With the internal decay, decline and disintegration of Jewish life in Poland and the external destruction of the Second World War this hope becomes less and less likely to be fulfilled.

At the end the Yiddish readers of this novel are left with a choice between a nihilistic response to the catastrophe in seeing redemption only in death, and a return to the ideas and values of Judaism and of the Torah. In the last chapter of the Yiddish edition, Oyzer-Heshl, the main protagonist of the novel, finds the God he had lost in his pursuit of worldly pleasures, and discovers the validity of the words of the Torah. The resolution of

Oyzer-Heshl's inner conflicts will not prevent his physical destruction by the Nazis, but it will give him strength to carry on for a while. After all, the letters of the Torah, from which he draws his strength, are the same letters, with which the whole universe was created, and which keep on soaring on high, even when the parchment, on which they are written, is consumed by fire.

6. The Role of Jewish Mysticism in פון לובלין דער קונצנמאכער

6.1. Introduction: “א שטיק קבלה”

ס'זענען אפשר דא אַזוינע כוחות? ... ער אליין, יאַשא, האָט חלומות, אַנגען,

וואָס מ'קאָן אויף אַ ראַציאָנעלן שטייגער נישט אויפקלערן. טייל מאל דוכט זיך

אים, אַז אַפילו אין די קונצן זיינע שטעקט אַ שטיק קבלה...¹

Maybe there are such powers?... He himself, Yasha, has dreams,
premonitions, which cannot be explained in any rational way.

Sometimes it seems to him, as if even in his magical tricks there
was a little bit of Kabbalah.²

These lines are taken from one of the few paragraphs of the Yiddish original of Bashevis's *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, in which the Kabbalah is mentioned explicitly. This paragraph is, however, omitted in the English translation.

The Yiddish original was initially serialized in פֿאַרווערטס in 1959. The English translation by Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer was already published in 1960 under the title *The Magician of Lublin*. Thus it is Bashevis's first novel to omit the intermediary stage of publication in Yiddish book form. Translations into other languages were, as a rule, made from the English version, but a significant exception to this rule is the German translation of *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, published as *Der Zauberer von Lublin* in 1967. Otto F. Best consulted the Yiddish original and worked those paragraphs omitted in the English into the text of the German translation by Susanna Rademacher. The work was not published in Yiddish book form till 1971.

¹ יצחק באַשעוויס-זינגער, *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, 74. All page numbers within the text of this chapter refer to the Yiddish original, unless otherwise stated.

² This translation is my own. In the existing English translation by Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer this paragraph is omitted: I.B. Singer, *The Magician of Lublin*, London: Penguin, 1996 (first ed. New York: Noonday, 1960), 60. The translation will be quoted during the course of this chapter, wherever it does not significantly differ from the Yiddish.

More significant than the history of publication of this novel, however, is Bashevis's "change in authorial direction", turning from his focus on the Jewish people or a particular Jewish community, as in *דער שטן אין גאָר* and *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, to the fate of a very singular individual, who has to a large extent cut himself off from the Jewish community.³

In her article on *פון ליובלין דער קונצנמאכער* Cyrena N. Pondrom presents three separate "patterns of meaning" in the novel. The first is the "literal world" of the novel, describing an individual character's struggles as well as underlying recurrent human experiences.

Secondly, there is an examination of the uncertainties of ethical behaviour, and finally, beyond the concreteness of Bashevis's fictional world, metaphysical themes emerge.⁴

Although the literal world of the novel and some of its ethical questions will be dealt with, the main focus of this chapter will be on its metaphysical aspects, though the emphasis will differ from that in Pondrom's article. While Pondrom stresses the theme of "metaphysical skepticism" concerning the existence of God and the conception of reality, the emphasis of this chapter will be on the kabbalistic undercurrents of the novel, the themes of God's concealment and His revelation in creation as well as the first stages towards creation according to Lurianic Kabbalah.⁵

After presenting the storyline of *פון ליובלין דער קונצנמאכער*, the relationship between the magician and his hidden God will be explored, the recurrent theme of God's concealment corresponding to the concept of *Zimzum* in Lurianic Kabbalah, and the likewise recurrent theme of God's revelation in nature connected with the question of the relationship between pantheism, panentheism and the Kabbalah.

The above-quoted paragraph of the Yiddish original, which mentions the Kabbalah

³ Cf. L.S. Friedman, *Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 116; E. Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 60.

⁴ Cf. Cyrena N. Pondrom, 'Conjuring Reality: I.B.Singer's *The Magician of Lublin*', in: M. Allentuck (ed.), *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 93.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 109-111.

explicitly [74], occurs in connection with one of four synagogue-scenes which are of great importance in the novel as a whole and have to be analyzed separately. These synagogue-scenes are part of a carefully crafted design of vacillation between sacred and profane spaces within the overall pattern of the novel.⁶ In the context of these synagogue-scenes a mysterious atmosphere is often created, much light imagery is used, and some of the language seems to allude to mystical experiences and ideas.

Of special significance here is the recurrent image of “פּוּקֶקֶן” or “sparks” of light, which appear in one of the synagogue-scenes and elsewhere in several passages throughout the latter part of the novel, always in contexts of darkness, whether literal or metaphorical. Bashevis’s use of this image and its connection to the Lurianic concept of the “sparks of holiness” has to be considered carefully.

Finally, there is the question of the epilogue, not only as an ironic literal and imperfect ethical solution to the dilemmas of the novel, but also as a repository of metaphysical speculations and kabbalistic, mainly Lurianic, ideas. Most important in this context are Yasha’s reflections on good and evil, the concept of *Zimzum*, the “breaking of the vessels”, free will and possibilities of *Tikun*.

דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין is not as full of kabbalistic language and ideas as some of Bashevis’s other works, but beneath the carefully crafted literal world and ethical dilemmas of the novel, in all the “קונצן” (magical tricks) of Bashevis’s artistry, there is “אַ שטיק קבלה” (a little bit of Kabbalah), which will be elucidated in this chapter.

6.2. The Storyline of *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*

The action of the novel takes place in late nineteenth century Poland. The main character is the magician and tightrope-walker Yasha Mazur from Lublin who is described as

⁶ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 85.

“האַלב ייד, האַלב גוי, אַדער נישט קיין ייד און נישט קיין גוי” (“half Jew, half Gentile – neither Jew nor Gentile”) – [Yiddish: 9; English: 10]. Yasha spends little time in Lublin with his traditional wife Ester. The novel opens during one of Yasha’s periods of rest in Lublin, before he sets off again for another season of magic performances in a summer theatre in Warsaw [5-29].

On the way he picks up his assistant Magda from the vicinity of Piask. Magda, a Polish peasant girl, has been Yasha’s lover for eight years and lives with him in his apartment in Warsaw during the summer seasons [31-36]. In Piask itself Yasha is pursuing an affair with Zevtl (Zeftel), the deserted wife of a Jewish thief [44-54].

Meanwhile Yasha is debating with himself whether he can bring himself to divorce his wife and to convert to Christianity in order to marry Emilia, a Roman Catholic widow, with whom he believes himself deeply in love, although he also seems to feel some affection for her adolescent daughter Halina [65-68].

On his way to Warsaw with Magda, seeking shelter from a thunder-storm in a synagogue, Yasha is confronted with his Jewish heritage. On this occasion, though, his identification with the Jewish tradition is not yet particularly deep [69-72].

Soon after his arrival in Warsaw where he should have started rehearsing for his new series of performances in the summer theatre, Yasha postpones his rehearsals from day to day and instead spends his time in cafés, at Emilia’s house and at the theatre [98-111].

Meanwhile his Piask mistress Zevtl has arrived in Warsaw from the provinces and has found accommodation in the house of Reytse, the sister of Herman, a pimp from Buenos Aires [117-123]. Yasha spends a whole evening with Herman [128-141], but responding to Herman’s suggestion on how to make a fortune, Yasha insists that he is “אַ קונצנמאַכער, נישט אַ גנב” (a magician, not a thief) – [139].

He knows, however, that he would need a large amount of money, if he wanted to realize

his plans of marrying Emilia and of settling in Italy with her. That night he decides to commit a burglary at the house of an old miser, in order to finance his plans for the future. Yasha easily manages to break into the old man's apartment and to find the safe, but then he bungles his attempted crime hopelessly. In addition to this, he is unable to descend from the balcony of the apartment without injuring his foot in the process [142-154].

He seeks shelter from possible pursuers in a synagogue, where he is again confronted with his Jewish heritage and with a realization of the seriousness of his attempted crime [154-162]. But this time his identification with the traditional Jewish way of life deepens significantly, and he decides: "כ'מוז ווערן א ייד! [...] – א ייד ווי זיי אַלע!..." ("I must be a Jew! [...] A Jew like all the others!") – [Yiddish: 162; English: 127].

Of course, outside the context of the synagogue Yasha's good resolutions weaken again [163]. On returning to his apartment, Yasha has an argument with Magda and sets off again to see Emilia, to whom he confesses his attempted burglary [177-205]. Emilia casts him off immediately. Directly after that, another visit to a synagogue strengthens his conviction that he has to return to his tradition and to a disciplined Jewish life [206-210]. Two further events reinforce this conviction: Coming home from the synagogue, he finds Magda dead. She has committed suicide [212-216]. Soon after that Yasha discovers his Piask mistress Zevtl in bed with the pimp Herman at the house of Herman's sister [234]. Staring at the sleeping couple, he concludes that he has to become a different person: "ער האָט דערגרייכט פֿון וועג..." ("He had reached the end of the road.") – [Yiddish: 235; English: 181]. With these words the main part of the novel comes to an end.

In the epilogue, set in Lublin three years later, Yasha the magician has transformed into "ר' יעקעלע בעל-תשובה" (R. Yekele the Penitent – "Reb Jacob the Penitent") – [Yiddish: 239; English: 185]. He has had himself immured in a small structure in his courtyard, a building

without a door and with only a tiny window connecting him to the world outside. But his self-imprisonment only protects him from sinful actions, not from sinful thoughts [e.g. 243]. Nor does it protect him from intrusions of the outside world. Many people have begun to believe that he is a holy man and a miracle worker and visit him to request his blessing [245 f.].

The epilogue ends with a letter from Emilia, which Yasha receives in his penitential cell. In the letter Emilia acknowledges her own share of guilt and moral responsibility for the events which have led Yasha to his attempted crime [261]. With Emilia's best wishes and the acknowledgement of her friendship for him the novel comes to a close. ✓

6.3. The Magician and His Hidden God Between Concealment and Revelation

6.3.1. Parallels Between the Artist-Magician and the Creator-God

The magician's or artist's journey is a journey of "painful self-discovery". Yasha's search for his identity, for self-definition, is part of his search for a "larger source of meaning", affirming the self, but also transcending it. It is a search for God. In *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* the images of the magician and his frequently hidden God, are often interwoven, so much so, that the magician's "ontological search for self" reflects his "spiritual search for God", and vice versa.⁷

At one point in *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* the parallel between God and the magician is explicitly drawn [64 f.]. This important connection is made in the context of one of Yasha's contemplations of nature which he understands as Divine creation. In the wonders of nature Yasha detects the Creator-God. This particular passage is a key-passage for understanding Yasha's religiosity as well as for understanding the parallel, which Bashevis draws between the magician or artist and the Creator, who are both

⁷ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 82 f.

experienced by others in the two extremes of concealment, mystery and inscrutability, on the one hand, and revelation in creation or art, on the other, although, of course, on different levels.

This passage occurs in the context of Yasha's journey from Piask to Warsaw with Magda. Yasha enjoys being alone with Magda again and is admiring the beauties of nature around him, the golden fields and the scents of the earth, which make him feel drunk and fill his mind with a stillness that is not of this world. Experiencing this,

Yasha exclaims: "איי, רבונו של עולם, דו ביסט א קונצנמאכער, נישט איך! [...] אַרויסצוברענגען [...] די אַלע פלאַנצן, בלומען און פאַרבן פון אַ ביסל שוואַרצער ערד!..." ("Oh, God Almighty, you are the magician, not I! [...] To bring out plants, flowers and colors from a bit of black soil!") – [Yiddish: 65; English: 53].

Here we find a description of Yasha's religious experience of God's revelation in nature, God's creation, as well as the author's setting forth of an explicit connection between the Creator-God and the artist-magician within דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין, a connection which is a key to understanding many related passages within this literary creation.

In another passage Emilia's daughter Halina also compares Yasha, the artist, with God, albeit emphasizing their different levels and powers: "ער מיינט, אַז ווייל ער איז אַ גרויסער קינסטלער און מיר זענען פיצעמאַנקע מענטשעלעך, דאַרף ער זיך איבער אונדז גרויסן. גאָט איז נאָך

גרעסער פון אייך, אַנקל יאַשאַ. ער קאָן נאָך מאַכן גרעסערע קונצן..." ("He thinks that because he is a great artist and we are insignificant little people he can lord it over us. God is mightier than you, Uncle Yasha. He can perform even finer tricks.") – [Yiddish: 92; English: 73 f.].

The artist is on three occasions in the novel described as the unseen observer who sees, but is not seen. At the beginning of the novel there is a passage which deals with different people's attitudes to Yasha's art. Some people say that Yasha practices "כישוף"

(magic) and that he owns a cap, “וואָס ווען מ'טוט עס אָן, ווערט מען אַן אומגעזעענער” (which makes one invisible, if one puts it on) – [7]. Others say that his art is nothing, but a “פאַרבלענדעניש” (illusion) – [7]. Here the understanding of art vacillates between magic and illusion, which gives it a dubious quality.

The idea of the artist as someone who sees, but is not seen, also occurs in another passage, where Yasha is sitting quietly in Emilia's apartment, “אַ שטייגער ווי עמעץ פאַר וועמען ער באַהאַלט זיך אויס, וואָלט אים געקומען זוכן און ער טאָר נישט געבן קיין צייכן, אַז ער איז דאָ. [...] ער איז געבליבן אַ סאָרט רואה-וואינו-גראה.” (“as if he were in hiding and afraid to reveal his presence to someone who sought him. [...] He had become like one who sees but is himself invisible.”) – [Yiddish: 89; English: 71].

The same expression is also used in connection with Yasha's waiting at the barber's in a state of despair before a visit to Emilia. When the barber does not take any notice of him, Yasha wonders: “אפשר בין איך אַ רואה-וואינו-גראה?” (“Maybe I'm one who sees but isn't seen!”) – [Yiddish: 182; English: 142].

Here we find another explicit connection between the artist-magician and God. The expression “רואה-וואינו-גראה” (one who sees, but is not seen) is derived from the Talmud, where it is used to describe God.⁸

God's invisibility is also stressed in another passage in the novel. When Yasha stands at the open door of a synagogue in Lublin, he sees a whole congregation of Jews who are talking to “אַ גאָט וואָס קיינער זעט אים נישט” (“a God no one saw”) – [Yiddish: 18; English: 17]. In this passage it is also stated that Yasha has already many times envied the faith of these traditional Jews. This synagogue-scene is contrasted with the preceding scene, which takes place in Beyle's Tavern (Bella's Tavern in the English). When his friend

⁸ b Berakhot 10 a. In this passage God is compared to the soul. One of the points of resemblance stated here, is: Just as the Holy One Blessed be He is a “רואה-וואינו-גראה” (sees, but is not seen), so the “נשמה” (soul) is a “רואה-וואינו-גראה” (sees, but is not seen).

Shmuel Muzikant doubts the magician's artistry, Yasha reflects with sadness on people who see, but do not believe their own eyes [16 f.].

In these two adjacent scenes both the parallel and the contrast between the artist and God is made explicit: People see the artistry of the artist, but they do not believe their eyes. In contrast to this, nobody can see God, but these traditional Jews, whom Yasha observes in the synagogue, believe in Him and call Him "דערבאַרעמדיקער" (Merciful One), despite the calamities and pogroms they have experienced.

Yasha's beliefs are very different from those of traditional Jews. If someone tries to teach him ethics or morals, he says: "ביסט געווען אין הימל און געזען גאט?" (Have you been to Heaven and seen God?) – [6]. But although in the context of the tavern Yasha likes to play the "אַפיקורס" (heretic), in his own heart he believes in God and finds His hand everywhere in nature: "מ'האט באַשיימפערלעך געזען גאטס האַנט אומעטום: אין יעדער פרוכט, בליט, שטיינדל, זעמדל, " (God's hand was evident everywhere, in each fruit, blossom, pebble and grain of sand) – [8].

According to Yasha's own personal faith, God as the Creator is manifest and detectable in His creation, but He has not revealed His will to any person on earth: "ער האָט זיך געהאַט אויסגעאַרבעט אַן אייגענע אמונה: גאט איז דאָ, אָבער ער האָט זיך צו קיינעם נישט אַנטפלעקט. ("He had worked out his own religion. There was a Creator, but He revealed Himself to no one, gave no indication of what was permitted or forbidden.") – [Yiddish: 9; English: 10].

This God, who has not revealed His will to anybody, is a concealed, hidden God. This understanding of God is closely connected to the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*, the concealment or withdrawal of *'Ein-Sof* into Himself, in order to create a space, which is not *'Ein-Sof*, "for the creative processes to come into play".⁹

⁹ Cf. G.Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 129.

Just as God remains hidden and concealed, so on the human level the secretive magician cannot really be understood, not even by his own wife: אסתר האָט אים יעדעס מאָל פונסניי:

אַ בליק געטאָן אין די אויגן, ווי צו דערקענען זיינע הינטערוועגלעך, אָבער זיין פנים איז געבליבן

“פאַרשלאָסן” (Ester looked into his eyes every time anew, as if she wanted to understand his artifices, but his face remained inscrutable.) – [11].¹⁰

In the same way in which in Bashevis's works God's face is forever hidden from human beings, here the magician's face remains inscrutable.¹¹ Like the Creator-God, whom nobody sees and who has hidden His face, so also the artist-magician, Yasha Mazur, has hidden powers. Even Ester has given up trying to understand him: “ער האָט געהאַט

פאַרבאָרגענע כוחות. ער האָט געהאַט מער סודות וויפל אַ מילגרוים - וואָס מ'מאַכט איבער איר אַ

“He possessed hidden powers, he had more secrets than the blessed Rosh Hashonah pomegranate has seeds.”) – [Yiddish: 13;

English: 12 f.].¹²

This pomegranate, which is explicitly linked here to Rosh Hashanah, is the first of many references throughout the book to the Days of Awe, the time of reflection, of self-examination and of “תשובה” (repentance or return) which is a major theme of the novel.

To his wife Ester the magician is oddly close and oddly strange at the same time. She never grows tired of watching his every movement and catching his every word. Even when Yasha seemingly speaks foolishly “ווי אַ דרקדי-קינד” (like a very young child), his words always turn out to be meaningful [11 f.]. As mentioned above, this artistry of the

¹⁰ The translation does not mention Yasha's inscrutable face. It states only that “his impassivity always defeated her” [English: 11].

¹¹ Cf. for example: דער קמעכט, 12, 42 f., 54, 60.

¹² The reference to the pomegranate, over which one says “שהחיינו” on Rosh Hashanah, is rather unusual. On the first night one usually says the *Kidush*, then “שהחיינו”, then the blessing over fruit for a piece of apple dipped in honey. On the second night there is no need to say “שהחיינו”. But one may nevertheless say it over a fruit which one eats for the first time that season, and this fruit could be a pomegranate. – Cf. also: Philip Goodman (ed.), *The Rosh Hashanah Anthology*, Philadelphia / Jerusalem: JPS, 1992, 188: “Pious Jews, therefore, deny themselves one certain fruit all summer long, in order to be able to make the special blessing over it at the Rosh Hashanah table on the second evening.”

magician can be understood as an allusion to the artistry of the author, whose every word is meaningful.¹³

6.3.2. Bashevis's Descriptions of Nature – Mystical Nocturnal Landscapes

The hidden and concealed God, who has withdrawn into Himself in the act of *Zimzum*, remains invisible and inscrutable, as stated above. All Kabbalists agree, however, that it is possible to derive a belief in the existence of *'Ein-Sof* as the “first infinite cause” from the “actual existence of creation itself”.¹⁴ This is also the only way, in which the magician Yasha experiences the Divine.

In his descriptions of the visible creation in *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* Bashevis often employs a mixture of mysticism and realism. In one such description of nature Bashevis presents Yasha's view of the sky being lower than usual and densely sown with stars. He continues: “אזוי ווי יאשא איז אריין אין הויף, האט א שטערן זיך ערגעץ אפגעריסן אין די הויכענישן, געטאן א פאל און א ווייל איבערגעלאזט נאך זיך א פייערדיקן צייכן.” (As Yasha entered the courtyard, a star somewhere on high detached itself, fell and left a fiery sign behind for a while.) – [21 f.]. In this scene the majesty of the sky is described, pointing to the majesty of God's creation. This is also one of many occasions where light imagery is used to create a mysterious atmosphere. In this case this is achieved with the help of the image of the fiery sign left behind by the falling star.

Even more mystical is Bashevis's description of Yasha's perception of his horses, standing in the darkness: “די פערד זענען געשטאנען נאכטיש גרויסע, איינגעהילט אין טונקלקייט, סודות. אין די גרויסע אויגן פול מיט שווארצאפלען האבן זיך אפגעשלאגן פיצלעך גאלד אדער פייער.” (The big nocturnal horses stood, enwrapped in darkness, in secrets. In their big, pupil-

¹³ See: Section 3.3, 75 f.

¹⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88 f.

filled eyes particles of gold or fire appeared.) – [22]. This reminds Yasha of something his father has told him: “אז חיות זעען שדים...” (that animals see demons).

Here the telepathic, psychic powers of animals are emphasized. In the Yiddish this description of the telepathic powers of God’s creatures continues for two more

sentences: “ער אליין, יאשא, האט געהאט סימנים, אז גאטס באשעפענישן טרעפן געדאנקען, ווייסן די

לוינעס פון מענטשן, זעען פארויס אלערליי קאטאסטראפס און טויט-פאלן. ער, יאשא, האט זיי אפילו

“געדענט היפנאטיזירן.” (He himself, Yasha, had signs that God’s creatures could read

human thoughts, knew the moods of people, could foresee all kinds of catastrophes and deaths. He, Yasha, could even hypnotize them.) – [22].¹⁵

The implication of this is that it is human reason which blinds people to truths which animals apprehend instinctively. This kind of anti-rationalism, which is also a criticism against the Maskilic belief in human reason, can be found at different places throughout Bashevis’s works.¹⁶

There is a parallel here to Yasha’s perception of his animals after his attempted burglary:

“יאשאן האט זיך אויסגעוויזן ווי דער פאפוגיי וואלט געמיינט צו זאגן: דו טוסט אן עוולה דיר, נישט מיר.”

(It seemed to Yasha, as if the parrot wanted to say: You are inflicting grievance upon yourself, not me.) And: “ס’האט זיך געדוכט יאשאן ווי דאס מאלפעלע פרעגט: ווייסטו נאך אלץ נישט

“...? (It seemed to Yasha, as if the little monkey asked: Do you still not know that all is vanity?...)) – [169].

Another mystical nocturnal landscape is described in connection with Yasha’s journey from Lublin to Magda’s home near Piask. Yasha seemingly hears the sucking of the roots in the earth and other nocturnal sounds. The description continues:

“צו מאל איז אַ שאַטן פאַרבלייגעלאָפן איבערן פעלד ווי געוואָרפן פון אַ פויגל אן אומגעהויער. צו מאַל

¹⁵ These two sentences are omitted in the translation [English: 19].

¹⁶ Cf. for example: *מעשיות פון דינשערן אויוון*, 18 f.; *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, 8-13.

האט זיך געהערט אַ הוילער ברום, נישט פון אַ מענטש און נישט פון אַ חיה, נאָר פון אַ געשפענסטיקן ריז, וואָס הויערט ערגעץ אין חלל. (Sometimes a shadow passed through the field, as if cast by a monstrous bird. Sometimes a hollow droning became audible, which was not of a human being and not of an animal, but of a ghostly giant, who hovered somewhere in the void.) – [30].

Shadows and dark forces are experienced here by the magician. The word “חלל” means “void” or “empty space”. Bashevis’s use of this term at exactly this point in connection with dark, mysterious forces could possibly be an allusion to the Lurianic concept of the “חלל פנוי”, the “empty space” which was created in the process of *Zimzum*. The “חלל פנוי” is a place which is devoid of God and thus makes the existence of evil possible.

One further description of a mystical, nocturnal landscape may be mentioned, which occurs during a thunderstorm on Yasha’s way to Warsaw with Magda, which leads the two of them to seek shelter in a nearby synagogue. The light imagery employed here will be discussed in connection with the second synagogue scene.¹⁷

6.3.3. God in Nature - The Content of the Magician’s Faith - Some Reflections on Pantheism, Panentheism and the Kabbalah

In the context of Bashevis’s descriptions of nature and of Yasha Mazur’s religious experiences in connection with the beauties of nature, it is also important to note that, whereas Yasha’s outward course of action changes at the end of the novel, the content of his personal faith does not change throughout the whole of the novel.¹⁸

Just as in the first pages of *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* we are told that in his heart Yasha

¹⁷ See: Section 6.4.2.

¹⁸ Cf. C.N. Pondrom, ‘Conjuring Reality’, in: M.Allentuck (ed.), *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 95.

believed in God and saw God's hand evident everywhere around him in nature [8], so also in the epilogue, when the outwardly transformed R. Yekele the Penitent watches the snowflakes on the window sill of his penitential cell, he contemplates that all of this is formed by a hidden hand which is everywhere: אין דער ערד און אין וואַלקן, אין גאָלד און אין מיסט, אין ווייטסטן שטערן און אין האַרץ פון מענטש. ווי קען מען רופן די דאָזיקע מאַכט אויב נישט גאָט? [...] ("in the earth and in the clouds, in gold and in carrion, in the most distant star and in the heart of man. What can one call this force, if not God? [...] And what difference does it make if it's called nature?") – [Yiddish: 256; English: 197]. And shortly afterwards it says: "ער, יאַשאַ, האָט געזוכט אַ צייכן, אָבער גאָט האָט געגעבן זיינע צייכנס יעדע מינוט, יעדע רגע, אין אים, יאַשאַן, אויסער אים." ("He had sought a sign, yet every minute, every second, within him and outside, God signaled His presence.") – [Yiddish: 256; English: 197].

According to this passage, it does not make any difference to Yasha, whether he calls the force behind every snowflake, every cloud, the most distant star or the human heart "God" or "nature". Every moment Yasha can find signs of God's presence, both within himself and in the world around him. Thus at first and at last the content of Yasha's faith is a view of God who is manifest in nature, but has not revealed His will to any prophets. Yasha's theological conceptions in the main part of the novel and in the epilogue are identical in their "stress on the manifestation of God in nature".¹⁹

In her article on *דער קונצנמאָכער פון לובלין* Cyrena N. Pondrom calls Yasha's view of a God who reveals Himself in nature, but not directly to prophets, a "somewhat pantheistic view".²⁰ According to pantheistic theory, "God is the name given to the universe as a whole".²¹ God is "only immanent in the universe and not transcendent" at

¹⁹ Ibid., 95 f.

²⁰ Ibid., 95.

²¹ Cf. Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 373.

all. In pantheism God is “identified with the totality of things”, so much so, that “He is the universe and the universe is He”.²²

Strictly speaking, one cannot call Yasha’s view “pantheistic”, because he only speaks of God’s hand being visible everywhere in nature [8], but not of God being identical with everything in nature. Yasha distinguishes between creation and the Creator, whom he calls “קיוצנמאכער” (magician), and he marvels at this Creator’s power to bring forth all these plants, flowers and colours from a bit of black soil [65]. Even the passage in the epilogue, where Yasha asks himself, what one can call this force, if not “God”, and in what way it would be different, if one called it “nature”, only speaks of God’s hand being visible in everything. It does not speak of God Himself being identical with everything in nature.

In her letter in the epilogue of the novel Emilia calls Yasha’s religious faith “דעיזם” (deism), a faith in God, but without any dogmas or revelations [259]. Deism is “the doctrine that God is entirely beyond the universe”, entirely transcendent, which leaves no room for any “interaction between the divine and the universe” or any “possibility of divine intervention in the affairs of the universe”. Thus deism “rules out divine providence and revelation”.²³

The description of Yasha’s own personal faith, that God is there, but has not revealed Himself to anybody and has told nobody what one may or may not do [9], seems to support Emilia’s characterization. One cannot say, however, that Yasha believes in a God who is entirely beyond the universe, who is entirely transcendent, because, as stated above, Yasha sees God’s hand everywhere around him in nature, and every moment he finds signs of God’s presence, both within himself and in the outside world [256]. Thus

²² Cf. Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973, 56.

²³ Ibid., 56.

Yasha believes in a God who is both transcendent, beyond the universe and totally distinct from it, and immanent, manifest in His creation. This is why neither the term “pantheism”, nor the term “deism” can really be applied to Yasha’s religious views.

A term which could be used in connection with Yasha’s faith, is “panentheism”.

Panentheism means literally: “All is in God”. It is the doctrine that “all creation is embraced by God. In panentheism the “Being of God is both transcendent and immanent in relation to the universe”, so that “while it is inconceivable for there to be a universe without a God it is not inconceivable for God to exist without the universe”.²⁴ The panentheistic doctrine is “Jewishly unconventional”, but traces of it can be found in some Jewish sources, especially in the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic writings.²⁵

According to Moshe Idel, one can summarize the “stand of theosophical Kabbalah” as a “*visio rerum omnium in Deo*”, that is kabbalistic theosophy “enabled Jewish mystics to envision all things in God”.²⁶ The infinite *’Ein-Sof* “comprehends much more than what proceeds from Him in the emanative and creative processes”, but He “encompasses the latter within Himself as well”. “All is comprehended within the Godhead but not everything is identical with it.”²⁷

According to Scholem, the term “panentheism” could be applied to such a view. This term could also be applied to a number of well-known Kabbalists who were able to argue “that a similar position was already implied in the statement in the Midrash” that “The Holy One blessed be He is the place of the world but the world is not His place”.²⁸

In the later strata of the *Zohar*, the *Ra’aya Meheimna* and the *Tikunei Zohar*, it is stressed that, if God “stands apart from the world”, He is also “within it”: “He is outside

²⁴ Cf. L. Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*, 373.

²⁵ Ibid., 372.

²⁶ Cf. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1988, 153 f.

²⁷ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 147.

²⁸ Bereshit Rabah 68. Cf. also: G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 147 f.

as much as He is inside". God "fills and causes all", "without this immanence precluding a personalistic and theistic view" of God.²⁹

Panentheistic, kabbalistic statements, like God "stands apart from the world", but "He is also within it", and "He is outside as much as He is inside", could also be applied to the content of Yasha Mazur's faith. On the one hand, Yasha believes in a Creator-God who is totally distinct from His creation. It is He who brings forth all plants, flowers and colours from a bit of black soil [65]. But He Himself remains invisible, inscrutable, completely transcendent, as it is expressed at the beginning of the novel, when Yasha wonders about the traditional Jews who speak to a God, whom nobody sees, but whom they call merciful, despite the calamities they have experienced [18 f.].

On the other hand, Yasha experiences God in his contemplations of nature and finds signs of God's presence every moment, both within himself and everywhere around him [256]. That means, Yasha believes in a God who is both transcendent and immanent.

Even when Yasha is transformed into R. Yekele the Penitent, his theological conceptions remain identical in their emphasis on the manifestation of an otherwise invisible and unknowable God in nature.

This is because only through the contemplation of nature, God's visible creation, is it possible for the secretive, inscrutable magician Yasha Mazur to gain any religious knowledge or experience of his hidden, inscrutable, concealed God in His relationship to His creation, in which He has manifested Himself.

6.4. The Sacred and the Profane in the Design of the Novel and Redemptive "Sparks" in Contexts of Darkness

While the content of Yasha Mazur's faith in God remains the same throughout the novel,

²⁹ Ibid., 148.

his relationship to Jewish tradition and his approach to a disciplined religious life gradually changes. At the beginning of the novel we meet a magician who has to a large extent cut himself off from the Jewish community. In the course of the novel there are four occasions, on which Yasha comes into contact with traditional Jewish religion, four synagogue-scenes, and each of Yasha's encounters with traditional Judaism in the context of the synagogue "deepens his identification with a way of life he had ostensibly abandoned".³⁰ These four synagogue-scenes are part of a carefully crafted design of vacillation between "sacred and profane spaces" in the overall pattern of the novel.³¹

6.4.1. The First Synagogue-Scene

On the first of these occasions Yasha moves from a tavern to the threshold of a synagogue. The first of the novel's public spaces is Beyle's Tavern in Lublin, where Yasha sits with Shmuel Muzikant, debating the authenticity of his magic. Unable to make himself understood to Shmuel or to shatter his companion's doubts, Yasha is left musing: "יעדער מענטש האט זיינע סודות" ("Each person has his secrets") – [Yiddish: 17; English: 16]. With this he is revealing secretiveness to be a "form of exile", a "withholding or hiding of oneself in a relationship" – the "human counterpart of God's withdrawal, His hiding of His face".³²

Leaving the tavern and walking through the dark streets of Lublin, Yasha pauses for a while at the open door of a synagogue. At this stage in his life Yasha only glances into the synagogue from outside. He observes traditional Jewish life only from outside and is not yet able to enter and to participate in this way of life. What he sees inside the

³⁰ Cf. L.S. Friedman, *Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 123.

³¹ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 85.

³² *Ibid.*, 85.

synagogue, is a congregation of Jews in traditional garments in the process of praying “מעריב” (the evening prayer). They say the “שטילע שמונה עשרה” (silent *‘Amidah*), and some beat their hearts for “חטאנו” (“We have sinned”) and “פשענו” (“We have transgressed”) – [18]. Yasha is amazed at those traditional Jews and envious of their faith [18 f.].

Yasha also notices the candle illumination from one single memorial candle in the “ששה נרות” (candelabra with six candles), which gives the synagogue some light, but also fills it with shadows [18]. This is contrasted with the darkness outside the synagogue, where the street lamps are just being lit. The gas lighting is a sign of urban modernization and also a possible hint at the Enlightenment or *Haskalah*. But through the lighting of the gas lamps it does not become any brighter: “ס'האט זיך געדוכט, אַז די פלעמלעך האָבן קוים גענוג שיין צו באַלויכטן זיך אליין.” (It seemed, as if the flames scarcely had enough light to illumine their own darkness) – [19].

6.4.2. The Second Synagogue-Scene

Another of those “profane spaces” like Beyle’s Tavern is described directly before the second synagogue-scene, when Yasha sits among the society of thieves in Piask, opening a complicated lock for their amusement. Admired by these thieves for his artistry, Yasha is offered an opportunity to join their community, but he refuses, with the words: “איך האָלט פון לאַ תגנוב...” (I respect the [commandment of] Thou shalt not steal...) – [63 f.].

On the way from Piask to Warsaw with Magda, the two of them to seek shelter from a thunderstorm in the novel’s “second sacred space”.³³ In connection with the

³³ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 88.

thunderstorm another mystical nocturnal landscape is described: אין מיטן דער נאכט איז פלוצלונג געווארן ווארעם א שטייגער ווי א נאכטישע זון וואלט גענומען ערגעץ היצן. די לבנה איז געווען פארדעקט. (“In the middle of the night it suddenly grew warm as if a nocturnal sun had begun to shine. The moon was overcast.”) – [Yiddish: 69; English: 56]. In fact, the darkness conveyed by the “lessening of the moon” was interpreted by the Kabbalists as a “symbol of the *Shekhinah*’s exile”. The *Shekhinah* itself is the “holy moon” which has “fallen from its high rank, been robbed of its light and sent into cosmic exile.”³⁴

On entering the synagogue, Yasha sees an old Jew with ashes on his head and only realizes much later that he is praying “חצוֹת”, the midnight prayer, lamenting the destruction of the Temple, the exile of the Jewish people and the exile of the *Shekhinah*.

In the light of the memorial candle Yasha tries to read the writing on the two tablets at the ark: “אנוכי ה'... לא יהיה לך... כבוד... לא תגנוב, לא תנאף, לא תרצח, לא תחמוד...” (I am the Eternal... Thou shalt have no... Honour... Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not murder. Thou shalt not covet...) – [71]. These are the beginnings of only seven out of the Ten Commandments [Ex 20, 1-14]. It is also interesting to note that Bashevis has reversed the sequence of three of the commandments. It should have said: “לא תרצח, לא תנאף, לא תגנוב” (“Thou shalt not murder. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal.”). With this change the commandment of “לא תגנוב” (Thou shalt not steal), which Yasha has just quoted to the thieves in Piask and which he will soon attempt to break, has moved into a very prominent position, even before the commandments concerning murder and adultery.³⁵

³⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 151.

³⁵ In the English the sequence of these three commandments is changed, but it is still not the usual one: “Thou shalt not commit adultery... Thou shalt not kill... Thou shalt not steal...” [English: 58]. – In the German translation, which sometimes changes irregularities in the English, the sequence of the English version is chosen [German: 51].

Directly after that the light imagery continues: דאָ איז געווען פינצטער און דאָ איז מיט אַ מאָל
 “Now it was dark and
 all of a sudden the prayer-house was suffused with a purple glow as if from a heavenly
 lamp.”) – [Yiddish: 71; English: 58].³⁶ Through this light imagery a mysterious, mystical
 atmosphere is created in this synagogue-scene.

When more Jews arrive for the morning prayers, Yasha watches their activities, as if
 seeing them for the first time, but at the same time he realizes that he himself belongs to
 this community. One of the men prays: מה כוחנו, מה גבורתנו... הלא כל הגבורים כאין נגדך
 ואנשי השם כלא היו וחכמים כבלי מדע ובונים כבלי השכל כי רוב מעשיהם תוהו וימי חייהם הבל
 “What is our strength? What is our might?... Are not the mighty men as
 nothing before You, the men of reknown as though they never existed, the wise as if
 devoid of knowledge, the intelligent as if without discernment? For most of their works
 are vain, and the days of their life are vanity in Your sight”) – [71 f.].³⁷

Here we find another reference to the motif of the “הבל”, the vanity of all worldly
 wisdom and power. While saying these words, the old man looks at Yasha, as if he
 knew exactly how well these words accord with the vanity of the magician’s life.

Breathing in the smells of the synagogue, Yasha feels reminded of the “נעילה”, the final
 service on Yom Kippur, which is another of the novel’s many references to the Days of
 Awe.³⁸ The *Neilah*-Service is the time of the “closing of the gates”, the last chance on
 Yom Kippur to repent, before one’s fate is sealed for the next year. But Yasha is not

³⁶ The last of these two sentences is left out both in the English [58], and in the German [51].

³⁷ The translation of this prayer is quoted according to *The Authorised Daily Prayerbook of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth*, Centenary Edition, London, 1992 (first ed. 1890), 20.
 In the English translation of Bashevis’s novel there are some additional words of this prayer, which are not
 quoted in the Yiddish, while other words are omitted [English: 58]. The German translation has the most
 complete version of this prayer [German: 52].

³⁸ In the English the significant reference to the *Neilah*-Service is omitted. Instead it is just said: “as during
 the Days of Atonement” [English: 58]. – The reference to *Neilah* is reinserted in the German translation:
 “wie beim Schlußgebet zu Jom Kippur” [German: 52].

ready yet to repent. He rejects the offer of a *talis* and *tfilin*, brought to him for prayer, and leaves the synagogue.

On leaving the synagogue, Yasha picks up a book from a barrel with torn books and manuscripts containing Divine names, stored there for burial. Soon he starts wondering, whether this book is a kabbalistic text: "אפשר איז דאס אַ מאָל וועגן קבלה? - איז אים

איינגעפאלן. - ער האָט אָפּט געהערט רעדן דערוועגן. ער האָט פון קינדווייז אָן געהאַט אַ גייגיר צו דער

דאָזיקער מיסטעריעזער לערע. אַפילו עמיליאַ האָט אים געפרעגט צי ער ווייסט עפעס וועגן דער

"קאַבאַלאַ" (Maybe "קאַבאַלאַ". ער האָט איר געהאַט צוגעזאָגט, אַז אין איטאַליע וועט ער דאָס שטודירן מיט איר...)

this is about Kabbalah? – it occurred to him. – He has often heard people talk about this.

From his childhood he had been curious about this mysterious teaching. Even Emilia had asked him, whether he knew anything about the "Kabbalah". He had promised her that in Italy he would study it with her.) – [72].³⁹

This is the first of the novel's few direct references to the Kabbalah. Soon after, while Yasha is posing as a Gentile Pole at a nearby inn, he has the strange desire to look at the torn book immediately and speculates again, if this could be a kabbalistic text, which he could possibly use for his magic performances: "ווער ווייסט? אפשר שטייט דאָרט ווי אַזוי צו

צאָפן וויין פון דער וואַנט און צו באַשאַפן לעבעדיקע טויכן? דער טאַטע האָט אים אַ מאָל געהאַט דערציילט

" (Who knows? Maybe it is written there, how to tap wine from the wall and

to create living doves? His father had once told him about this.) – [74].⁴⁰

This is the second of the novel's direct references to the Kabbalah, which in this paragraph is linked with magic. At this stage Yasha's encounters with his Jewish

heritage do not have any deep effect on him yet, if he is only interested, whether the

³⁹ In the English this whole paragraph is omitted [58 f.]. – Otto Best has reinserted the missing paragraph into the German translation [52].

⁴⁰ Again, very interestingly, this whole paragraph is omitted in the English [60]. – Otto Best has again reinserted the missing paragraph into the German translation [53]. – The remainder of this paragraph is quoted at the beginning of this chapter. See: Section 6.1, 199.

kabbalistic insights he hopes to find, can help him with his magic performances. He wonders about such magic powers and about his own dreams and premonitions, which cannot be explained in any rational way. It sometimes seems to him that even in his own magic and his own power of love there is a bit of Kabbalah [74].

The kind of Kabbalah which is referred to here, belongs to the realm of “קבלה מעשית” or “practical Kabbalah”, which is mostly identified with the so-called “white” magic, “as practiced through the medium of the sacred, esoteric names of God and the angels, the manipulation of which may affect the physical no less than the spiritual world”.⁴¹

Bashevis’s references to practical Kabbalah and particularly to these specific magical experiments have been discussed previously.⁴²

6.4.3. Two Instances of “Sparks” in Contexts of Darkness

There is another occasion of a “public space”, comparable to Beyle’s Tavern and the den of thieves in Piask, before, albeit at some distance to the third synagogue-scene.

This public space is a café in Warsaw, where Yasha sits reflecting on his situation.⁴³

Together with his ambition and passion Yasha has a feeling of sadness, of “הבל-הבלים” (vanity of vanities) and of a guilt which he can neither redeem nor forget [102].

This is another reference to the motif of the “הבל הבלים”, the vanity of all worldly pursuits.⁴⁴

When the waiter asks him, what he wishes, Yasha answers: “צאָלן” (to pay), sensing that this answer sounds ambiguous, as if he had meant to say, he wanted to pay for his deceitful life [102].

⁴¹ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 182.

⁴² See: Section 3.2, 66-70.

⁴³ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 89.

⁴⁴ Cf. Kohelet 1, 2.

Directly after the scene in the café “Yasha’s sexual deceit is magnified and put on stage”, when he is at a theatre with Emilia, watching a French comedy about a “licentious tutor” who is carrying on affairs with the wife and the daughter of a friend.⁴⁵ During the play Yasha reflects on the meaning of life again. He remembers nights, when long-forgotten prayers and verses came into his mind, such as this melody from the Days of Awe: “...?מחכה?יום ויום למות יזכה, בכל יום” (“To what can man aspire / When death will quench his fire?...”) – [Yiddish: 106; English: 84].⁴⁶

This is another reference to the Days of Awe and another reminder of one of the novel’s key-themes, the vanity of human existence. In this context Yasha has a thought of “תשובה” (repentance), and he feels that the “יצר-הרע” (evil inclination) and the “יצר-טוב” (good inclination) are wrangling within him [106 f.].

On Yasha’s way home from the theatre with Emilia another nocturnal landscape is described. When they arrive at the Saxon Gardens, it is full of nocturnal secrets, and small flames are flaring in its depth [108]. Smelling Emilia’s rose, a thought occurs to Yasha: If a bit of earth and water can bring forth such a scent, creation cannot be that bad [109]. At this point there is a kind of erotic electricity between Yasha and Emilia. Back at Emilia’s house, Yasha falls prey to his temptations concerning her. He leads her to the sofa and tries to undress her, but her silk dress starts to snap and shoot off “פונקען” (sparks), which startle him [111].

This is the first of several references to “פונקען” or “sparks” in the novel, which tend to appear as glimpses of redemptive good in contexts of darkness, both physically

⁴⁵ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 89.

⁴⁶ The German version does not provide a translation of the Hebrew line quoted in the Yiddish at all. Instead it gives a different translation of the paragraph from the morning service (also in the *Neilah*-Service on Yom Kippur), which was already quoted in the second synagogue scene [Yiddish: 71 f.; German: 52]. The passage in the German reads: “Jetzt fiel ihm eine Stelle aus dem Neilagebet für den Versöhnungstag ein: Was sind wir, was unser Leben... / was unser Heil, was unsere Kraft? / Fürwahr, alle Helden sind wie nichts vor Dir, / Denn alles ist eitel.” [77].

and symbolically, as mentioned above. Through the sudden appearance of these redemptive “sparks”, Yasha’s attempt of seduction is brought to a halt and he has to leave.⁴⁷

The next appearance of “sparks” occurs shortly after this, on Yasha’s way to Herman’s sister with Zevtl who has just arrived in Warsaw from the provinces. The passage is introduced with a discription that is replete with light-imagery. The contrast between the darkness on Freta, where Yasha lives, and the light on Franciszkánska is emphasized [124]. The “sparks” appear in the midst of a description of Franciszkánska in the evening, the open stores, workshops, people winding thread, glueing paper bags, knitting underwear, sounds of sawing and hammering. There are also bakeries, and their chimneys “האָבן געשפיגן מיט רויך און מיט פונקען” (were spitting out smoke and sparks) – [125].⁴⁸ From the gutters a familiar smell is rising, like in Piask or Lublin. Young men in long gabardines and with tousled sidelocks are carrying volumes of the Talmud. There is a *yeshivah* and there are ḥasidic houses of study. What is described here, is a context of Jewish life, familiar pictures and smells, on a street that is characterized as “ליכטיק” (full of light), contrasted with the darkness on Freta, where Yasha lives, which is mainly a non-Jewish street.⁴⁹

It is in this context of light and darkness, of Yasha’s non-Jewish place of residence and his encounter with a familiar Jewish street, that the “sparks” appear, alluding to the “sparks of holiness”, as a possible reminder to Yasha, where he comes from, and how “ליכטיק” (full of light) a fulfilled Jewish life can be.

When Yasha leaves the Franciszkánska, it becomes dark again, and on Gęsia Yasha

⁴⁷ For a discussion of this passage, see also: Section 3.4.2, 93.

⁴⁸ The English reads: “the chimneys spewed out smoke and cinders.” [98]. But the Yiddish word translated as “cinders” is, in fact, the same “פונקען” (sparks) as in the previous case.

⁴⁹ See: דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין, 127, where Herman’s sister asks Yasha, why he has moved to the Freta, where only Gentiles live.

sees an eerie “פאַרשפּעטיקטע לוויה” (late funeral procession) passing by. The deceased is brought to his burial place in the dark. “אפשר געווען אַזאַ פאַרשוין ווי איך” (“Perhaps someone like myself”), Yasha thinks [Yiddish: 125 f.; English: 99].

6.4.4. The Third Synagogue-Scene and the Third Instance of “Sparks” in a Context of Darkness

Yasha falls prey to worse temptations than trying to seduce Emilia. He “chooses to profane his sacred gifts”, to give up his search for meaning, “to choose the vanity of worldly things – to steal”.⁵⁰

Failing in his attempt to steal and running away from possible pursuers, Yasha takes shelter in the “third of the novel’s sacred spaces”, a synagogue on Gnojna.⁵¹ When the worshippers arrive in the early morning twilight, their shadows seem to Yasha like shadows of the dead who are believed to come to the synagogue to pray at night. They seem to drone “מיט אַ נישט-דער-וועלטיק ברומעניש” (with a droning not of this world) – [155 f.].

In mediaeval Jewish literature there are countless anecdotes bearing testimony to the “belief in the continuance of some form of spirit life on earth”.⁵² There are accounts, according to which on some nights the dead “gather in the synagogue, where, clothed in ghostly prayer shawls, they conduct their own weird service”. The *Sefer Ḥasidim* contains scores of such accounts of nightly encounters with the spirits of the dead.⁵³

In this scene Yasha is again confronted with the Ten Commandments on the ark, one of which he has just attempted to break, and he remembers, how in the evening he had said

⁵⁰ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 90.

⁵¹ Ibid., 90.

⁵² Cf. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 61.

⁵³ Ibid., 62.

to Herman that he is a magician, not a thief [139].

Soon the worshippers begin saying the silent '*Amidah*' during their morning prayers, followed by the prayer-leader's repetition of the '*Amidah*'.⁵⁴ Here only parts of the first and second paragraph of the '*Amidah*' are quoted: גומל, יעקב, יצחק, אברהם, "אלוק' אברהם, יצחק, יעקב. גומל" חסדים טובים וקונה הכל... מכלקל חיים בחסד, מחיה מתים ברחמים רבים. סומך נופלים ורופא חולים "ומקיים אמונתו לישני עפר..." (God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, "who bestows lovingkindness, the Creator of all things" – "You sustain the living with lovingkindness, You revive the dead with great mercy. You support the falling, heal the sick" – "and keep faith with those that sleep in the dust.") – [157].⁵⁵

Yasha begins to wonder, whether God is really that good [157]. But in contrast to the previous synagogue-scene, this time Yasha accepts the *talis* and *tfilin* offered to him, although in his confusion he does not remember what to put on first and how. Alienated from himself, it seems to Yasha that even the tassels of his *talis* make fun of him: "א' ציצה האט אים אפילו געטאן עפעס ווי מוטוויליק א' שמיץ איבערן אויג." (One tassel even lashed him across the eye as if arbitrarily) – [158].

Struggling with his *talis* and *tfilin*, Yasha feels faint, and in this context the next "sparks" appear, this time directly in front of his eyes: זיך געוויגט (Fiery spots were swaying before his eyes.) – [158]. Yasha starts praying to God and tries to shake off his faintness, but the sparks continue to sway up and down before his eyes: זיך געהוידעט, זיך געהוידעט, זיך געהוידעט (The sparks were still) – [158].

⁵⁴ The Yiddish words "שטילע שמונה-עשרה" (silent '*Amidah*'), and "הויכע שמונה-עשרה" (the reader's repetition of the '*Amidah*') are translated in the English as "Eighteen Benedictions" and "high Eighteen Benedictions" [122]. Obviously, the English translator did not understand the meaning of the Yiddish. In the German the words are translated correctly [112].

⁵⁵ The translation of this prayer is quoted according to *The Authorised Daily Prayerbook*, 76. – In the English translation of Bashevis's novel some of the words omitted in the Yiddish are reinserted, but not all of them [English: 122 f.].

moving up and down, swaying as if on a swing. Some of them were white, others green or blue.) – [158].⁵⁶

These “פונקען” function again as redemptive “sparks” in an otherwise dark or evil context. Yasha has just tried to commit a serious crime, employing his artistic skills for the pursuit of worldly riches, forsaking his search for God and meaning. He has forsaken the ethos of the artist by abusing his artistic skills, in order to commit a burglary, and broken one of the Ten Commandments. He realizes himself, how low he has fallen [161]. In this situation he finds himself in a synagogue, confronted with his Jewish tradition, with the Ten Commandments on the ark, and trying to put on a *talis* and *tfilin* for the morning prayers. This is the situation, where the “פונקען” appear, as “sparks of holiness”, signs of redemptive good in a context of darkness.

When the worshippers leave the synagogue, Yasha remains alone in his *talis* and *tfilin* praying and suddenly believing in the words of the prayers: “ברוך שאמר והיה העולם, “Blessed be ברוך הוא, ברוך יוצר בראשית, ברוך מרחם על הבריות ומשלם שכר טוב ליראיו...” He who spoke and the world came into being; blessed be He. Blessed be He who maintains the creation.” – “Blessed be He who has mercy upon his creatures” – “who pays a good reward to those who fear Him.”) – [160].⁵⁷

The theme of the prayers quoted in this synagogue-scene, in contrast to those quoted in the previous one, is not so much the “הבל” (vanity) of human existence, but rather the theme of God as the Creator (in “ברוך שאמר”) and the Merciful (in “ברוך שאמר” and in the first two benedictions of the *Amidah*). God is described as bestowing life, reviving the dead and supporting the fallen [157], which accords with Yasha’s present situation,

⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that these “sparks”, some of which are white, others green or blue in the Yiddish, become red, green and blue in the English [124]. In the German translation they are only green and blue [113].

⁵⁷ The translation is quoted according to *The Authorised Daily Prayerbook*, 38. – Bashevis omits several words of this prayer.

in which he realizes, how low he has fallen [161].

Standing there in his *talis* and *tfilin* praying, Yasha suddenly feels a light coming from the *tfilin* and penetrating into his mind: "יאשא האט איצט געשפירט ווי א ליכט גייט ארויס פון די תפילין און דרינגט אריין אין זיין שארבן, עפנט פארשלאסענע קעסטעלעך, מאכט קלאר פינצטערנישן, וויקלט אויף קנאילן און פלאגטערנישן." (Yasha felt now, how a light went forth from the *tfilin* and penetrated into his mind, opening locked compartments, illuminating the darkness, unravelling knots and confusions.) – [162]. This light from the *tfilin*, opening locked compartments in his mind, is in sharp contrast with Yasha's scissors, paper cone, skeleton key and all of his artistic skills, with which he is not able to open Zaruski's safe. The light issuing from the *tfilin* on Yasha's forehead is connected to the Lurianic idea of the 'Adam Kadmon, from whose head "tremendous lights shone forth".⁵⁸ These lights combined to form names. In fact, according to Lurianic Kabbalah, the "primordial world", which is "described by linguistic symbols", was "precipitated from the lights" on 'Adam Kadmon's "forehead", "which issued from the spot where the phylactery-of-the-head is laid".⁵⁹

At this moment Yasha decides he has to do "תשובה", to repent, to return to his Jewish tradition: "כ'מוז ווערן א ייד! - האט ער צו זיך א זאג געטאן. - א ייד ווי זיי אלע!..." ("I must be a Jew! He said to himself. A Jew like all the others!") – [Yiddish: 162; English: 127].

6.4.5. Two More Instances of "Sparks" in Contexts of Darkness

The third synagogue-scene is contrasted with a scene outside on Gnojna and later inside a soup kitchen, which is, in fact, the novel's "fourth profane space".⁶⁰ Yasha strongly feels this contrast between the synagogue and the street: "יאשאן האט זיך איצט

⁵⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 137. – See also: Section 3.4.2, 88.

⁵⁹ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 138.

⁶⁰ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 91.

“אויסגעוויזן, אַז די גאַס און דער שולהויף לייקענען אַפּ איינער דעם אַנדערן. (“It now seemed to Yasha that the street and the synagogue denied each other.”) – [Yiddish: 163; English: 128]. Outside on Gnojna Yasha experiences, how his newly discovered piety evaporates and his indecisions return. In this context Bashevis’s choice of Gnojna cannot be accidental, since in Polish the literal meaning of Gnojna is “dung-street”.

Yasha lifts his eyes up to the sky and asks God for a sign. At this moment Yasha sees a cripple approaching. He tries in vain to place a coin in the beggar’s gnarled hand and thinks: “אויך אַ קונצנמאַכער!” (“Another magician!”) – [Yiddish: 164; English: 129]. Yasha is suddenly overcome by fear, by repulsion and again by nausea. He wants to run away, but the beggar tries to touch him. At this point fiery sparks appear again in front of his eyes: “די פֿייערדיקע פֿינטלעך האָבן ווידער אַ שוועב געטאַן פֿאַר יאַשאַס אויגן, אַ שטייגער ווי זיי וואָלטן: “Fiery sparks again flashed before Yasha’s eyes, as if they were constantly present and only needed the opportunity to reveal themselves.”) – [Yiddish: 164; English: 129].

This time the fiery sparks are not called “פֿונקען”, but “פֿייערדיקע פֿינטלעך” (fiery spots). Both expressions, however, refer to the same phenomenon. The context is the same as in the third synagogue-scene [158]. Yasha feels nauseous and sees sparks in front of his eyes.

What is interesting in this scene is the fact that it says that these fiery sparks were floating before Yasha’s eyes, “as if they were constantly present and only needed the opportunity to reveal themselves”. According to Lurianic cosmology, the “עולם העשייה” (World of Action) is “filled with holy sparks”, which fell there on the occasion of the “breaking of the vessels”.⁶¹ If the “World of Action”, which is our terrestrial world, is filled with these “sparks”, it means that they are constantly present, although they

⁶¹ Cf. R. Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 362.

usually remain invisible and only reveal themselves in certain moments. This corresponds exactly to Yasha's experience in this passage.

Here these "sparks" reveal themselves again in a context, when Yasha's former indecisions return and his newly discovered religious feelings and thoughts begin to lose their meaning. The light which Yasha has experienced in the synagogue, issuing from the *tfilin* on his forehead, is already forgotten and Yasha has returned to a context of metaphorical darkness. He has become so uncertain again, that he requires a sign from God. The appearance of the cripple, which seems like an answer to his request of a sign, could act as a revelation to Yasha. It shows him the vanity and meaninglessness of his whole existence and could lead him to return to a meaningful Jewish life. This is the context, in which Yasha feels faint and sees "sparks" again.

After this encounter, Yasha sees his alternatives clearly: It is either "תשובה" (repentance) or "זעלבסטמאָרד" (suicide) – [167]. In fact, the word "זעלבסטמאָרד" appears a second time directly afterwards. When he comes home and Magda does not open the door for him, he wonders, whether she has committed suicide [168]. When she returns, the two of them begin to quarrel, whereupon Magda disappears into the kitchen crying. He soon hears a rattling sound, as if Magda had strangled herself [180]. This is an obvious hint at Magda's future suicide, which at this stage Yasha could probably have prevented. But instead of following her into the kitchen, he sets off to Emilia's house.

Unintentionally Yasha confesses his attempted burglary to Emilia, who casts him off immediately. During his confession Yasha feels nauseous again and sees fiery sparks:

"ס'איז אים געוואָרן טונקל פאַר די אויגן און ער האָט ווידער דערזען די פייערדיקע פינטלעך. ס'איז געווען
 "Darkness rose before his eyes, and again he saw
 the fiery sparks. It was as if a dybbuk had spoken within him." – [Yiddish: 198;
 English: 154].

Yasha did not plan to confess his burglary to Emilia, but instead he feels as if a dybbuk had spoken within him. This is one of many occasions in Bashevis's works, including *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, when his characters say something unintentionally and are surprised at their own words.⁶²

Here the expression employed for the "fiery sparks" is again "פייערדיקע פֿינטלעך", not "פֿונקען", but the context of nausea is the same as in the two previous instances.

After his failed crime Yasha struggles with the choice of actions still open to him, repentance or suicide. A complete return to his former way of life has already become impossible. In this situation he confesses his attempted burglary to Emilia, and his confession is the first step in the direction towards "תשובה" or "repentance". This is the point, where he sees the "fiery sparks" again, hinting at the "sparks of holiness", the possibility of redemptive good in Yasha's state of darkness and despair.

6.4.6. The Fourth Synagogue-Scene

After being cast off by Emilia, Yasha needs a place to rest and enters the synagogue on Gnojna again, where this time a group of Lithuanian Jews is praying "מנחה" (the afternoon prayer). The prayer-leader intones the *'Amidah*, and the same line from the benediction concerning the return to Jerusalem is quoted as in the previous synagogue-scene [157 and 206]. The word "תשוב", found in this benediction hints at Yasha's impending "תשובה", his return to Judaism, possibly his wish to return to his hidden God. At the same time it might also be alluding to Yasha's wish for his hidden God to return to His people.

Yasha wonders about these Lithuanian Jews, *mitnagdim*, who are very different from the Polish *hasidim* he knows [206 f.]. Yasha also sees men sitting at the tables, studying

⁶² See for example: *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, 16, 69, 87, 97, 180 and 221.

Talmud. One man shouts: “טענו לו בחיטים והודו לו בשעורים...” (If one claims wheat and he gave him barley) – [207].⁶³

The image of these men studying Talmud makes Yasha reflect on the contrast between traditional Jews and those who are completely assimilated. Concerning the traditional Jews, Yasha holds: “די דאזיקע יידן זענען אפשר טאקע אַזיאַטן, ווי די משכילים רופן זיי, אָבער “ (Those Jews were perhaps really Asiatic, as the *maskilim* called them, but at least they had a faith, a spiritual home, a history, a hope.) – [208].

At this point the English version adds one sentence, which is not found in the Yiddish original: “In addition to their laws governing commerce, they had their Hasidic literature, and they studied their cabala and books of ethics.” [English: 162].⁶⁴ This is the only occasion in this novel, on which a direct reference to the Kabbalah is added in the English, which is not present in the Yiddish original. The fact that these traditional Jews, in contrast to the assimilated *maskilim*, had their ḥasidic literature and studied their Kabbalah and books of ethics, might seem obvious to Bashevis’s Yiddish-speaking readers, but for his English-speaking American, largely non-Jewish audience, he may have felt it necessary to add this information.

In the synagogue Yasha reflects on his life and his Jewish heritage again. He wonders, if God really needs all the traditional Jewish garments, and how many more laws a Jew can take upon himself. On the other hand, he knows that, if he had been a pious Jew wearing a “טלית-קטן” (ritual undergarment) and praying three times a day, he would never have begun any of his affairs with various women. This thought leads Yasha to the conclusion

⁶³ b Ketubot 108 b. The actual text in the Talmud reads: “טענו חיטין ושעורים והודה לו באחד מהן” (“if one claims wheat and barley (two different things)”, and [the defendant] admits [only] one of them). Cf. Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, New York: Judaica Press, 1992 (first published in 1903), 544.

⁶⁴ In the German translation this sentence is included as well [German: 149].

that a religion needs discipline [209].

Before Yasha leaves the synagogue, he takes a book from a shelf and opens it blindly. It is the “נתיבות עולם” (Eternal Paths) by the *Maharal* of Prague.⁶⁵ On that particular page a Biblical verse is quoted, “עוצם עיניו מראות ברע” (“and shuts his eyes from seeing evil”) – [Isaiah 33, 15], which is interpreted as: “זה שאינו מסתכל בנשים בשעה שעומדות על הכביסה” (This is the one who does not look at women at the time, when they stand at their washing.) – [209].

Yasha has found a passage in this book, which accords with his own thoughts: There must be discipline in religion. If one does not look, one does not sin. But if one breaks the discipline of looking, one can easily be tempted to break one of the Ten Commandments. This book shows Yasha the difficult path of a disciplined Jewish life. It demands something of him, whereas all the secular literature does not demand anything.

6.4.7. The Last Two Instances of “Sparks” in Contexts of Darkness

Sitting in a droshky on his way home, Yasha experiences a dread which he has never felt before [210]. At this point there is another appearance of “sparks”. Yasha sees wagons loaded with wood and sacks of flour passing by. The horses stomp their thick legs on the cobblestones, “אז פונקען זענען געפלויגן” (so that sparks were flying) – [211]. This time the “sparks” are called “פונקען” again and do not appear, as in the previous cases, in front of Yasha’s eyes, but are caused by the hooves of horses in their

⁶⁵ Rabbi Judah Leyb ben Bezalel (c.1525-1609). The acronym “מהר”ל” stands for מורנו הרב רבי לייב . The *Maharal* was a Talmudist and theologian, who wrote many books of commentaries, ethics and Halakhah. Although there was a “strong mystical tinge” to the *Maharal*’s thought and he was obviously influenced by the Kabbalah, he formulated his thought in such a way that “his theories are presented in his own style without any direct reference to Kabbalistic terminology”. Cf. L. Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion*, 329 f. – The English translation mistakenly refers to the *Maharal* as “Rabbi Leib of Praga” [English: 163], instead of Prague. The German translation not only has the correct place name, but also adds that the *Maharal* was a famous Kabbalist: “Jascha sah, daß er das Buch «Ewige Pfade» des berühmten Prager Kabbalisten, Rabbi Judah Löw, gegriffen hatte.” [German: 150].

movement through the streets.

As stated above, according to Lurianic cosmology, our terrestrial world, is filled with “holy sparks”, which are embodied in the “mineral”, “vegetable”, “animal” and “human world”.⁶⁶ Thus, as there are “sparks of holiness” in all living creatures, they can also be found in the horses which Yasha sees, although these “holy sparks” are obviously not recognized by the owners of the horses, who make them carry such heavy loads, that one of the horses even collapses [211 f.].

Yasha sees the “sparks” again in a context of metaphorical darkness, when he is suffering from unbearable pain and fear. He also feels a disgust towards himself and his plans of theft. This disgust is so strong, that Yasha experiences nausea again, as in the previous instances, when “sparks” appeared before his eyes.

On returning home, Yasha finds Magda hanging from the ceiling [216]. After the shock caused by her suicide, Yasha has the urge to get drunk and enters a tavern. Inside he can neither move forwards nor backwards. He feels as if he were caught in a trap. His nausea returns, and again he sees “sparks” in front of his eyes: *און ס'האבן פון ס'ניי זיך אַ צוויי גרויסע דיקע פונקען, שיער גישט אַזוי גרויס ווי קוילן.* (And sparks were swaying again before him: two big, fat sparks, almost as big as coals.) – [221].

Here Yasha sees these “sparks” in a situation, in which he is trapped and can neither move forwards nor backwards, not only at the counter of this tavern, but in his whole life. In this context of existential darkness these “sparks”, hinting at the “sparks of holiness” in our world, show Yasha a way out. They point towards the possibility of redemptive good, even in the darkest context, in which Yasha has been so far. They act as signposts for him on his path towards “חשובה” (repentance).

⁶⁶ Cf. R. Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 361 f., 364.

6.5. The Epilogue – Reflections on the Nature of Evil, *Zimzum*, the “Breaking of the Vessels”, Free Will and Possibilities of Redemption

The epilogue sees Yasha back in Lublin three years later, transformed into ר' יעקעלע (R. Yekele the Penitent) – [239]. But the form of “תשובה”, which he chooses, or rather which Bashevis chooses for him, is an unusual one. Instead of returning to a traditional Jewish life with his wife Ester and within the context of a Jewish community, Yasha separates himself from his wife and his community again and has himself immured inside a small structure in his courtyard, which G. Farrell Lee calls “the novel’s fifth and final prayerhouse – a tiny, doorless, brick penitential cell”.⁶⁷

Inside his “penitential cell” Yasha spends most of his time studying and praying. Verses from Scripture and sayings from the rabbinic literature are now constantly on Yasha’s mind. One of Yasha’s methods of driving away “מחשבות זרות” (strange thoughts), is to learn chapters from the Mishnah by heart. The beginning of the first three *mishnayot* from Tractate Berakhot are quoted here.⁶⁸ The quotations include the following passage:

“מאימתי קורין את שמע בשחרית? משיכיר בין תכלת ללבן, ר' אליעזר אומר: בין תכלת לכרתי...” (From what time in the morning may the *Shma* be recited? – As soon as one can distinguish between blue and white. R. Eliezer says: Between blue and green.) – [255].⁶⁹ It is, in fact, very interesting that this particular *mishnah* is quoted here, because it mentions exactly the three colours – white, blue and green – in which the “sparks” before Yasha’s eyes in the third synagogue-scene are described in the Yiddish [158]. What enforces this connection, is the fact that these “sparks” appear before Yasha’s eyes at the time, when he is struggling to put on his *talis* and *tfilin* for the morning prayers, which include the “שמע”

⁶⁷ Cf. G. Farrell Lee, *From Exile to Redemption*, 93.

⁶⁸ m Berakhot 1, 1-3. – Bashevis has slight variations in the text of the first and third *mishnah*. This might be due to the fact that he was citing from memory and did not bother to check the passage in the Mishnah.

⁶⁹ m Berakhot 1, 2.

and its blessings, which he may say, as soon as he can distinguish between blue and white (the usual colours of the *talis*), and R. Eliezer says: Between blue and green.

But despite all his prayers and studies and the renewed affirmation of his faith in God, throughout the epilogue Yasha is time and again plagued by the voice of the “יצר הרע” (evil inclination) within him, by temptations, by sexual desires and by doubts. Yasha’s dilemma is that he wants to live a life without sin and without the pursuit of vanity, but is not able to do so as an artist in the modern world. His solution to this dilemma, however, is problematic. This also becomes apparent in the response of the local rabbi, who argues that this is not a Jewish solution: דער בן-אדם מוז “די וועלט איז באשאפן געווארן צוליב בחירה. (‘The world had been created for the exercise of free will and the sons of Adam must constantly choose between good and evil.’) – [Yiddish: 237; English: 183].

But Yasha is quite capable of answering the rabbi, because in the meantime he has studied various Jewish sources, the Mishnah, the *Ein-Ya‘akov* (עין-יעקב), the Midrash, the Talmud, and even the *Zohar* [237].⁷⁰ This is the first direct reference to a kabbalistic work in this novel. Soon after this other works are mentioned: the “של”ה” (Shnei Luhot ha-Brit) – [240], the *Shef‘a Tal*, the *Pardes Rimonim* and the *‘Ez Hayim* [243].⁷¹

Meanwhile Yasha quotes the case of a “תנא” (rabbi from Mishnaic times), who had put out his eyes not to look at a Roman matron, and similar cases, and argues that most laws are merely “סייגים” (fences) to prevent a person from sinning [237]. In the end Yasha wins Rabbi Eyger’s blessing, because the rabbi realizes that Yasha acts “לשם-שמים” (for the sake of Heaven) – [237].

In his self-imposed imprisonment Yasha feels protected against transgressions. He has

⁷⁰ The *‘Ein-Ya‘akov* is a collection of legends and homilies from the Talmud, compiled by R. Ya‘akov b. Shlomo ibn Haviv (sixteenth - seventeenth century).

⁷¹ Regarding these works, see: Section 2.5, 40-42, 45-49.

become like a child in its mother's womb again, who is taught the whole of the Torah by an angel [240 f.]. Comparing the life in his penitential cell with his former life, in which he had almost become a thief, Yasha reflects: ווי שאלן אָדער טאַקע ווי קליפות. "דאָ, אין דעם קעמערל, זענען אַלע חיצוניותן אָפגעפאַלן (Here, in the little cell, all externalities fell off like husks or actually like *Klipot*.) – [241].⁷²

In this passage Yasha makes a connection between all externalities and the *Klipot*, as if all externalities of this world were nothing but *Klipot*, "husks", sources of evil, from which one needed to free oneself. Outside in the world Yasha has certainly experienced his futile pursuit of externalities, of money, of more amorous adventures, of fame as an artist, in this way. But his self-imposed imprisonment is no real solution to his dilemma, because it only saves him from sinning, not from temptation and not from his doubts, which are not external, but come from within himself.

Reflecting on the graveness of his sins, Yasha holds that his true punishment will be given to him in the World-to-Come. His only comfort is that God is an "אל רחום וחנון" (merciful and gracious God) and that in the end good must triumph over evil. This leads Yasha to a reflection on the nature of evil, influenced by several kabbalistic works, which he has studied. From the reading of these works, Yasha has developed his own ideas about the origins of evil: ער האָט שוין געוואוסט, אַז די קליפה איז נישט מער ווי דער צמצום, וואָס דער אין-סוף האָט זיך מצמצם געווען צו באַשאַפן די וועלט, ער זאָל קאָנען זיין אַ בורא און טאָן חסד מיט זיינע האָט זיך מצמצם געווען צו באַשאַפן די וועלט, ער זאָל קאָנען זיין אַ בורא און טאָן חסד מיט זיינע "ער האָט שוין געוואוסט, אַז די קליפה איז נישט מער ווי דער צמצום, וואָס דער אין-סוף האָט זיך מצמצם געווען צו באַשאַפן די וועלט, ער זאָל קאָנען זיין אַ בורא און טאָן חסד מיט זיינע" (He knew already that the *Klipah* is nothing else than *Zimzum*, by which 'Ein-Sof has contracted Himself, in order to create the world, so that He should be able to be a Creator and show lovingkindness to His creatures.) – [243].⁷³

⁷² This passage is poorly translated in the English: "Here, in his solitude, all externalities fell away like the husks which the cabalists call the evil spirits." [English: 186]. The Kabbalists do not call these husks "evil spirits", but *Klipot*, as the Yiddish original has it, and these *Klipot* are, in fact, no "spirits" at all, but the dark forces of the *sitra 'ahra*, which emerged from the "shards" of the broken "vessels", as explained above.

⁷³ The English version mentions neither the *Klipah* nor *Zimzum*, but translates instead: "already he was aware that evil was merely God's diminishing of Himself to create the world" [English: 187].

As explained previously, Yasha is expressing a teleological interpretation of *Zimzum* in this passage, although he is not following the exact sequence of the Lurianic doctrine of creation.⁷⁴ Yasha holds that God needed to contract Himself in the act of *Zimzum*, in order to create the world, and He needed to create the world, because “אין מלך בלי עם” (there is no King without a people). A Creator has to create, a Giver must have someone to give to, a Heavenly Father needs His children. But it is not enough, that He leads them with His merciful hand. They have to learn to walk on the right path out of their own free will: “אלע עולמות ווארטן דערויף: מלאכים און שרפים קוקן אויס, אז דער בן-אדם זאל טאן א מצווה, דאווענען מיט כוונה, געבן א גראַשן צדקה. יעדע מצווה ברענגט א תיקון. יעדעס וואָרט תורה פלעכט קרוינען פאַר דער שכינה.” (All the worlds are waiting for this: Angels and seraphs are longing for this, that the human being should perform a commandment, pray with intention, give a bit of charity. Each performance of a commandment leads to a cosmic restoration. Each word of Torah braids crowns for the *Shekhinah*.) – [243].⁷⁵

With the statement that every commandment, which a person performs, brings about a *Tikun*, Yasha expresses the Lurianic idea that “certain concluding actions” in the process of restoring both the universe and the Divine realm to their originally intended state of harmony have been reserved for human beings. Thus according to the Lurianic doctrine of *Tikun*, a Jew “must struggle with and overcome not only the historic exile of the Jewish people”, “but also the mystic exile of the *Shekhinah*, which was caused by the breaking of the vessels”.⁷⁶

Bashevis’s formulation that every word of the Torah braids crowns for the *Shekhinah*, can

⁷⁴ See: Section 3.4.1, 85-87.

⁷⁵ The English translation of this paragraph is very inexact [English: 188]. – “טאן א מצווה” means “to perform a commandment”, rather than “to be righteous”. “דאווענען מיט כוונה” means “to pray with intention” or “to direct one’s heart in prayer”, rather than “to pray with humility”. A “תיקון” is more than an act which “improved the Universe”. It is a “cosmic restoration” of the intended harmony within the Divine realm. And worst of all, the “שכינה” is not the “Godhead” at all, but God’s presence in the world, according to kabbalistic interpretation, a female aspect of God, corresponding to the tenth *Sfirah*, “מלכות” (kingdom).

⁷⁶ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 142 f. See also: Section 3.4.3, 95 f.

be understood as a poetic expression of this Lurianic concept. The image is derived from a passage in the Talmud, according to which God is braiding crowns for the Torah.⁷⁷

If every word of Torah, which a person studies, speaks or fulfills, braids crowns for the *Shekhinah*, this means that it prepares the way to end the cosmic exile of the *Shekhinah*, to re-unite her with the rest of the Godhead, to prepare the last stages of *Tikun*. The image of crowns also accords with the kabbalistic idea that the *Shekhinah* corresponds to the tenth *Sfirah*, “מלכות”, which means “kingdom”. The connection is even more profound, since in kabbalistic writings the Torah has frequently been associated with the *Shekhinah*.⁷⁸

The epilogue of the novel is replete with expressions of Yasha’s doubts and uncertainties, which call Yasha’s solution to his dilemma into question. But it also contains Yasha’s deep insights into the nature of evil and expresses his profound hopes for redemption and his wish to atone for all the sins he has committed in his former life and to contribute to the process of *Tikun* with his performance of the commandments, his prayers and his study of the Torah.

6.6. Conclusion

As we have seen, the epilogue of the novel is replete with kabbalistic expressions and references to kabbalistic works, which cannot be found in the main part of the novel. In the main part of the novel there are few direct references to the Kabbalah, although certain metaphysical themes like God’s concealment and His revelation in nature as well as the image of “sparks” in contexts of darkness have a strong kabbalistic basis, as shown above.

The magician’s God remains as concealed in the epilogue, as He was in the main part of

⁷⁷ b Menakhot 29 b.

⁷⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 47.

the novel. Despite all his prayers and studies in his penitential cell, R. Yekele the Penitent still experiences God's concealment, His silence, as he did before: די "גאָט האָט געשוויגן. די מלאכים האָבן געשוויגן. די מתים האָבן געשוויגן. אַפילו די שדים האָבן געשוויגן." (God was silent. The angels were silent. The dead were silent. Even the demons were silent.) – [254]. And even worse: While in the main part of the novel Yasha, the magician, acknowledged his Creator-God as the ultimate Magician ("רבונו של עולם, דו ביסט אַ קונצנמאַכער, נישט איך!") – [65], in the epilogue, people treat Yasha, the magician, as if he was God: "זיי האָבן געשריגן צו אים, יאַשאַ קונצן-מאַכער, אַ שטייגער" (They cried to him, Yasha, the magician, just as if he was God.) – [248].

Thus the images of the magician and his frequently hidden and concealed, but at times also revealed God are as interwoven in the epilogue, as they are in the main part of the novel. On different levels, both the magician and his Creator-God are experienced by others in the two extremes of concealment and revelation in creation or art, although Yasha, the magician, renounces his talent as an artist in the end.

In the main part of the novel, the artistry of the magician, whose every word has a meaning [11 f.], has a close parallel to the artistry of the author, Bashevis, whose every word has a meaning in his literary creation of דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין.

Some of the concealed kabbalistic undercurrents within the literary creation of דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין have been identified in this chapter.

7. The Role of Jewish Mysticism in דער קנעכט (The Slave)

7.1. Introduction: A Vessel for Cosmic Restorations

יעקב האָט געדענקט פֿון לערנען דעם עץ החיים פֿון אר"י הקודש אַז די קליפה איז
 נישט מער ווי צמזום, ליידיקייט, הסתר פנים. תשובה קאָן מאַכן פֿון עברות - מצוות,
 פֿון דינים - חסדים. אַמאָל איז אַפֿילו אַן עברה אַ געפֿעס פֿאַר תיקונים. אַזוי האָט ער,
 יעקב געזינדיקט וואָס ער האָט געגלוסט צו דער וואַנדאַן, יאָן בוזיקס טאַכטער. [...] ¹
 איצט איז זי שרה בת אברהם און זי האָלט בײַ געבוירן אַ ייִדיש קינד, אַראָפּברענגען
 אַ ייִדישע נשמה פֿון כסא הכבוד.

Yankev remembered from studying the holy ARI's *'Ez Hayim* that the
Klipah is nothing else than *Zimzum*, emptiness, the hiding of God's face.
 Repentance can turn transgressions – into good deeds, justice – into
 lovingkindness. Sometimes even a transgression is a vessel for cosmic
 restorations. Thus he, Yankev, has sinned, in that he longed for Wanda,
 Jan Bzik's daughter.[...] Now she is Sore bas Avrom, and she is going
 to give birth to a Jewish child, bringing down a Jewish soul from the
 Throne of Glory.²

This is one of many passages, explicitly concerned with kabbalistic ideas, from Bashevis's
 novel *דער קנעכט (The Slave)*, which was published in book form for the first time in 1962
 in an English translation, and in 1967 in its original Yiddish. Like *דער שטן אין גאָרײ*, the
 setting of this novel is seventeenth-century Poland, in the wake of the Chmielnicki
 massacres in 1648. As in *דער שטן אין גאָרײ*, the themes of Jewish suffering, messianic
 yearning and the rise and fall of the Shabbatean movement appear, although

¹ יצחק באַשעוויס, *דער קנעכט*, 189 f. All page numbers within the text of this chapter refer to the Yiddish original, unless otherwise stated.

² This translation is my own, emphasizing the kabbalistic terminology employed in this paragraph in the Yiddish original. The existing English translation – I.B. Singer, *The Slave*, London: Penguin, 1996 (first ed. New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1962), translated by the author and Cecil Hemley – will be quoted during the course of this chapter, wherever it does not differ significantly from the Yiddish.

Shabbateanism plays a more marginal role in *דער קנעכט*, than it does in *דער שטן אין גאָר*.

Like Bashevis's first novel with the same seventeenth-century Polish-Jewish setting, this novel is also a repository of mystical images and kabbalistic, mainly Lurianic ideas. But unlike *דער שטן אין גאָר*, the main focus of this novel is not a particular Jewish community, but a Jewish individual, trying to preserve his Jewish identity in his situation of exile from the community, and his understanding of Judaism and humanity after his difficult reunion with the community. Unlike *דער שטן אין גאָר*, it is not an exploration of human vulnerability to evil, but a "study in goodness", with an exalted love story at its core.³ In its emphasis on the beauty of nature, this novel is even more pronounced than *דער קונצנמאָכער פון לובלין*. As in *דער קונצנמאָכער פון לובלין*, the individual's experience of God in the two extreme forms of concealment and of revelation in God's creation, is also a major theme in *דער קנעכט*.

In this chapter the references to Jewish mystical works and the use of these works for study and for magical and superstitious practices, will be explored. Although Shabbatean messianism is only presented as a short episode towards the end of the novel, its depiction in *דער קנעכט* and the significance of this Shabbatean episode for the novel as a whole needs to be considered.

Furthermore there are various Lurianic references and allusions to Lurianic ideas, which will be investigated. The above-mentioned theme of a person's experience of God's concealment and God's revelation in nature, will be analyzed in connection with the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*. References to other Lurianic ideas, the "breaking of the vessels", the resulting formation of the *Klipot* and the scattering of the "sparks of holiness", will be explored in the context of the themes of good and evil and the immensity

³ Cf. Susan Sontag, 'Demons and Dreams', in: G. Farrell (ed.), *Critical Essays*, 34.

of Jewish suffering.

Finally, *דער קנעכט* is the only one of Bashevis's major novels in which the possibility of redemption is presented as a reality. His vision of *Tikun* finds its expression in the image of the "זיווגא קדישא", the "sacred marriage" of the *Shekhinah* and the *Sfirah* of "תפארת" (beauty), which is reflected in the relationship of the two main characters of this novel, Yankev, the Jewish slave, and Wanda, the daughter of Jan Bzik, Yankev's Polish master, who beomes Sore bas Avrom and gives birth to a Jewish child, "bringing down a Jewish soul from the Throne of Glory".

7.2. The Storyline of *דער קנעכט*

After *דער שטן אין גארי*, Bashevis's *דער קנעכט* is his second novel with a seventeenth-century Polish-Jewish setting. In the wake of the Chmielnicki massacres in 1648, Yankev (Jacob in the English), the hero of this novel, has been captured and sold as a slave to the Polish peasant Jan Bzik. During the summer months Yankev lives in a barn in the mountains, taking care of Jan Bzik's cattle. Despite his isolation from the Jewish community, Yankev does not forsake his Judaism. He says his prayers every day and rehearses all the passages from the Scriptures, which he knows by heart [11]. He even undertakes to inscribe the "תרי"ג מצוות" (613 commandments) on stone [38-40].

Jan Bzik's daughter Wanda climbs up to his barn every evening to milk the cows and to bring Yankev some food [19]. Yankev and Wanda have been in love with each other for a long time. She has assisted him in preserving his Jewish observances and has saved his life more than once [14 f.]. But so far Yankev has restrained himself from succumbing to his passion for her, because he is Jewish, and she is Gentile. Instructing Wanda in the tenets of Judaism, however, Yankev realizes that her thirst for Jewish knowledge is as strong as her love for him [80]. Eventually he converts Wanda to Judaism, although this is punishable

by death, according to Polish law, and the two of them finally consummate their love [26, 63-65].

About half a year later, Yankev is ransomed from his slavery by fellow Jews from his home town Józefów [92-96]. He is taken to Józefów, where he learns about the extent of Chmielnicki's massacres and about the death of his own wife and children [97-100]. The matchmakers in Józefów try to convince Yankev to remarry, but he cannot forget Wanda. When she appears to him in a dream, he decides to return to her and to take her away with him [103-122]. He manages to reach Wanda's village and to flee with her [132-140].

The two of them travel around Poland for some time, undergoing many hardships. During their time of wandering they also get married, according to the law of Moses and Israel, and Wanda acquires the name Sore (Sarah). One day in spring, the couple reaches the distant Jewish community of Pilica, which has emerged on the estates of the Polish nobleman Adam Pilicki (Adam Pilitzky). They settle in Pilica and Yankev becomes the school teacher of the town. Fearing that her poor Yiddish would reveal her Gentile origins, Sore pretends to be mute and has to endure the ridicule of the women in the community [143-151]. Yankev soon becomes disappointed in his fellow Jews, who follow the "מצוות שבין אדם למקום" (commandments between a person and God) meticulously, while often completely disregarding the "מצוות שבין אדם לחברו" (commandments between a person and his fellows) – [155-159, 212, 238 f.].

In addition to her isolation in Pilica and the mockery she experiences, Sore goes through a difficult pregnancy. Suffering from terrible labour pains, she can no longer restrain herself and begins shouting in her native Polish. The women at her bedside believe that a Gentile dybbuk has entered Sore's body. Sore finally gives birth to a baby boy, but she herself dies at the beginning of Yom Kippur [210-236].

But before Sore's body can even be buried, Yankev is enchained again, for the "crime" of converting a Gentile to Judaism, and is carried off by Polish soldiers. He manages, however, to break his chains and to flee [239-243]. During the course of his flight Yankev first meets a ferryman, named Wacław, who shares his bread with him and advises him to live a life of complete freedom [247-252]. The next person Yankev meets is a "שד"ר" (an emissary from the Land of Israel), a follower of Shabbatai Zvi, who informs Yankev that the "קץ" (End of Days) is near, and reminds him of his responsibility for his son. Yankev lets himself be persuaded by the emissary to save his son and to travel with him to the Land of Israel [254-265]. Yankev decides to call his son Binyomin (Benjamin), because like the Biblical Binyomin, this child is also a "בן איו" (child of sorrow), whose mother died, when he was born. With this passage, in which Yankev's individual life story is set within the context of the Biblical story and Jewish history, the main part of the novel comes to a close [272-274].

In the epilogue, which takes place twenty years later, Yankev returns to Pilica from the Land of Israel, in order to visit Sore's grave and to take her bones for reburial on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. But the cemetery has grown and changed during the course of all these years and Sore's grave cannot be found. Staying at the poorhouse in Pilica, Yankev falls ill and grows weaker from hour to hour. Soon he dies and is buried in the cemetery in Pilica. But when the gravedigger breaks the ground for Yankev's grave, Sore's bones are surprisingly discovered. Thus Yankev is buried next to Sore. A common tombstone is erected for the couple, with an inscription of their names, the image of two doves and a Scriptural verse: "הנאהבים והנעימים בחייהם ובמותם לא נפרדו" ([They] "were loved and dear in their lives, and in their death they were not divided") – [2 Sam 1, 23] – [293-301].

7.3. References to Jewish Mystical Literature, Magic and Superstition in דער קנעכט

In Bashevis's *דער קנעכט* there are several direct references to the study of the Kabbalah, the use of Jewish mystical works for magical purposes and various other superstitious practices. Yankev is reported to have always been more interested in the study of philosophy and Kabbalah than in his teaching of Halakhic literature, when he was still a young teacher in Józefów.

Apart from philosophical works, like Maimonides' *מורה נבוכים* (*The Guide for the Perplexed*), Judah Halevi's *כוזרי* (*Kuzari*) and Saadia Gaon's *האמונות והדעות* (*Book of Beliefs and Opinions*), he is familiar with the "קבלה פון ר' משה קורדובירא און פון אר"י הקדוש" (Kabbalah of R. Moshe Cordovero and the holy ARI) – [53 f.].⁴ He has read about the concept of *Zimzum* and "הסתר פנים" (the hiding of God's face) in unspecified "קבלה-ספרים" (kabbalistic works) – [60].

After his return to Józefów and its collection of Jewish literature in the house of study, Yankev occupies himself again with the study of "חקירה-ספרים" (philosophical works) and "קבלה-ספרים" (kabbalistic works). He leafs through various books, looking for answers to his questions. The works of Maimonides, the *Kuzari*, Bahya ibn Pakuda's *חובות הלבבות* (*The Duties of the Heart*) and the kabbalistic "פרדס", referring to Moshe Cordovero's *Pardes Rimonim*, are mentioned here. But Yankev remains sitting *אין דער איינגעהילט* "אייגענער פֿינסטערניש" (enwrapped in his own darkness), not being able to find any guidance in these books [116 f.].⁵

Later, on his way back to Wanda's village, Yankev has a sudden recollection of an idea, he remembers from his study of "קבלה-ספרים" (kabbalistic works), which are again not

⁴ The English provides an accurate translation of the titles of the philosophical works and kabbalistic systems mentioned here, referring to "A Guide for the Perplexed, the Chuzary, The Beliefs and Ideas" and "the cabalistic systems of Rabbi Moshe of Cordova and the holy Isaac Luria" [English: 46].

⁵ In the English these works are translated as "the Chuzary", "The Duty of the Heart" and "The Vineyard". The reference to Yankev's sitting enwrapped in his own darkness is omitted [English: 94]. Regarding the *Pardes Rimonim*, see: Section 2.5, 46 f.

specified here: that every physical desire has its root in the “עולמות העליונים” (upper worlds) – [129].

Still later, as a school teacher in Pilica, Yankev is careful not to be seen too often looking into a “ספֿר” (religious work), particularly into a “קבלה-ספֿר” (kabbalistic work), because he does not want to be considered as a scholar and to be exposed to various suspicions. But on Adam Pilicki’s estate he feels free to study kabbalistic literature in his spare time.

Three mystical works are mentioned explicitly here, the ספֿר יצירה (*Sefer Yezirah*), the “רזיאל המלאך” (*Sefer Razi’el*) and the תיקוני זוהר (*Tikunei Zohar*) – [189].⁶ Yankev carries these works as a protection against demons and plans to put them under Sore’s pillow, when she is about to give birth, as mentioned above.⁷ Yankev also leafs through these three mystical works, and although he does not understand much of what he reads, he senses the “קדושה” (holiness) inherent in the words and letters contained in these volumes [189]. This additional information in this paragraph confirms the idea of employing mystical works as magical, apotropaic devices, on account of the power and holiness of the words and letters contained in them.

One more kabbalistic work is referred to in the same passage. While occupying himself with the mystical works specified earlier, Yankev recalls an idea concerning the *Klipah* and *Zimzum* from his previous study of the “עץ החיים פֿון אר”י הקדוש” (literally: the ‘*Ez Hayim* by the holy ARI) – [189]. Here Bashevis has Yankev ascribe the ‘*Ez Hayim* uncritically to the ARI, that is Isaac Luria, when in reality it was written by Luria’s chief disciple Hayim Vital.⁸

⁶ In the English these three works are translated as “the *Book of Creation*, *Angel Raziel*, and the *Zohar*” [English: 151], although the *Tikunei Zohar*, mentioned in the Yiddish, does not refer to the *Zohar* as a whole, but is an independant book, which forms part of the Zoharic literature. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 213, 218. Regarding these three works, see: Section 2.5, 41, 50-52.

⁷ See: Section 3.2, 66 f., 71.

⁸ The English translates “עץ החיים” as “*The Tree of Life*” and omits any reference to its author [English: 151]. Bashevis correctly ascribes the ‘*Ez Hayim* to Hayim Vital on other occasions in his works, e.g. *המשכים-זאמלונג*, 151. See: Section 2.5, 46.

When Sore is about to give birth, Yankev places the *Sefer Yezirah* under her pillow, as he has planned, together with a knife, וואָס די אַנדערע שדים וואָס
 “אָ סגולה צו פֿאַרטרייבן די לילית און די אַנדערע שדים וואָס
 “באַהעפֿטן זיך אין קינפּעטאַרינס” (as a remedy to ward off Lilith and the other demons, that
 attach themselves to women in labour) – [207]. All these details testify to the superstitious
 beliefs and practices common among Jews at that period in history.⁹ It is also interesting
 to note that, while Yankev employs Jewish superstitious practices on Sore’s behalf, she
 secretly practices the magic common among the Polish peasants of her native village
 [207].

When Sore’s birthpangs begin, Yankev is afraid to leave her alone, in order to fetch the
 midwife. But he is comforted by the presence of “שיר-המעלותן” (special amulets containing
 sections of the Psalms of “Ascent” – [Ps 120-134]) on the walls of her room and the
Sefer Yezirah under her pillow [214].¹⁰ However, despite all the magic employed, Sore is
 having a difficult labour, which in turn leads to the use of more superstitious practices by
 the women at her bedside. Thus a pious Jewish woman puts her hand on Sore’s stomach
 and recites an incantation. The women fetch the man, who had the honour of “מפֿטיר” (the
 reading from the Prophets) on Rosh Hashanah to recite certain Biblical verses, including
 the passage from the Book of Genesis, starting with the words “וה' פקד את שרה” (And the
 Eternal visited Sarah – [Gen 21, 1]), while resting his hands on the *mezuzah*. The most
 powerful remedy is supposed to be the use of a long string, attached to Sore’s wrist, the
 other end of which is tied to the door of the ark in the house of study. But when Sore
 pulls the string to open the ark, the thread snaps, which is seen as a bad omen [214 f.].
 Given the superstitious beliefs of the women at Sore’s bedside, expressed in all these
 magical practices, it is not surprising that these women are ready to believe that a dybbuk

⁹ Regarding these magical and superstitious practices, see also: Section 3.2, 70 f.

¹⁰ In the English the “שיר-המעלותן” are translated as “charms and verses from the Psalms”, and סֵפֶר יְצִירָה is translated as “*The Book of Creation*” [English: 170].

has entered Sore, when the supposedly mute woman starts crying out in her native Polish [216 ff.].¹¹

More superstitious and magical practices are mentioned in connection with the Shabbatean movement, which is depicted toward the end of the novel. The only other reference to a kabbalistic work in *דער קנעכט* also appears in the context of Shabbateanism, when the emissary from the Land of Israel, who is a follower of Shabbatai Zvi, asks Yankev, whether he has studied the *Zohar*, and informs him about the power of “שמות הקדושים” (holy names), “יחודים” (unifications) and “צירופים” (combinations of letters), employed by the Kabbalists in the Land of Israel [255].

Bashevis’s depiction of the Shabbatean movement in *דער קנעכט* will be explored in more depth in the following section of this chapter.

7.4. The Depiction of Shabbatean Messianism in *דער קנעכט*

Although the setting of this novel is seventeenth century Poland in the wake of the Chmielnicki massacres, just as it is in *דער שטן אין גאָר*, there is neither any reference, nor even any allusion to the Shabbatean movement in *דער קנעכט*, until the description of Yankev’s encounter with the emissary from the Land of Israel, who is later identified as a follower of Shabbatai Zvi [254-262, 281].

The emissary tells Yankev that he had heard about Chmielnicki’s “גזירות” (persecutions), when he was still in the Land of Israel. According to him, the world has been ruled “על פי מידת-הדין” (by God’s attribute of justice), since the Temple was destroyed, but there are many signs that the “קץ” (End of Days) is near. He says it is possible to calculate the date of the “גאולה” (redemption) from the mysterious prophecies of the Book of Daniel and announces the date as “התכ”ו” (5426), that is 1665/66 C.E [255].

¹¹ Regarding the subject of דיבוקים (dybbuks), see: Section 3.2, 71 f.

This is also the date given for the full redemption, according to the calculations of the Kabbalists in *דער שטן אין גאָרײ*.¹² It is, of course, the date of Shabbatai Zvi's proclamation of himself as the Messiah and the beginning of the Shabbatean messianic mass movement. The emissary then informs Yankev about the activities of the "מקובלים" (Kabbalists) in the Land of Israel, their studies of the Kabbalah, their fasts and their activities with holy names and combinations of letters, as mentioned above.¹³

The emissary's description of the activities of the Kabbalists in the Land of Israel corresponds to historical accounts of Shabbatean activities before Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy. At this stage in history the followers of the Shabbatean movement still observed Jewish law very strictly. They were filled with "penitential enthusiasm", practicing fasts and other "penitential exercises". All of these practices were directed to the specific purpose of "hastening the advent of redemption".¹⁴

Before the emissary bids Yankev farewell, he advises him to settle in the Land of Israel with his son, so that he should be among the first to welcome the "גואל" (redeemer). He also hints that the Kabbalists already knew the identity of the Messiah. The emissary does not wish to say more, because: "ודי לחכימא ברמיזא" (for the wise person a hint is sufficient), but he tells Yankev: "מיר'ן נאך דערלעבן ישועות און נחמות!... במהרה בימינו!..." (We will yet experience salvations and consolations!... Soon, in our days!...) – [262].¹⁵

Here the emissary uses prophetic language, announcing "salvations" and "consolations", "במהרה בימינו" (soon, in our days). Prophecies such as these were a common phenomenon at the time before Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy. The words of the emissary in this passage confirm two of the factors, which contributed to the success of the Shabbatean

¹² *דער שטן אין גאָרײ*, 27.

¹³ See: Section 3.5, 104 f.; Section 7.3, 248.

¹⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 466 f.

¹⁵ For a more detailed analysis of the emissary's words to Yankev, see: Section 3.5, 104-106.

propaganda at the time, as mentioned previously: The “messianic call” came from the “Holy Land”, and from the beginning the “messianic manifestation was accompanied by a renewal of prophecy”.¹⁶

The epilogue takes place many years after Shabbatai Zvi’s apostasy. It begins by giving a short account of the events in Pilica in the twenty years between Yankev’s departure to the Land of Israel and his return to Pilica. It recounts the split in the Jewish community at the time of Shabbatai Zvi’s messianic activities: “קהל האט געלייגט די כת אין חרם, אָבער די כת (The community excommunicated the sect, but the sect excommunicated the rabbi and the seven town elders.) – [278].

The followers of Shabbatai Zvi are here referred to as the “כת” (sect), as they are in “דער שטן אין גאָר”¹⁷ But while in “דער שטן אין גאָר” the term “כת” is applied to the Shabbatean movement even before Shabbatai Zvi’s apostasy, which is not historically correct, in “דער קנעכט” it is not clear, whether the series of excommunications described here is meant to have taken place before or after Shabbatai Zvi’s conversion to Islam.¹⁸

Furthermore it is stated that among the “מאמינים אין שבתי צבי” (believers in Shabbatai Zvi) there were those who tore the roofs from their houses and packed all their belongings, expecting to be in the Land of Israel at the time of the messianic redemption. Others occupied themselves with “קבלה מעשית” (practical Kabbalah) – [278].¹⁹

After Shabbatai Zvi’s apostasy the majority of Jews in Pilica is reported to have recognized their error and turned away “פֿון דער אמונה אין דעם פֿאַלשן משיח” (from the belief

¹⁶ Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 464. See also: Section 3.5, 103 f.

¹⁷ “דער שטן אין גאָר”, 64, 81.

¹⁸ Before Shabbatai Zvi’s apostasy Shabbatean messianism cannot be described as a sect, since it encompassed the majority of the Jewish population. Only after the apostasy did it break into “radical and sectarian forms”. Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 58.

¹⁹ In the English “קבלה מעשית” is simply translated as “cabala”, omitting any reference to the magical character of this particular form of Kabbalah [English: 216].

in the false Messiah). But there were also those, who remained faithful to the apostate. They wrote the abbreviation “ש"ץ” (Shabbatai Zvi) on the margins of religious works and used Shabbatean “קמיעות” (amulets). Apart from their belief that Shabbatai Zvi would return and rebuild Jerusalem, the “בני-מהימנותא” (Faithful) also shared business interests and ridiculed those righteous people, whom they swindled in their business dealings. Furthermore the radical Shabbateans ceased to observe Jewish law and committed all kinds of transgressions and abominations [278 f.].²⁰

Parallel to the account of the events in Pilica during the twenty years between Yankev’s departure and his return, the epilogue recounts the main events in Yankev’s life during the same period of time. It is reported that Yankev’s son, Binyomin-Eliezer, had grown up as an “עלוי” (prodigy), who began to study Kabbalah when he was thirteen. At that time both father and son were followers of Shabbatai Zvi. When Yankev reflects on that time, he immediately adds the epithet “ימח שמו” (May his name be blotted out) to Shabbatai Zvi’s name and recalls that he and his son had both been “פֿאַרפֿירט פֿון דעם פֿאַלשן משיח” (deceived by the false Messiah) – [281].²¹

Yankev remembers the time, when Shabbatai Zvi was driven out of Jerusalem. He had known “נתן העוזי” (Nathan of Gaza) and Shmuel Primo personally. He had used Shabbatean “קמיעות” (amulets) and discarded the fasts of Tisha b’Av and the 17th of *Tamuz*. Yankev had nearly converted to Islam together with many other followers of Shabbatai Zvi, but he had recognized his error and realized, he had sunk “אין שאול תחתיה” (into the lowest abyss). He had subsequently repented and taken severe “סיגופים”

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the antinomian character of the radical wing of Shabbateans after Shabbatai Zvi’s apostasy, see: Section 3.5, 108-110.

²¹ In the translation Yankev’s epithet to Shabbatai Zvi’s name is omitted [English: 218].

(penances) upon himself [281 f.].²²

Shabbatai Zvi's expulsion from Jerusalem, which is referred to here, is a historical event. Following Shabbatai Zvi's journey to Jerusalem, probably in mid-June 1665, during which he shocked the rabbis of Jerusalem with his strange behaviour, he was excommunicated and expelled by the Jerusalem rabbinate. This expulsion took place despite the fact that some of the rabbis embraced the faith in Shabbatai Zvi, among them Shmuel Primo, an eminent rabbinic scholar and confirmed Kabbalist. It also took place despite the fact that several rabbinic scholars, who had examined Shabbatai Zvi's prophet, Nathan of Gaza, had admitted that "the spirit was truly upon him".²³

The abolition of the fasts, which is referred to in this paragraph, also occurred before Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy. Shabbatai Zvi abolished the fast of the 17th of *Tamuz* in 1665 and the fast of Tisha b'Av by a "messianic edict" in 1666.²⁴

Thus Yankev is described here as having been a devout follower of the Shabbatean movement until Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy, only recognizing his error, when Shabbatai Zvi converted to Islam.

Another thought, which Yankev expresses on the subject of Shabbatai Zvi, is noteworthy. He believes that "כל מה דעבד רחמנא לטב עבד" (Everything, which the Merciful did, was for the good). Even Shabbatai Zvi had not come in vain: "איינער די קינפעטאָרין קריגט די וואָרע" ("Before the woman in childbirth has her real birthpangs, she has false birthpangs.") – [282].

The "birthpangs" mentioned here obviously allude to the "חבלי משיח", in the Talmud referred to as the "חבלי של משיח" (birthpangs of the Messiah), which are supposed to

²² The translation omits the reference to the penances, which Yankev took upon himself [English: 219].

²³ Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 239-251.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 236, 630.

precede messianic redemption.²⁵ The historical event commonly interpreted as the “birthpangs of the Messiah” by the followers of Shabbatai Zvi, were the Chmielnicki massacres in 1648. This is also the date given for the “birthpangs of the Messiah” by the Kabbalists in *דער שטן אין גאָר*.²⁶

Yankev’s association of the messianic movement ignited by the false Messiah Shabbatai Zvi with “false birthpangs”, is a far more unusual and original thought. But Yankev’s words also reflect his firm belief that the “real” messianic “birth-pangs” and the ensuing messianic redemption are still to come in the not so distant future.

This also corresponds to Yankev’s pronouncements during his encounter with the “פאַרבאָרגענע שבתי-צב'ניקעס” (secret followers of Shabbatai Zvi) in Pilica, who approach Yankev, hoping that he is one of them. But whenever someone mentions Shabbatai Zvi’s name, Yankev calls out “ימה שמו וזכרו” (May his name and memory be blotted out), which immediately shows these members of the “כת” (sect) that they were mistaken in their assumption. In addition to this, when he describes the situation in the Land of Israel, Yankev speaks about the “אמתע מקובלים, וישט קיין פאַלשע” (true Kabbalists, not the false ones), who are attempting to bring about the “קץ” (End of Days) – [286].²⁷

Unlike Bashevis’s first seventeenth-century novel, *דער שטן אין גאָר*, where Shabbatean messianism is the main focus of Bashevis’s literary creation, in *דער קנעכט* it plays a relatively minor role, being invoked only in the last few sections of the main part and in the epilogue, which is replete with references to Shabbatai Zvi and his messianic movement.

This design of the novel has two effects: Firstly, it provides the historical setting of

²⁵ b Sanhedrin 98 b.

²⁶ *דער שטן אין גאָר*, 27.

²⁷ The translation omits the reference to the “כת” (sect) and only mentions the “true cabalists”, about whom Yankev is speaking, while omitting the emphasis that these are not the “false” ones associated with the false Messiah Shabbatai Zvi [222 f.].

Yankev's individual story by placing the description of the events of his later life within the framework of seventeenth-century Shabbatean messianism. Secondly, the fact that these references to the Shabbatean movement only appear towards the end of the novel, also shows that Shabbateanism is nothing more than the last "among the many temptations", which Yankev has to overcome.²⁸ But although Yankev's adherence to Shabbatean messianism turns out to have been based on a gross delusion, it is presented by Bashevis as not having been in vain, since it has led to Yankev's emigration to the Land of Israel, which has enabled his son to grow up as a Jew and eventually to become the head of a *yeshivah* and the son-in-law of a rabbi. Thus, reflecting on his own life, Yankev is certainly right in acknowledging that everything which the Merciful has done, was for the good, and that not even Shabbatai Zvi had come in vain.

7.5. *Zimzum*, the "Breaking of the Vessels" and *Tikun* – Lurianic Concepts and Their Interpretation in *דער קנעכט*

While Shabbatean messianism, which presented itself in the light of Lurianic ideas, is only a short episode at the end of *דער קנעכט*, the main part of the novel is replete with Lurianic references and allusions to Lurianic ideas on creation, the emergence of evil and the hope for redemption. In Lurianic terms these ideas are expressed in the three concepts of *Zimzum*, the "breaking of the vessels" and *Tikun*, which are alluded to and interpreted by Bashevis in *דער קנעכט*.

7.5.1. The Concept of *Zimzum* – Yankev's Experience of God in the Two Extremes of Concealment and Revelation in Nature

The first direct reference to the concept of *Zimzum* occurs during one of Bashevis's

²⁸ Cf. L.S. Friedman, *Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 52.

countless descriptions of nature in the novel. When Yankev – in his situation of exile in the mountains – witnesses the sky, the mountains, the valleys and the wooded slopes disappearing in the fog, he understands the meaning of “הסתר פנים” (the hiding of God’s face) and “צמצום” (*Zimzum*) for the first time in his life. Before the fog everything was full of light, now everything is dark. “ווייטקייטן זיינען געוואָרן איינגעשרומפֿן” (Distances have shrunk), and “דאָס ממשותדיקע האָט פֿאַרלוירן די האַפֿט” (that which was once tangible has lost its substance). [60].²⁹

It is no coincidence that Yankev’s insight concerning the hiding of God’s face and *Zimzum* occurs during one of his contemplations of nature, because no “religious knowledge of God” can be gained except through the contemplation of the relationship of God to His creation, as mentioned previously.³⁰

Like Yasha Mazur in פון לובלין קונצנמאַכער דער, Yankev experiences God in the two extreme forms of concealment and of revelation in creation.³¹ Both of these experiences of the Divine, however, are referred to within the context of Yankev’s contemplation of nature. In this passage Yankev’s sudden intuitive understanding of the meaning of *Zimzum* is derived from the disappearance of familiar landscapes, caused by the denseness of the fog and his experience of light turning into darkness in an instant. The images of shrinking distances and of darkness conform to the Lurianic understanding of *Zimzum* as contraction within the infinite ‘*Ein-Sof*’ and the concealment of its light. But most interesting in this context is the fact that the idea of *Zimzum* is connected here with the experience of exile, since according to Scholem, *Zimzum* can be regarded as “the deepest symbol of exile”.³²

²⁹ In the English “הסתר פנים” is translated as “God’s hidden face” and “צמצום” as “the shrinking of His light”.

The “היכלות” are referred to as “mansions” and the “ארפי הקדוש” as “sacred chariots” [English: 52].

³⁰ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88. See also: Section 3.4.1, 81.

³¹ See: Section 6.3.1, 204-209.

³² Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 261.

The idea of “הסתר פנים” or the “hiding of God’s face”, which is closely connected with the concept of *Zimzum* in this passage, is a recurrent motive within the novel. It occurs either on its own, as it does in this paragraph, expressing Yankev’s experience of God’s concealment, or it is contrasted with the image of the hand of the Creator, expressing the tension between the two extreme experiences of God in His concealment and His revelation in nature.

This is the case in a passage at the beginning of the novel, where Yankev admires the fiery clouds at sunrise, in which he can detect “גאָטס האַנט” (God’s hand). Yankev has this impression despite the fact that he has experienced God as having punished His chosen people and having “פאַרבאָרגן זײַן פנים” (hidden His face from it) – [12].

In another passage of the novel these two images also appear within close proximity.

While Yankev is reaping the fields, he notices a variety of small creatures, crickets, ladybirds and other crawling and flying insects, each one with its own structure, which makes him think that “ערגעץ אַ האַנט האָט דאָס אַלץ באַשאַפֿן. ערגעץ אַן אויג האָט דערויף געוואַכט” (some hand has created all of this. Some eye has watched over it.) – [42]. Later Yankev sings “זמירות” (*Zmirot*), melodies from the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy and “אַקדמות” (*Akdamot*) for Shavuot, while he is reaping. He also starts arguing with God, asking Him: “עד מתי, ה', ווי לאַנג נאָך וועט געוועלטיקן די קליפה [...]?” (How long, God, how long will the *Klipah* still have the upper hand [...]?) – [42].³³ When Yankev says it is dark, he is referring to the “חושך מצריים” (darkness of Egypt), and asks God to show His light. He asks for an end to human suffering, although he acknowledges: “אַוודאי דאַרף מען: בחירה, אַוודאי האָסטו געמוזט פאַרבאָרגן זײַן פנים. You had to hide Your face.) – [42 f.].

As in the previously discussed passage [60], the idea of the hiding of God’s face is

³³ The translation makes no mention of the *Klipah* [English: 38 f.].

closely connected with the image of darkness, the absence of God's light. This idea is also explicitly connected here with the problem of human suffering. The explanation of evil and suffering, given here by Yankev, is a teleological interpretation of the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*, which is advanced by various of Bashevis's characters throughout his works, as mentioned previously.³⁴

In this passage the term *Zimzum* itself does not appear [42 f.]. But the existence of evil and human suffering is explained as resulting from the hiding of God's face, which was necessary for the sake of "בחירה" (free will), and in one of the previously discussed passages the concepts of *Zimzum* and "הסתר פנים" (the hiding of God's face) are explicitly connected [60].

There is another passage in the novel, where human suffering is connected with the idea of God hiding His face, as well as with the image of darkness [54]. In this passage the term "חושך מצריים" (darkness of Egypt) is also employed, as it was previously in exactly the same context [42].

Yankev is again reflecting on the question of evil and suffering, asking himself, why God had created the world and why He had found it necessary to include "די קליפות, די זיגד, די יסורים" (the *Klipot*, sins, suffering) in His plan [54].³⁵ Yankev realizes that he has spent a sixth of his life in slavery, apart from his fellow Jews and without any religious books, feeling like one of these naked souls, wandering around in the "עולם-התוהו" (world of chaos). Now that the summer has almost passed and the days are becoming shorter, the nights colder, Yankev has the impression that he can almost touch the "חושך מצריים" (darkness of Egypt) and the "הסתר פנים" (the hiding of God's face) – [54].³⁶

³⁴ See: Section 3.4.1, 84-87.

³⁵ The English translates these words as "pain, sin, evil", omitting any reference to the *Klipot* [English: 46].

³⁶ In the English this phrase is translated as "the void from which God's face was absent" [English: 47].

The “darkness of Egypt”, which is referred to here for the second time in the novel, alludes both to Yankev’s personal situation of slavery and to the darkness of a world, in which evil and suffering exist as a result of the apparent hiding of God’s face. It is also interesting to note that Yankev’s reflections on the darkness of Egypt and the hiding of God’s face are again inspired by his contemplation of a certain process in the world of nature, the end of the summer with its shortening days and cold nights.

In another passage in the novel Yankev explains the idea of *Zimzum* to Vanda (without employing this term, however), saying that God had been there from eternity, but that in the beginning there had been no space for creation, because “גאָט אַליין האָט אַלץ אָנגעפֿילט” (God Himself had filled everything). Thus in order to enable the creation of the world, God had to contract Himself, to dim His light and form “אַ בלוין און אַ פֿינסטערניש” (a void and a darkness). He then goes on to say that this void is synonymous with evil, but that this act, which made the existence of evil possible, was nevertheless necessary, so that there should be “פֿרייער ווילן” (free will) – [79 f.].

In addition to these passages, expressing Yankev’s experience of God’s concealment and the hiding of God’s face, which enabled the emergence of evil, suffering and metaphorical darkness in our world, there are various other passages, expressing the opposite experience of the Divine by Yankev, that is the experience of God’s revelation in nature.

When Yankev sees the sunlight filtering through the branches and pine needles, as if through a sieve, sparkling in all the colours of the rainbow, he begins to reflect on the contrast between God’s supposed “חסד” (lovingkindness) and God’s apparent “חכמה” (wisdom). He finds it difficult to believe in God’s lovingkindness, knowing that Chmielnicki’s Cossacks had buried children alive. But nonetheless he thinks that God’s

wisdom is visible everywhere in nature [16].

Another time Yankev is sitting in his barn in the mountains, waiting for the sun to rise and giving himself a “חשבון-הנפש” (account of his life). He realizes that, while he lives his life as a slave in Jan Bzik’s barn, the Creator continues to direct the world, makes the rivers flow, leads the stars on their course in the sky, ripens the grain in the fields and forms a human being from a drop of semen in a woman’s womb. For Yankev these are all great “ניסים” (miracles). He knows there are many questions, which one could pose to the Almighty, but he also knows that the human mind is not able to comprehend “גאטס מעשים” (God’s actions) – [38 f.].

In another passage in the novel the recurrent motif of the Creator’s hand appears again, in the context of one of Yankev’s contemplations of nature. On his way back to Wanda’s village from Józefów, Yankev admires the beauty of the countryside, the blue sky, the sweet smell of honey in the air and the different fragrances of each individual flower. He thinks that “א פאַרבאָרגענע האַנט” (a hidden hand) has carved and moulded each cornstalk, blade of grass, herb, fly and little worm [121].

In the course of these reflections the adjective “פאַרבאָרגן” (hidden) is used to describe the hand of the Creator, which Yankev can detect in the design of every little detail in the natural world. The corresponding verb has been employed previously in connection with the concept of “הסתר פנים”, the hiding of God’s face [12, 42 f., 54]. But while the expression “דאָס פאַרבאָרגן גאָטס פנים” (the hiding of God’s face) indicates the experience of a God, who is seemingly absent from a world, which is full of evil and suffering [54], the expression “א פאַרבאָרגענע האַנט” (a hidden hand) points to an understanding of God as the Creator, who, although He Himself remains invisible, has manifested Himself in His creation [121].

Continuing on his journey to Wanda’s village, Yankev notices an eagle in the sky,

hanging suspended in mid-air, without moving its wings, looking as if it was kept aloft by a “שם” (Divine name) – [131].³⁷ Looking about him, Yankev realizes that he is as solitary as “אדם הראשון” (the first human being). At nightfall he admires the stars above him, the lights of the “עולם העשיה” (World of Action), and he begins to reflect on space and time [131 f.]. For Yankev it is a strange feeling to be “א קליין מענטשעלע” (a small human being), surrounded by eternity, by countless forces, by כרובים, שרפים, מלאכים “(angels, seraphs, cherubs, mystical wheels), by “ספירות, עולמות, סודות” (*Sfirot*, worlds, mysteries).³⁸ But he thinks that the human smallness is not less amazing than the “געטלעכע גרויסקייט” (Divine greatness) – [132].

The association of the majesty of the nocturnal sky with the higher worlds is a recurrent motif throughout Bashevis’s work, as stated above.³⁹ The other passage in this novel, in which the nocturnal sky is associated with the higher spheres, also includes references to both the idea of God’s concealment, *Zimzum* and the hiding of God’s face, and the idea of God’s revelation in nature. The latter passage also needs to be discussed in this context.

When Yankev watches the nocturnal sky one summer night on Pilicki’s estate, he notices a star, shining with a strange, blue-green light “נישט-פֿון-דער-וועלט” (not of this world). Despite his difficulties here on earth, Yankev finds it comforting to know that there is “א גאט, מלאכים, שרפים, ליכטיקע עולמות” (a God, angels, seraphs, worlds full of light) – [189].⁴⁰

Leafing through various mystical works, the *Sefer Yezirah*, *Sefer Razi’el* and the *Tikunei*

³⁷ The English translates this phrase as “kept aloft by cabala” [English: 104]. No mention is made of Kabbalah in the Yiddish original at this point.

³⁸ The English translates these words as “angels, seraphim, cherubim, arcane worlds, and divine mysteries” [English: 105]. The reference to the *Sfirot* is omitted in the translation.

³⁹ See: Section 2.3, 28 f.; Section 5.4.2, 166-168.

⁴⁰ The English translates this phrase as: “But it was a comfort to realize that God and his angels and seraphim dwelt in their heavenly mansions.” [English: 151]. No mention is made of “worlds full of light” in the translation.

Zohar, and drawing in the “קדושה” (holiness) of the letters, Yankev thinks that it is even a privilege to exist as a sinful person among so many “עולמות, היכלות, שרים” (worlds, mystical palaces, heavenly princes).⁴¹ From his study of the *‘Ez Hayim* he remembers that the *Klipah* is nothing else than *Zimzum*, emptiness, the hiding of God’s face [189], as mentioned previously.⁴²

Later on, walking in the fields, Yankev reflects on the “חכמה” (wisdom) of the Creator, which is visible in every little insect. The summer night seems full of joy and music.

Yankev thinks that the night itself is like a “קבלה-ספר” (kabbalistic work), full of “שמות, נקודות, רזין דרזין” (sacred names, vowel signs, mysteries upon mysteries). The stars appear to him “ווי אותיות, ווי פינטעלעך, ווי טראָפּ” (like letters, like vowels, like musical notation) – [190].

In this passage it is again a contemplation of the majesty of the nocturnal sky, which convinces a person of the existence of higher worlds, of mysterious forces and of a God, who has created all of this. The “חכמה” (wisdom) of the Creator, which is visible in every little detail of the natural world, is referred to again here. While in a previous passage in the novel God’s apparent “חכמה” (wisdom) was contrasted with God’s “חסד” (lovingkindness), so difficult to apprehend in the face of suffering and evil [16], here the Creator’s revelation in nature is juxtaposed with God’s concealment through the act of *Zimzum*, which enabled the existence of evil in the world [189 f.]. In this passage the expression “הסתר פנים” (the hiding of God’s face) is used again in connection with the concept of *Zimzum*, as it was done previously in the novel [60]. Here the term “ליידיקייט” (emptiness) is added [189], expressing the idea that in the act of *Zimzum* God has vacated a space, into which He could place His creation. But since

⁴¹ In the English these words are translated as “spheres, chariots, powers, and potentates” [English: 151], which are all different entities from those mentioned in the Yiddish.

⁴² See: Section 3.4.2, 91.

this empty space was devoid of God's presence as well as of God's goodness, it also enabled the emergence of evil.

Juxtaposed to this idea of God's concealment in the act of *Zimzum*, is the idea of God's revelation in nature, which is not only expressed in the reference to the Creator's wisdom, but also in the mystical image of the nocturnal sky, looking like a kabbalistic work, full of sacred names, letters, vowel signs and musical notations. This image can also be found in other places throughout Bashevis's work, as stated above.⁴³ It expresses the idea of the creation of the world by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, an idea, elaborated in the *Sefer Yezirah*, which is specifically mentioned in this passage.

On the one hand, Bashevis's *על קנעכט* contains various references to the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*, the image of the hiding of God's face and the experience of God's concealment in a world, abundant in evil and suffering. On the other hand, it also contains many references to God's "hand" or God's "wisdom", visible in the wonders of nature, expressing the idea of God's revelation in His creation. But both of these diametrically opposed experiences of the Divine are placed side by side, and sometimes they even appear in one and the same passage of the novel.

7.5.2. Lurianic Allusions Concerning the "Breaking of the Vessels", the *Klipot* and the "Sparks of Holiness"

In addition to the references to the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*, analyzed above, there are a few Lurianic allusions in the novel, connected to the concept of the "breaking of the vessels".

⁴³ See: Section 3.3, 76 f.

There are various references to the *Klipot*, which were formed as a result of the “breaking of the vessels”. Thus *Klipot* are mentioned in connection with Yankev’s uneasiness concerning dogs. It is necessary for Yankev to keep a dog, in order to protect the cattle in his care from wild animals. At first he dislikes the black, barking creature, remembering that the “אר” (ARI – Rabbi Isaac Luria) and other “מקובלים” (Kabbalists) have compared dogs to the “קליפות” (*Klipot*). But eventually Yankev grows accustomed to his dog and even gives him a name: “בלעם” (Bilem; in the English: Balaam) – [15 f.].⁴⁴

On three occasions *Klipot* are mentioned in connection with the idea of “הסתר פנים” (the hiding of God’s face), as discussed above [42 f., 54, 189].⁴⁵ Thus Yankev asks, for how long the *Klipah* will still have the upper hand [42], and why God had found it necessary to include *Klipot*, sin and suffering in His creation in the first place [54]. Yankev’s explanation that the root of evil, for which the *Klipah* stands, was already inherent in the Creator’s first act of *Zimzum*, has also been discussed previously [189].⁴⁶

There is one more direct reference to the *Klipot* in the novel, which has not been mentioned so far. On his return to Pilica from the Land of Israel, Yankev remembers the words of the “מקובלים” (Kabbalists), to whom he has become close during the last years of his life. They have tried to dissuade Yankev from returning to Poland, saying that the end of the “חבלי-לדה” (birthpangs [of the Messiah]) and the “מלחמת-גוג-ומגוג” (War of Gog and Magog) were near. Satan was drawing up his accusations, and: “די קליפות האָבן
“אײַנגעלייגט וועלטן איבערצואוועגן די וואָגשאַל פֿון חסד.” (The *Klipot* were moving worlds, in order to weigh down the scales of [God’s quality of] lovingkindness.) – [284].⁴⁷ The

⁴⁴ In the English “קליפות” is translated as “satanic hosts” [English: 15].

⁴⁵ See: Section 3.4.2, 90 f. ; Section 7.5.1, 256 f., 260 f.

⁴⁶ See: Section 3.4.2, 91.

⁴⁷ The term *Klipot* is not employed in the English. The phrase is translated as: “Soon would come that battle when the evil hosts would attempt to overturn the scale of mercy.” [English: 221].

forces, which wanted to bring the “גאולה” (redemption), could not spare any observant Jew in the Land of Israel, or any blessing, prayer or “כוונה” (religious intention in performing a commandment) – [284].

The Kabbalists referred to here, are not those who had calculated the year 1665/66 as the date for the complete redemption and had endorsed Shabbatai Zvi’s messianic claims. When Yankev sets out on his journey to Poland, it is already many years after Shabbatai Zvi’s apostasy, and Yankev has distanced himself from the Shabbatean movement. The Kabbalists, with whom Yankev is acquainted, convey traditional messianic ideas about the End of Days, the “birthpangs of the Messiah” and the “War of Gog and Magog”, said to precede the coming of the Messiah.⁴⁸ The term *Klipot* is not used in its strict Lurianic sense in this context, that is as referring to the “shards” of the broken “vessels”. The term is simply employed to refer to the forces of evil, which form an obstacle on the path towards redemption, by bringing so much evil into the world, that God will be forced to judge His creatures with His “מידת הדין” (attribute of justice), instead of His “מידת הרחמים” (attribute of mercy) or “חסד” (lovingkindness), and will have to decide that the time to send the Messiah has not yet come.

As mentioned above, the literal meaning of the term “קליפה” is “husk” or “shell”. In The novel there are two references to a “שָׂאֵל” (“husk” or “shell”), in connection with Sore/Wanda, which are possibly allusions to the *Klipah*.

When Wanda comes up to Yankev’s barn in the middle of a thunderstorm, Yankev looks at her in the twilight of the barn, illumined by an occasional flash of lightning, and he sees a “הימלישער שיין” (heavenly glow) on her face. It seems to him that the Wanda he knew was just “אַ משל און אַ מגושמדיקע שָׂאֵל” (a parable and a corporeal shell) of the

⁴⁸ On the “birthpangs of the Messiah”, see: b Sanhedrin 98 a and b. On the “War of Gog and Magog”, see: Ezekiel 38, 2 ff.; m Eduyot 2, 10 and b Berakhot 13 a.

woman, who is revealing herself to him now. Yankev asks himself, whether she is not created “בצלם אלוקים” (in the image of God), and whether her beauty is not a reflection of God’s emanation of “תפארת” (beauty): “האָט דען נישט עשוי אין זיך אַ ניצוץ פֿון אברהם און יצחק...”⁴⁹ [62]. God’s emanation of “תפארת”, of which Wanda’s beauty is a reflection, is, of course, the sixth and central one of the ten *Sfirot*. In Bashevis’s “דער שטן אין גאָר” Rekhele is likewise connected to the *Sfirah* of “תפארת” at one point.⁵⁰

The connection between the image of the “spark”, alluding to the “sparks of holiness” and the “husk”, alluding to the *Klipah*, has been discussed previously.⁵¹

The idea of the “ניצוצות הנשמות” (“sparks of the souls”) was, in fact, highly developed in Lurianic Kabbalah and was connected to the concept of “גלגול”, the transmigration of the soul.⁵² While some Kabbalists limited the idea of *gilgul* “to the souls of Jews”, many of them acknowledged it as a “universal law for all human beings” and believed that the “souls of the pious Gentiles” deserved to transmigrate “and will be forgiven, and thereafter will enter into Israel and be sanctified”.⁵³

Much later, when the Polish Gentile Wanda, the daughter of Jan Bzik, dies as the Jewish Sore bas Avrom, and Yankev watches over the body of the deceased, he notices that even the expression of acquiescence has vanished from her face. Yankev can almost see that she is somewhere else. The “נשמה” (soul) has become completely separate from the “גוף” (body). All that is left now is “אַ רעשטל, אַ שאָל, אַ דומם” (a small remainder, a shell, an inanimate object) – [239].⁵⁴

⁴⁹ The English translates “אַ משל און אַ מגרשדיקע שאָל” as “a sign or a husk”. The “spark” of Abraham and Isaac is not mentioned at all. Instead this sentence is translated as: “Had not Esau come from the seed of Abraham and Isaac?” [English: 53 f.].

⁵⁰ “דער שטן אין גאָר” 122.

⁵¹ See: Section 3.4.2, 92 f.

⁵² Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 347 f.

⁵³ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 238.

⁵⁴ The translation omits these two sentences, stating simply “Clearly, she was no longer there.” [English: 189].

Previously Yankev had called Sore “הייליקע נשמה” (holy soul) – [236]. Now – with the departure of her “נשמה” – every trace of holiness has left her, and even her natural expression of humility has vanished from her face. All that remains now is a dead body, an empty “shell”, without any “spark of holiness” clinging to it anymore.

Immediately after this Yankev is captured by Polish soldiers [239 f.] for the “crime” of converting a Christian to Judaism, and has to undergo more tribulations, which are all the more difficult to bear, since after Sore’s death he has lost all hope [244].

Later on, when Yankev has already recovered his son from Pilica and has set out on his journey to the Land of Israel with the child, he realizes how many troubles he has endured during his life. But he has never been as full of fear, as he is during that night, when he carries his small child through a completely dark forest. The moon has already disappeared, but the sun has not yet risen. Yankev prays very intently to God, surrendering himself to the “הענט פֿון דער השגחה” (hands of Providence), although he knows that a person must not rely on “נסים” (miracles). But now he has no other choice than to thrust his burden upon God. Nothing is left “ווי דער פֿונק בטחון” (than the spark of faith) – [272].⁵⁵

This is the second and last reference to a “spark” in this novel. Throughout Bashevis’s work these “sparks” appear as glimpses of Divine light and redemptive good in contexts of utter darkness, both physically and metaphorically, as mentioned above.⁵⁶

In this passage we find a context of darkness, which is both physical and metaphorical. It is mentioned explicitly that the moon has set, and it is utterly dark in the forest through which Yankev is carrying his child. Apart from this, Yankev’s situation is one of despair and hopelessness, as stated previously [244], and Yankev is more afraid than he has ever

⁵⁵ In the English this sentence is translated as: “He had nothing left but his faith.” [English: 211]. There is no reference to a “spark” at this point.

⁵⁶ See: Section 3.4.2, 89, 92 f.

been before, because his child's life is endangered [272]. In this context of utter darkness, despair and fear there is a glimpse of Divine light, a "פֿויק" (spark), which enables Yankev to continue on his perilous journey, and this "spark" is his "בטחון" (faith).

Yankev prays to God for the day to come, for the sun to rise, sensing, while he prays, that his words have a double meaning. It is as if he had meant to say: Let the "אויסלייזונג" (redemption) come! Let there be an end "צו דעם פֿינסטערן גלות" (to the dark exile)! – Shortly after this the forest is suddenly filled with "אן אויסטערליש ליכט" (a strange light). For a moment he thinks that "א ליכט פֿון יענער וועלט" (an other-worldly light) has revealed itself to him, but then he realizes that it is the light of the rising sun [272 f.].

Unlike some of Bashevis's other novels, most notably *די פאמיליע מושקאט* and *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, which are abundant with "sparks" of light in contexts of darkness, in *דער קנעכט* there are only two references to "sparks".

This might be put down to the fact that this novel is not an exploration of human evil, of sin or of metaphorical darkness, but a story of faith and love, filled with beautiful descriptions of nature. Unlike Oyzer-Heshl Banet and Yasha Mazur in the two novels referred to here, the two main characters of *דער קנעכט*, Yankev and Sore/Wanda, are not ambiguous characters, but are as good, as loving, as faithful and as righteous as human beings can be. Thus for most of the novel there is no need of showing "sparks" of redemptive good in an otherwise dark and evil context, since there is little darkness and evil in Yankev's and Sore's situation.

The only two instances of "sparks" occur within situations of darkness for Yankev, firstly, when he is afraid of committing a sin with his love for a Gentile woman, but then discovers the "spark" of holiness within her, and secondly, when Sore has died as a

righteous Jewish woman and Yankev has lost every desire to carry on with his life, a “פֿױק בטחון” (spark of faith) appears, which helps Yankev to continue on his dark and difficult journey and to care for his and Sore’s child.

7.5.3. A Vision of *Tikun* – The Image of the “זיווג קדישא” (Sacred Marriage) in

דער קנעכט

The love story between Yankev and Sore/Wanda is at the center of Bashevis’s novel *דער קנעכט*, which has been called a “mythic narrative with a hierogamy or sacred marriage at its core”.⁵⁷

The idea of the “זיווג קדישא” or “sacred marriage” plays a central role in the *Zohar* and is further developed by subsequent Kabbalists. As explained previously, it is primarily understood as the union of the two *Sfirot* of “מלכות”, closely associated with the *Shekhinah*, the female aspect of God, and “תפארת”, its male partner.⁵⁸

The love between Yankev and Wanda is at two points in the novel associated with images from the Biblical love song “שיר השירים” (Song of Songs). When Yankev dreams of Wanda one night and awakes with feelings of love and passion, which he ascribes to the “יצר-הרע” (evil inclination), he decides to immerse himself in the nearby river to purify himself [38]. But even the cold water cannot extinguish his passion. A verse from “שיר השירים” comes to his mind: “מים רבים לא יוכלו לכבות את האהבה:” (“Many waters cannot quench love”) – [Shir 8, 7]. But Yankev admonishes himself immediately for this comparison, reminding himself that the love, referred to in Song of Songs, is the “ליבשאַפֿט פֿון קודשא-ברוך-הוא צו דער כנסת ישראל” (love of the Holy One Blessed Be He to the community of Israel), and that every word of this Scriptural text is full of “רוזין-דרוזין”

⁵⁷ Cf. B. Lyons, ‘Sexual Love in I.B. Singer’s Work’, in: D. Walden (ed.), *A Reconsideration*, 69.

⁵⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 138. See also: Section 3.4.3, 96.

(mysteries upon mysteries) – [37].

The description of the first night, which Yankev and Wanda spend together, also contains Biblical motifs. When Wanda comes to the place in the barn, where Yankev is sleeping, he feels reminded of the Biblical story of Ruth and Boaz [63 f.].⁵⁹ Later it is stated that Wanda has spoken to Yankev exactly as Ruth had spoken to Naomi:

“וואו דו וועסט גיין, וועל איך גיין, דיין פֿאַלק איז מיין פֿאַלק, דיין גאָט איז מיין גאָט.” (Where you will go, I will go. Your people is my people. Your God is my God.) – [71].⁶⁰

Ruth, the Moabite, who entered the community of Israel and became the great-grandmother of King David, is seen as the prototype of all converts to Judaism.

In fact, before Yankev and Wanda consummate their union, Yankev requires of her, what is required of every convert, the complete immersion in water from a natural source. Usually a “מקווה” (ritual bath) would be used for this purpose, in which water from a natural source is combined with water from an invalid source, according to strict halakhic regulations. Here the stream close to Yankev’s barn is used for the immersion, which as a source of natural water would be completely valid, according to Halakhah.

Yankev’s and Wanda’s immersion in the cold stream in the middle of the night contains an element of “מסירת-נפש” (the willingness to give up one’s life). Yankev thinks that thus Jews have jumped into fire and water for the sake of “קידוש-השם” (literally: the sanctification of God’s name ; i.e. martyrdom). When Wanda remarks that she has done this for Yankev, he replies that it was not for him, but for God, although at the same time he is frightened by his own words [65].⁶¹

Back in the barn, when the two lovers finally succumb to their passion, Yankev is surprised by Wanda’s “התפעלות” (ecstasy), which could either come from God or from

⁵⁹ Cf. Ruth 3, 6-14.

⁶⁰ Cf. Ruth 1, 16.

⁶¹ The English omits the reference to “מסירת-נפש” and translates “קידוש-השם” as “martyrdom” [English: 56].

the “סיטרא אחרא” (*sitra 'ahra*). He is also astonished by the force of his own love and passion, and for the first time in his life he understands the verse from “שיר השירים”

which says: “...עזה כמוות אהבה...” (“love is strong as death” – Shir 8, 6) – [69].⁶²

The Biblical allusions, with which this passage is fraught, as well as the references to “מסירת-נפש”, “קידוש-השם” and the statement that Wanda’s immersion in the stream took place for the sake of God, lend a religious significance to the union of Yankev and Wanda. The “Biblical parallel” with Song of Songs associates their union “with the union in the sacred text”.⁶³

The love described in Song of Songs is, according to Jewish tradition, understood allegorically as referring to the love of God and the “כנסת ישראל” (community of Israel), as Yankev has also stated previously [37]. As explained above, in the Kabbalah the community of Israel was identified with the *Shekhinah*, and the interpretation of Song of Songs as referring to the community of Israel and its union with God was “transferred to the *Shekhinah*” and her union with the *Sfirah* of “תפארת”.⁶⁴

The fact that the union of Yankev and Wanda is associated with the “זיווג קדישא” or “sacred marriage” is emphasized by Yankev’s connection with his Biblical namesake יעקב, who in kabbalistic terms symbolizes the *Sfirah* of “תפארת”. In addition to this there is one passage in the novel, in which Sore/Wanda is explicitly connected to the Biblical רחל (Rokhl or Rachel), who symbolizes the *Shekhinah* in her state of exile from the rest of the Godhead.⁶⁵

The main part of the novel ends with a paragraph, in which Yankev’s situation after Sore’s death is presented in the light of the Biblical Yankev’s situation after the death of

⁶² In the translation the *sitra 'ahra* is not mentioned explicitly, but the question is asked, whether Wanda’s “ecstasy” was “from heaven or hell” [English: 57].

⁶³ Cf. B. Lyons, ‘Sexual Love in I.B. Singer’s Work’, in: D. Walden (ed.), *A Reconsideration*, 71.

⁶⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 106. See also: Section 3.4.3, 100 f.

⁶⁵ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 183; *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 149.

his beloved wife: „ער הייסט אויך יעקב. ס'איז אים אויך געשטאָרבן אַ באַליבטע פֿרוי אין דער פֿרעמד, אַ טאָכטער פֿון אַ געצנדיגער. מ'האַט זי אויך באַגראָבן אַזוי גוט ווי אויפֿן וועג. ס'איז אים אויך געבליבן אַ קינד.“ (His name was also Yankev. His beloved wife, the daughter of an idolater, had also died among strangers. She was also buried by the way. He was also left with a child.) – [274]. And a few lines later: „אַלץ איז געבליבן ווי געווען: די אַלטע ליבשאַפֿט, דער אַלטער ווייטיק. ס'וועלן אַפֿשר אַוועק גאָך פֿיר טויזנט יאָר און ערגעץ בײַ אַן אַנדער טײַך וועט שפּאַנען אַן אַנדער יעקב און ס'וועט אים אַפֿשטאָרבן אַן אַנדערע רחל. אַדער ווער ווייסט? אַפֿשר איז עס אַלץ דער אַיגענער יעקב און די אַיגענע רחל?“ (Everything remained as it had been: The old love, the old pain. Maybe another four thousand years would pass, and somewhere at another river another Yankev would walk, and another Rokhl would die. But who knows? Perhaps it was always the same Yankev and the same Rokhl?) – [274].

By associating Yankev and Sore with their Biblical counterparts in this way, these two characters become part of the “stream of Jewish history”.⁶⁶ But the statement that perhaps “it was always the same Yankev and the same Rokhl”, also seems to suggest a kabbalistic association to the effect that all the earthly unions of various “Yankevs” and “Rokhls” throughout Jewish history are reflections of the celestial “זיווג קדישאַ” of the *Sfirot* of “תפארת” and “מלכות” (the *Shekhinah*), with whom the Biblical Yankev and Rokhl are connected.

When Yankev returns to Wanda’s village from Józefów after their long separation, he remembers an idea from the “קבלה-ספרים” (kabbalistic works), which he has studied: “אַז יעדע לוסט צו לייב [...] האָט אַ שורש אין די עולמות עליונים” (that every physical desire [...] has its root in the upper worlds). According to this kabbalistic idea, everything is “זיווג” (coupling), “תורה, תפילה, יעדע מצווה, יעדער יחוד” (Torah, prayer, every fulfilment of a

⁶⁶ Cf. L.S. Friedman, *Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 69.

commandment, every unification of holy names) – [129].⁶⁷

In the *Zohar* every “earthly sexual union”, if it is performed “within the limits of *mitsvah* and *halakhah*”, is explained in terms of the “זיווג קדישא”, the “sacred union” in the realm of the *Sfirot*.⁶⁸ Yankev’s thought that every physical desire “has its root in the upper worlds” is thus a reflection of this Zoharic idea. In Lurianic Kabbalah the process of *Tikun* is described in even more explicit sexual terminology, as mentioned above.⁶⁹

In Bashevis’s *דער קנעכט* there is one passage, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, in which the concept of *Tikun* is explicitly linked with the union of Yankev and Sore/Wanda. Yankev reflects on the power of “תשובה” (repentance), which can turn transgressions into good deeds and God’s justice into lovingkindness: “אַמאָל איז אַפֿילו” “אָן עברה אַ געפֿעס פֿאַר זיַקונִים” (Sometimes even a transgression is a vessel for cosmic restorations). Yankev knows that he has sinned in his longing for a Gentile woman. But the Polish Wanda has subsequently become the Jewish Sore bas Avrom, who is about to give birth to a Jewish child. This means that the union between Yankev and Wanda, which has begun in transgression, has been transformed through Wanda’s conversion to Judaism and the couple’s marriage into a “vessel” for “תיקונים”. Their act of procreation, leading to the birth of a Jewish child, reflects the “sacred union” in the realm of the *Sfirot* in Zoharic terms. In Lurianic terms this “sacred union” forms part of the process of re-unification of the *Shekhinah* – or its restructured configuration in the *Parzuf* of “Rachel” – with the rest of the Godhead. This is the process of *Tikun*.

In another passage of the novel Sore is explicitly connected with the *Shekhinah*. This

⁶⁷ The translation provides an expanded version of this phrase: “Coupling was the universal act underlying everything: Torah, prayer, the Commandments, God’s holy names themselves were mysterious unions of the male and female principles.” [English: 103].

⁶⁸ Cf. G. Schden, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 183 f.

⁶⁹ See: Section 3.4.3, 94-96.

connection is made in the course of the description of Sore's death. Immediately after Sore's death it seems to Yankev that, when he is looking at her now, he merits to see a "געטלעכע געשטאַלט" (Divine being) from the "הימלישע היכלות" (celestial Palaces), from the "מעשה המרכבה" (work of the mystical Chariot) – [235].⁷⁰ He thinks that their union has begun with "לוסט צו לייב" (physical desire). But now, nine years later he is looking at pure "הייליקייט" (holiness), and he can see the "שלווה" (tranquility) resting on her face "ווי די שכינה" (like the *Shekhinah*) – [235 f.].⁷¹

After Sore's death Yankev never remarries. In the course of the years in the Land of Israel, during which he is involved with the Shabbateans, they try frequently to arrange a match for him. But he refuses consistently. After his break with the Shabbateans and his consequent "תשובה" (repentance) it is the rabbis and the "מקובלים" (Kabbalists), who try to convince him that "על-פי-דין און על-פי-קבלה" (according to the law and according to Kabbalah) he should find a new partner to form a "זווג" (couple) – [282 f.]. But again he refuses, feeling that Sore accompanies him, wherever he goes, and continues to talk to him in spirit. Yankev's love for Jewish learning continues to grow, and everything he studies, he explains to Sore in Yiddish and Polish. Sometimes, when yet another match is being suggested to him, Yankev is even tempted to answer: "די תורה איז מיין ווייב." (The Torah is my wife.) – [283].

Such a statement bears both historical and mystical allusions. On the one hand, it is reminiscent of the marriage ceremony, which Shabbatai Zvi performed between himself and a Torah scroll, to the greatest dismay of some of the most prominent rabbis of Salonika, who were present at this occasion.⁷² This association is strengthened by the

⁷⁰ This phrase is interpreted in a completely different way in the translation: "Jacob's sight became as if visionary, and he saw her entering a heavenly mansion." [English: 186].

⁷¹ This reference to the *Shekhinah* is omitted in the translation [English: 186].

⁷² Cf. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 159.

fact that Yankev was a follower of Shabbatai Zvi for some part of his life. On the other hand, there is a more profound mystical significance to this statement, since the Torah in all its “levels of meaning” is identified in the Kabbalah with the *Shekhinah*, who is referred to in the *Tikunei Zohar* as “פרדס התורה” (the paradise of the Torah), as mentioned above.⁷³ Since Sore has previously been associated with the *Shekhinah* [236] or with the female partner in the “זיווג קדישא” [37, 69], who is none other than the *Shekhinah*, Yankev’s statement that the Torah is his wife, can be understood as an allusion to the “sacred marriage”. Yankev’s earthly partner of a match, which came to reflect the celestial “sacred union” cannot be replaced by any other earthly partner. Instead Yankev is now concentrating on his spiritual union with the Torah and possibly with the *Shekhinah* itself, with which it is mystically identified.

One last passage in the novel deserves mentioning in connection with the idea of the “sacred marriage”. When Yankev suddenly dies after his return from the Land of Israel, and the gravedigger, in breaking ground for Yankev’s grave, discovers Sore’s bones, the Pilica community sees the “האנט פֿון דער השגחה” (hand of Providence) in this extraordinary coincidence. Although Sore’s conversion to Judaism was not recognized by the community at the time of her death, and she was buried outside the main part of the cemetery, the cemetery had grown during the course of the years, and it had, as it were, “געפֿסקנט אַז שרױ איז אַ ייִדיש קינד און אַ מת טהור” (passed the judgement that Sore is a Jewish child and a pure deceased) – [300]. Thus Yankev is buried next to Sore, and they are finally united in their death.

Through this miracle at the end of the novel, the sanctity of Yankev’s and Sore’s union is ultimately confirmed. It finds its final expression in the inscription on their tombstone,

⁷³ Cf. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 58. See also: Section 4.4.2, 143 f.

with which the novel is brought to a close: “הנאהבים והנעימים בחייהם ובמותם לא נפרדו”

([They] “were loved and dear in their lives, and in their death they were not divided” –

2 Sam 1, 23) – [301].

7.6. Conclusion

Like Bashevis’s first novel *דער קנעכט*, his later novel *דער שטן אין גאָר* is set in seventeenth-century Poland in the aftermath of the Chmielnicki massacres. But despite its concrete historical setting, this novel has a “vast backward and forward reference” through its various allusions, reaching back to Biblical times and forward to the time of the Holocaust.⁷⁴

Yankev “relives biblical bondage” as a slave to Polish peasants presented as “seventeenth century Egyptians”.⁷⁵ Like Moses he carves commandments in stone [39 f.]. The love story of Yankev and Wanda/Sore is likewise fraught with Biblical allusions. During the description of their first night together Wanda and Yankev are likened to Ruth and Boaz [64]. Verses from Song of Songs are employed in connection with their union [37, 69], as well as the verse from 2 Samuel, with which the novel is brought to a close [301]. But most of all Yankev is associated with his Biblical namesake, who also had to flee from a pursuer, whose beloved wife, the daughter of an idolater, had also died among strangers and who was also left with a child [274].

In addition to these Biblical allusions, the descriptions of the seventeenth century atrocities committed by Chmielnicki and his Cossacks contain obvious allusions to the Holocaust. The cruelty of these atrocities and the difficulty of the Jewish community to come to terms with this tragedy are presented in an even more pronounced way than they are in

⁷⁴ Cf. E. Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 73.

⁷⁵ Cf. I.H. Buchen, *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past*, 152.

דער שטן אין גאָרײ, which deals with the same historical period, but was written before the Holocaust. One of the most striking images in דער קנעכט in this respect is the idea that after Chmielnicki's massacres Poland had become "אײן בית-עולם" (one cemetery) – [106].

Compared to דער שטן אין גאָרײ, the extent of Jewish suffering during the calamity of 1648 and its aftermath is described in a more pronounced way in דער קנעכט. On the other hand, the upsurge of Shabbatean messianism as a response to the catastrophe, which was at the center stage of דער שטן אין גאָרײ, only plays a marginal role in דער קנעכט. It provides the historical framework for the description of the events in Yankev's later life, leading to his emigration to the Land of Israel, where he is able to bring up his son as a Jew. But the fact that Shabbatean messianism is only described as a short episode at the end of the novel, also shows that it is nothing more than the last in a series of trials and tribulations, which Yankev has to overcome.

Not only in connection with Shabbatean messianism, as in דער שטן אין גאָרײ, but also during the course of the whole novel, various kabbalistic references appear. Several Jewish mystical works are mentioned as having been studied by Yankev, or as being employed by him for magical or superstitious practices. Thus he is reported to use mystical works like *Sefer Yezirah* and *Sefer Razi'el* as a protection against demons, both for himself and particularly for Sore during the time of her difficult labour.

Apart from these references, it is mainly Lurianic ideas and allusions, which Bashevis employs at various points throughout the novel. The three main Lurianic concepts referred to either directly or indirectly in דער קנעכט are: *Zimzum*, the "breaking of the vessels" and *Tikun*.

Like Yasha Mazur in דער קנעכט, Yankev in דער קנעכט experiences God in the two extremes of concealment and revelation in nature. In דער קנעכט Yankev's

experience of a hidden, concealed God in a world full of evil and suffering, finds its expression in the Lurianic idea of *Zimzum*, the contraction and withdrawal of *'Ein-Sof*, in order to make the creation of the world possible, but also enabling the emergence of evil. This idea is also expressed in the image of “הסתר פנים”, the hiding of God’s face, which is juxtaposed to the image of God’s hand, which to Yankev seems to be visible everywhere in nature and points to his experience of God’s revelation in His creation.

Several other Lurianic allusions in this novel are connected to the concept of the “breaking of the vessels”, which led to the emergence of the *Klipot*, the forces of evil. Thus the *Klipot* are referred to on various occasions in the novel in connection with the question of evil, sin and suffering in our world. Furthermore there are two references to a “שָׂאָל” (“husk”), which are possible allusions to the *Klipah*, whose literal meaning is “husk”.

There are also two references to a “ניצוץ” or “פֿונק” (“spark”), which are most likely allusions to the “ניצוצות דקדושה” (“sparks of holiness”). As in other novels by Bashevis these “sparks” appear as glimpses of redemptive good in contexts of darkness. But while some of Bashevis’s novels, particularly *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* and *די פאָמיליע מושקאַט*, abound with “sparks” of light in contexts of darkness, in this novel, whose two main characters are portrayed as studies in goodness, faith and love, these “sparks” of redemptive good are as rare as the contexts of darkness and evil, which would render them necessary.

דער קנעכט is also Bashevis’s only major novel, in which a vision of *Tikun*, of redemption, of a restoration of the universe to its originally intended state of harmony, is presented as a real possibility. This vision finds its expression in the image of the “זיווג קדישא” or “sacred marriage”, which is usually understood as the union of the two *Sfirot* of “תפארת”, the male aspect of God, and “מלכות”, identified with the *Shekhinah*, the female aspect of God. By means of various associations throughout the novel this celestial union appears to be

reflected in the union of Yankev, whose Biblical namesake is closely connected with the *Sfirah* of “תפארת”, and Sore/Wanda, who is associated both with the *Shekhinah* and with the Biblical Rokhl, who symbolizes the *Shekhinah* in her state of exile. Yankev and Sore/Wanda’s union, which has begun in transgression has been transformed through Wanda’s conversion to Judaism, their marriage and the intensity and continuity of their love, and become a “גַּעַלְעַס פֿאַר תִּיקוּנִים” (vessel for cosmic restorations), leading to the birth of a Jewish child [190]. But it is only after Yankev’s death that the couple is reunited, and that the union of Yankev ben Eliezer and Sore bas Avrom is finally recognized by the Jewish community.

Wanda, the daughter of the Polish peasant Jan Bzik, has become the Jewish Sore bas Avrom. The relationship of Yankev and Sore/Wanda, which has begun with lust, has become transformed and redeemed by their love and commitment both to Judaism and to each other. Yankev, who has started off as a slave to Polish peasants at the beginning of the novel and who has rejected the possibility of freedom without responsibility during the course of the novel, has become a slave to God at the end of *דער קנעכט*, both in the Land of Israel and on his return to Poland.

8. Jewish Mystical Motifs in Bashevis's Short Fiction

8.1. Introduction: Bashevis's Later Fiction and Short Fiction

- הייסט עס, פֿון דעם גרייז איז ארויסגעקומען עפעס גוטס – האָט

זלמן גלעזער געזאָגט.

מאיר טומטום האָט געבומען רייבן די הענט.

- ס'זענען נישטאָ קיין גרייזן. ווי קאָנען זײַן גרייזן, אַז אַלץ איז פֿון

אין-סוף? ס'זענען דאָ אַזוינע עולמות וווּ אַלע גרייזן קערן זיך אום צום

אמת...¹

- That means, something good came out of this mistake, said

Zalmen Glezer.

Meyer Tumtum started to rub his hands.

- There are no mistakes. How can there be mistakes, if everything

comes from the 'Ein-Sof? There are such worlds, where all mistakes

return to the truth...

This quotation is taken from one of Bashevis's ḥasidic tales, a short story, entitled 'גרייז',

דער שפיגל און אַנדערע דערציילונגען which can be found in the collection

So far this study has concentrated on Bashevis's use of Jewish mysticism in four of his

major novels, all of them written between the years 1933 and 1961, which have been

discussed at length. The emphasis has been on these novels, because they are a repository

of Jewish mystical motifs, ideas and images. Bashevis's first novel, דער שטן אין גאָר, which

deals with Shabbatean messianism, is replete with kabbalistic, mainly Lurianic

references and also demonstrates, how Lurianic ideas were reinterpreted in

Shabbateanism. Many references to Lurianic Kabbalah, to the *Zohar* and to the early

mystical idea of the creation of the world by means of the letters of the Hebrew

alphabet can be found in the other three novels discussed here, די פאַמיליע מושקאָט,

¹ 179, יצחק באַשעוויס-זינגער, דער שפיגל און אַנדערע דערציילונגען

דער קנעכט and דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין. This study has also extensively explored Bashevis's two collections of memoirs (containing material written between 1955 and 1960) to provide a background to Bashevis's interest in Jewish mysticism and to identify his mystical sources.

In addition to the two volumes of Bashevis's memoirs and five volumes of his novels (his novel *די פאמיליע מושקאט* consisting, of course, of two volumes), four more volumes have appeared in Yiddish book form. These volumes consist of three collections of Bashevis's short stories, *מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון און אנדערע* (1963), *גימפל תם און אנדערע דערציילונגען* (1971) and *דער שפיגל און אנדערע דערציילונגען* (1975), and one short novel, *דער בעל-תשובה* (1974).

In *דער בעל-תשובה* Bashevis employs the form of a monologue told to the narrator, a Yiddish writer, by Yoysef Shapiro, a Jew born in Eastern Europe, who has become a successful businessman in the United States. But after his bitter disappointment with the modern world of business and sex, Shapiro has left all of this behind to join the life of Jerusalem's ultra-orthodox community in Me'ah She'arim. The monologue is set in a frame, which recounts the narrator's chance encounter with Yoysef Shapiro at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Shapiro's monologue is a highly moralistic diatribe against modern life in general and against the modern endorsement of free sexuality in particular. It contains very few references to kabbalistic works or ideas. At one point Shapiro reminds the narrator that the male sexual organ is referred to as "אות ברית קודש" (a letter of the holy covenant) in kabbalistic literature.² He mentions Rabbi Isaac Luria and several ḥasidic leaders, the Baal Shem Tov, the *magid* of Kozienice and the Seer of Lublin as examples of great Jewish personalities, but does not refer to any of their mystical ideas.³ The *Zohar*, as well as three ethical works written under kabbalistic

² דער בעל-תשובה, 18.

³ Ibid., 92, cf. also 121.

influence, Isaiah Horowitz's *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit*, Moshe Hayim Luzzatto's *Mesilat Yesharim* and Eliyah de Vidas' *Reshit Hokhmah*, are likewise mentioned in passing without any reference to their contents.⁴ None of the complicated Lurianic and earlier Jewish mystical references, ideas and images of Bashevis's earlier novels can be found in his *לער בעל-תשובה*. This short novel does not therefore require any detailed discussion within a study exploring the use of Jewish mystical motifs in Bashevis's works.

Although Bashevis initially wrote all his works in Yiddish, many of his novels and several collections of his short stories were only published in bookform in translation, not in the original Yiddish. In his later years Bashevis worked increasingly with an English-speaking public in mind. He collaborated closely with his translators and spent a considerable amount of time "polishing" and editing his writings for their publication in English.⁵ While all of Bashevis's earlier novels discussed here, were set in Poland before the Holocaust, some of his later novels and many of his later short stories are set in America and deal with the interactions of Polish-Jewish refugees after the War. The first novel of this genre which appeared in the Yiddish press in the late 1950s, but was only published posthumously in English bookform, was *שאַטנס ביים האַדסאָן*, translated as *Shadows on the Hudson*.⁶ This was followed by *די געשיכטע פון אַ ליבע* (*Enemies, A Love Story*) and *משוגע* (*Meshugah*), the latter published posthumously.⁷ There are very few references to the Kabbalah in these works and none of the intricate mystical motifs of Bashevis's earlier novels set in Eastern Europe, can be found here. Some of Bashevis's later novels with an Eastern European setting were likewise only published in bookform

⁴ Ibid., 60, 69, 108. On the *Mesilat Yesharim*, the *Reshit Hokhmah* and the *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit*, see: Section 2.5., 41 f.

⁵ Cf. I. Zamir, *Journey to My Father*, Isaac Bashevis Singer, 44-47; Lester Goran, *The Bright Streets of Surfside*, 4-6.

⁶ *שאַטנס ביים האַדסאָן* was originally serialized in *פאַרווערטס* (New York), 1957-1958, translated by Joseph Sherman as *Shadows on the Hudson*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998.

⁷ *די געשיכטע פון אַ ליבע* was originally serialized in *פאַרווערטס* (New York), 1966, translated by Aliza Shevrin and Elizabeth Shub as *Enemies, A Love Story*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972. On *משוגע*, see: Section 1, 19.

in translation. These works include *The King of the Fields*, a mythical narrative, recreating the birth of the Polish nation and the Jewish contribution to Polish history from its inception, *Scum*, the story of a man from Buenos Aires, looking for his roots in Warsaw's Krochmalna Street in 1906, and *The Certificate*, a novel with strong autobiographical connotations, which tells the story of a young writer who arrives in Warsaw in 1922 and obtains a certificate to emigrate to Palestine.⁸ None of these works contains any significant Jewish mystical references.

Concerning Bashevis's short stories, there are far more collections of his short fiction in translation than in the original Yiddish. While Bashevis's earlier short stories are set in various Jewish communities in Poland, more and more of his later stories are set in America after the Second World War. All of the stories in his earliest collection in Yiddish book form, *דער שטן אין גאָרײ און אַנדערע דערציילונגען*, are set in Poland. Only two out of the twenty-four stories in *דער צוין* ('אליין' and 'גמפל תם'), have an all-American setting.⁹ In the collection *מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון און אַנדערע דערציילונגען*, this is the case with two out of seventeen ('די קאָפּעטעריע' and 'דער סעאַנס') and in *דער שפיגל און אַ פֿענסטערל אין טויער* with two out of twenty stories ('אייב' and 'אָפּעטערלעך'). If one compares this with one of Bashevis's late collections of his short fiction in English, the contrast is striking. In *The Death of Methuselah and Other Stories*, for example, nine out of the twenty stories are set in post-war America. Bashevis's stories with an American setting tend to be devoid of any specific kabbalistic references or motifs, although some of them employ more general supernatural motifs. The best examples of this genre in the Yiddish collections are 'אליין' ('Alone') in *גמפל תם*, which blurs the boundary between

⁸ On *דער שטן אין גאָרײ*, see: Section 1, 19. *שױם* was originally serialized in *פֿאַרווערטס* (New York), 1967, translated by Rosaline Dukalsky Schwartz as *Scum*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991. *דער סעאַנס* was originally serialized in *פֿאַרווערטס* (New York), 1967, translated by Leonard Wolf as *The Certificate*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992.

⁹ In 'די קליינע שוסטערלעך' the action begins in Poland and ends in America after Aba Shuster's emigration. This story has been discussed previously. See: Section 3.4.1, 83 f.

dream and reality, and 'די קאפעטעריע' ('The Cafeteria') in *מעשיות פון דינשערן אייוון*, which questions the boundary between life and death.¹⁰

Bashevis's short fiction can be divided into stories with a third-person narrator and stories employing the "monologue technique", which has become a dominant form in his works.

In his article 'Monologue as Narrative Strategy in the Short Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer', Chone Shmeruk analyzes different categories of monologues in Bashevis's works.¹¹ He distinguishes between those monologues, told by non-human, supernatural narrators, and those, told by human narrators. The monologues told by human narrators include "confessional monologues", told to those present in the poorhouse, "old wives' tales", told in front of a group of women, and ḥasidic tales, told at a gathering of men in the context of the ḥasidic *shtibl*. Some of these monologues are "closed" in form, some include direct responses of the hearers or interactions between different narrators. Some monologues are set within a frame, told either by a third-person narrator or by a first-person narrator, identified with Singer in his childhood.¹²

Several of Bashevis's short stories, particularly his monologues told by non-human narrators and his various kinds of ḥasidic tales, are replete with Jewish mystical motifs.

In the remainder of this chapter several examples of significant mystical motifs in various categories of Bashevis's short stories will be discussed.

8.2. Mystical Motifs in the Monologues of Supernatural Narrators

Bashevis began to employ the monologue technique in his short fiction with the creation of non-human, supernatural narrators. Four of the five short stories included in the

¹⁰ 'אַליין', in: *גימפל חם*, 168-179, translated as 'Alone', in: *Short Friday and Other Stories*, London: Penguin, 1983, 46-55 (first ed. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1964); 'די קאפעטעריע', in: *מעשיות פון דינשערן אייוון*, 43-71, translated as 'The Cafeteria', in: *A Friend of Kafka and Other Stories*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970, 77-96.

¹¹ Ch. Shmeruk, 'Monologue as Narrative Strategy in the Short Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer', in: D.N. Miller (ed.), *Recovering the Canon*, 98-115. An earlier version of this article was published in: *דער שפיגל*, *און אנדערע דערציילונגען*, Hebrew: ז-כט, English: v-xxxv.

¹² Ch. Shmeruk, 'Monologue as Narrative Strategy', in: D.N. Miller (ed.), *Recovering the Canon*, 104-111.

collection *דער שטען אין גאָר* and five stories included in the volume *דער שפיגל און אַנדערע דערציילונגען* (three of them reprinted in *גמפל תם*) are supposedly narrated by supernatural characters. Five of these nine monologues share the same narrator, who describes himself as the “יצר-הרע” (literally: the evil inclination, i.e. the Evil One). These are ‘דער חורבן פון קרעשעוו’ (‘The Destruction of Kreshev’), ‘צוויי מתים גייען טאַנצן’ (translated as: ‘Zeidlus the Pope’) and ‘צוויי קערפער גייען טאַנצן’ (‘Two Corpses Go Dancing’) in *דער שטען אין גאָר* and ‘אַ מעשה מיט צוויי ליגנער’ (‘A Tale of Two Liars’) and ‘דער רואה ואינו נראה’ (translated as: ‘The Unseen’) in *גמפל תם*.¹³

In ‘אין בין דער’ the narrator introduces himself in the following way: *יצר-הרע, דער שטן, דער נחש הקדמון. אין קבלה-ספרים רופט מען מיך סמאל, אָדער דער ס"ם.* (I am the Evil One, Satan, the Primeval Serpent. In kabbalistic works they call me Samael, or the “impure side”).¹⁴ “Samael” has become the major name for Satan from the amoraic period onward. The name already appears in rabbinic sources and there are frequent references to Samael and his spouse Lilith in kabbalistic literature, e.g. in the *Zohar* and the *Tikunei Zohar*. In Lurianic Kabbalah, Satan’s name was not supposed to be pronounced and therefore the custom of calling him “ס"ם” (an abbreviation of “סיטרא-מסאָבֹתא”, the “impure side”) became widespread.¹⁵

After this introduction the Satanic narrator tells the reader, how much pleasure he derives from arranging strange marriages and begins to tell the tale of one such mismatch he brought about in Krzeszów, between Lise, the daughter of the rich R. Gimpl, and Shloymele, a young Kabbalist and secret Shabbatean. The tale is replete with kabbalistic images and terminology, particularly during Shloymele’s speeches. In his attempts to

¹³ As for the translations, ‘The Destruction of Kreshev’ and ‘A Tale of Two Liars’ can be found in: *The Spinoza of Market Street and Other Stories*, Philadelphia: JPS, 1961, 160-214 and 36-60 respectively; ‘Zeidlus the Pope’, in: *Short Friday*, 150-160; ‘Two Corpses Go Dancing’, in: *The Séance and Other Stories*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968, 187-201; and ‘The Unseen’, in: *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories*, New York: Noonday Press, 1957, 171-205.

¹⁴ *דער שטען אין גאָר*, 193.

¹⁵ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 385-388. Some examples of rabbinic references to Samael are: Ex. R. 18, 5; 21, 7; b Sotah 10 b.

persuade Lise to begin an adulterous relationship with the coachman Leybl, Shloymele makes extensive use of images connected to the Lurianic concept of *Tikun*, as explained earlier.¹⁶

In 'זיידלוס דער ערשטער' the narrator, who again refers to himself as the "יצר-הרע", reports his successful attempts to lead the Talmudic scholar R. Zeydl to sin. Since R. Zeydl is neither plagued by passions or desires, nor by worries about earning a living, he devotes all his time to his studies. Zeydl's only weakness of character, which the Evil One can exploit for his purposes, is pride. Thus the "יצר-הרע" compliments Zeydl on his outstanding scholarship in traditional learning, as well as in Hebrew grammar, in philosophy, as well as in Kabbalah. He convinces Zeydl that he would never receive recognition among Jews, whereas he could achieve greatness among Christians, if he were to convert to Christianity. He also persuades Zeydl that there is no reward and punishment.¹⁷ Zeydl converts and spends his time writing a polemic against the Talmud. However, he never finishes his work, does not receive any recognition and ends up as a blind beggar at a church in Cracow. Before his death the "יצר-הרע" appears to lead Zeydl to "גיהנום" (hell) and Zeydl finally realizes that, if there is a Satan and a hell, then there is also a God, who metes out reward and punishment.¹⁸ At the end of the story Bashevis employs popular images of "גיהנום" and the "מלאכי-הבלה" (angels of destruction), which can be found in various ethical works, some of them written under Lurianic influence, like the *Kav ha-Yashar* and the *Shevet Musar*.¹⁹ But he also plays with the image of the two mocking imps, awaiting the sinner at the entrance of Gehenna, which is already familiar to Yiddish readers from Y.L. Perets's מאַניש (*Monish*).²⁰

In 'צוויי מחים גייען טאָנצן' the "יצר-הרע" speaks of the pleasure he derives from playing with

¹⁶ דער שטן אין גאָר, 219, 228 f. See: Section 3.4.3, 98 f.

¹⁷ דער שטן אין גאָר, 273, 275-278.

¹⁸ Ibid., 286.

¹⁹ See: Section 2.5, 41.

²⁰ דער שטן אין גאָר, 286.

the dead by temporarily returning a spirit of life or a “נפש בהמה” (animal soul) to them. He tells the tale of two such corpses, whom he temporarily returned to life and convinced to marry each other.²¹

The supernatural narrator of ‘אָ מעשה מיט צוויי ליגנערס’, once again the Evil One, tells the tale of a match between two liars, which he has brought about. Guided by the “יצר-הרע”, the two liars play tricks on each other and both end up on the gallows for crimes they have not committed. The story ends with the familiar images of “גיהנום” (hell) and the “מלאכי-חבלה”, which Bashevis also employed in ‘זיידל דער ערשטער’.²²

At the beginning of ‘דער רואה ואינו נראה’ the “יצר-הרע” acknowledges that he is not only the one who descends to earth to lead a person to sin and then ascends to Heaven to be “מקטרג” (i.e. to accuse the sinner), but that he is also the one who starts to punish the sinner.²³ He then tells the tale of the crude R. Nosn Yuzefer of Frampol, whom he first tempted to succumb to the pleasures of the flesh, promised by the maid Shifre Tsirl, then to return to his divorced wife Royze-Temerl, who had remarried in the meantime, and to live in sin with her. After R. Nosn dies without a “וידוי” (confession of his sins), the Evil One has great pleasure in dragging his soul into the “שאול-תחתית” (the Nether World), without even granting him access to “גיהנום” (hell).²⁴

While the narrator of all these five stories is the same “יצר-הרע”, a different demonic narrator appears in Bashevis’s ‘אָ טאָג-בוך פון אַ נישט-געבוירענעם’ (‘From the Diary of One Not Born’).²⁵ At the beginning of the story the narrator explains that his father had sinned in the manner of Onan and that he was created from his seeds: “האַלב-שד, האַלב-רוח” (half demon, half spirit).²⁶ The tricks that this demonic figure plays upon human beings are

²¹ Ibid., 289-305.

²² גימפל תם, 133-149.

²³ Ibid., 206.

²⁴ Ibid., 236.

²⁵ ‘אָ טאָג-בוך פון אַ נישט-געבוירענעם’, in: דער שטן אין גאָר, 253-270, translated as ‘From the Diary of One Not Born’, in: *Gimpel the Fool*, 135-145.

²⁶ דער שטן אין גאָר, 253.

similar to those of the Evil One, but his position in the ranks of the “סטרא אחרא” (the “other side”) is less exalted. He starts off as an insignificant “שרעטל” (hobgoblin), rising to the rank of a fully-fledged “שד” (demon), praised by both Lilith and Ashmeday (Asmodeus).²⁷

In this story Bashevis makes extensive use of Jewish demonology, which can be found in various kabbalistic sources. Ashmeday, the king of the demons, is mentioned, as well as Lilith and Agrath, two of the four mothers of the demons. The idea that every pollution of semen gives birth to a demon can be found in the *Zohar* and in later kabbalistic works. In later Kabbalah such demons are referred to as a man’s “mischievous sons” and are said to accompany the man at his death and burial.²⁸ This is also the case with the narrator of Bashevis’s story and his demonic siblings.

As Chone Shmeruk reminds us, all these six stories represent “forms of written monologue”. One is supposed to be taken from a demon’s diary, the other five form part of what was originally intended as a series of “memoirs of the *yeytser-hore* [evil one]”, which was later broken up into separate stories, published in two separate collections.²⁹

The other three stories which are narrated by supernatural figures, represent spoken monologues, told in front of some kind of undefined audience. Two of these stories are told by two different demonic narrators. These are ‘דער שפיגל’ (‘The Mirror’), which is defined in the subtitle as ‘אַ מאָנאָלאָג פֿון אַ שד’ (A monologue of a demon) and ‘מעשה טישעוויץ’ (translated as: ‘The Last Demon’), which is told by the last Jewish demon remaining in the *shtetl* of טישעוויץ (Tiszowce) in Poland after the Holocaust. The supernatural narrator of the third of these spoken monologues is a rooster and the story is

²⁷ Ibid., 257, 262.

²⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 322 f.

²⁹ Ch. Shmeruk, ‘Monologue as Narrative Strategy’, in: D.N. Miller (ed.), *Recovering the Canon*, 104 f. The stories ‘זיידלוס דער ערשטער’ and ‘דער רואה ואינו נראה’ were originally published in the monthly *ספֿינה*, 1943, Nos. 1 & 3, with a specific subtitle, referring to the memoirs of the “יצר-הרע”.

entitled 'קוקעדודל' ('Cockadoodledoo').³⁰

The narrator of 'דער שפיגל' is a demon, who enjoys sitting inside a mirror and leading young, beautiful women to sin. In the *shtetl* of Kraśnik he finds a suitable victim in Tsirl, the young wife of a rich merchant, who spends much of her time in front of the mirror in her boudoir. The demon appears to her in the mirror, compliments her on her beauty and persuades her to travel to "אשמדאס שלאָס" (Asmodeus's castle) with him.³¹

She follows all his instructions of cooking non-kosher food on Shabat, giving it to her husband, cutting off one of his sidelocks and half of his beard in his sleep, etc.

Subsequently her demonic tempter takes her to the mountain of Seir, where she is tortured by various demons, before being brought to "גיהנום" (hell).³²

In this story Bashevis once again employs popular images of "גיהנום" and makes extensive use of Jewish demonology. Once again Ashmeday and Lilith are mentioned, as is Rahab (who sometimes replaces Mahalath as another of the four mothers of demons in kabbalistic sources). The gatherings of the demons under their rule on a particular mountain can also be found in various kabbalistic sources.³³ But even more interesting than Bashevis's use of demonology is the style of his demonic narrator, who combines the language of religious learning with the style of a "ברדחן" (wedding jester).³⁴ In this particular style Bashevis is able to ask some of the eternal metaphysical questions from the irreverent perspective of a mocking demon, e.g.: Is there a God? Is He really a merciful and compassionate God? Did He create the world? Did he give the Torah? Will the Messiah come? "טוט די קדושה מיט דער טומאה פֿעכטן? וועט גאָט דעם שטן שעכטן?" (Does the sacred fight with the impure? Will God slaughter Satan?) – The demon calls God a "תיקן"

³⁰ 'דער שפיגל', 'מעשה טישעוויץ', 'קוקעדודל', in: גימפל חם, 123-132, 237-247 and 150-158 respectively, reprinted in: דער שפיגל, 1-11, 12-22 and 23-32 respectively. As for the translations, 'The Mirror' can be found in: *Gimpel the Fool*, 77-88, 'The Last Demon', in: *Short Friday*, 103-112, and 'Cockadoodledoo', in: *The Séance*, 85-94.

³¹ דער שפיגל, 1-6.

³² Ibid., 7-10.

³³ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 323.

³⁴ Cf. Ch. Shmeruk, 'Monologue as Narrative Strategy', in: D.N. Miller (ed.), *Recovering the Canon*, 106.

(an unsolvable problem in the Talmud) and hints that God actually needs Satan, an idea corresponding to the teleological explanation of the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*, which appears so frequently in Bashevis's writings.³⁵

A very similar style of mockery combined with religious scholarship also characterizes the monologue of the last demon in 'מעשה טישעוויץ'. This supernatural tale and its basis in the mystical linguistic theory of *Sefer Yezirah* has been discussed at length previously.³⁶

The remainder of this section will therefore be devoted to the monologue of the rooster in the story 'קוקעריקו'.

The narrator of this story, a rooster, tells his human audience about the life of cocks and hens in terms very similar to human life. During the course of his monologue there are frequent allusions to Jewish mystical ideas, expressed in images pertaining to the world of a rooster. The narrator tells his listeners that there is a "הימלישער האַן" (Heavenly cock), whom he calls the "תרגול של מעלה" (Celestial rooster), and that the earthly cocks and hens are made in his image. According to the narrator, there is also a Heavenly "קוקעדודלו" (Cockadoodledoo), from which the earthly cocks derive their "נגינה" (music) and which crows from the vocal chords of every earthly cock. He refers to the cock's "קוקעדריקו" as the "שם-המפורש" (the ineffable name), which is "אייביק" (eternal). It existed long before "אדם הראשון" (the first human being), he says, and it will – "מערטשישעם" (God willing) – still be there, after all ritual slaughterers and all people who are feasting on chicken, will have ceased to exist.³⁷

The rooster's words about the Heavenly "קוקעדריקו" can be understood as a mock allusion to the linguistic cosmology expressed in *Sefer Yezirah*, according to which every existing thing contains eternal "linguistic elements" and exists by their power, whose foundation

³⁵ דער שפיגל 5, 10 f. See also: Section 3.4.1, 85-87.

³⁶ See: Section 3.3, 78-81.

³⁷ דער שפיגל 24 f.

is the one ineffable name.³⁸

The rooster also reveals that opposite the “הימלישער האָן” (Heavenly cock) there is a “הימלישער הוין” (Heavenly hen). In connection with this, he remarks: גריבלט, מענטשן, איר, “איר, מענטשן, גריבלט” (You, people, speculate over kabbalistic works, but with us the Kabbalah lies in the marrow of our bones.).³⁹ In the second section of the monologue, the rooster tells his audience about his relations with various hens and comments: זוכר און נקבה זענען אין אַלע עולמות, אין אַלע (In all the worlds, in all the Heavens there is male and female. Everything is coupling.)⁴⁰

This is, of course, a mock allusion to the large amounts of sexual imagery, employed in the descriptions of the processes in the celestial world, which can be found in kabbalistic works like the *Zohar* and various Lurianic works. In the *Zohar* it is the “זיווג קדישא” (sacred marriage) between the *Shekhinah* and its male counterpart among the *Sfirot*, in Lurianic Kabbalah it is the union between “אבא ואמא” (the celestial father and mother) as well as another union between two *Parzufim*, which is described in explicitly sexual terms, as explained previously.⁴¹

In the third section the rooster returns to the subject of the “קוקעריקו” and reports a revelation, which he experienced one night. For him a rooster’s “קוקעריקו” is an expression of his “אמונה” (faith). But sometimes a rooster can lose this faith, especially in a dark night during the “עשרת-ימי-תשובה” (ten days of repentence) “ערב דעם גרויסן (before the great ceremony of *kaparot*).⁴² During such a night, when the world seemed to ask a difficult question, the rooster heard a new kind of “קוקעריקו” from an unknown rooster, which answered all questions for him. The crowing of this

³⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 25.

³⁹ דער שפיגל, 25.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 25 f.

⁴¹ See: Section 3.4.3, 94-97.

⁴² דער שפיגל, 29.

mysterious rooster revived his soul and made him understand that everything is part of the eternal “קוקעריקו”, the ritual slaughterer and the bird, the knife and the throat, the feathers and the woman who plucks them. Everything is needed, the crowing of the cock, the quacking of the hen, the egg that is hatched, and the egg that is eaten. A cock’s task is to sing and to praise God, to love his hens, to eat, to drink and not to fight, to stand on the rooftop and to crow, as if the whole world waited for his crowing. As the rooster says:

“אַן דײַן קרײַ וואָלט עפעס געפֿעלט. איין פֿאַלשער טאָן וואָלט געמאַכט אַ פּגומה.” (Without your crowing, something would be missing. One wrong note would cause a defect.).⁴³

The idea, which is once again expressed here in images pertaining to the world of a rooster, is the Lurianic idea of *Tikun*. According to Lurianic understanding, the completion of *Tikun*, the restoration the world to its originally intended state of harmony, depends on human action. Every transgression can cause a “פּגומה”, a defect in the harmony of the world, while every religious act, every fulfillment of a commandment and every prayer can accelerate the process of *Tikun*.⁴⁴

In the monologue of the rooster the eternal “קוקעריקו” of the Heavenly rooster is referred to as a “שם-המפורש”, the ineffable name, by which everything exists. The earthly cock’s “קוקעריקו” is described in terms of a prayer, a praise to God, an expression of faith, which, in the vein of Lurianic thinking, has the power to restore the “unity of God’s name which was destroyed by the original defect” of the “breaking of the vessels” and to prepare the way for the final *Tikun*.⁴⁵

All of Bashevis’s short stories discussed in this section, are monologues put in the mouth of non-human, supernatural figures: A rooster, various demons and Satan himself. As we have seen, these monologues are replete with kabbalistic motifs, including a rich

⁴³ Ibid., 30-32.

⁴⁴ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 142 f., *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*, 273 f. See also: Section 3.4.3., 95 f.

⁴⁵ Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*, 275.

demonology. The creation of these supernatural narrators enabled Bashevis to extend the powers of an “anonymous omniscient narrator” by “allowing his demonic figures to participate in the action”. It remains unclear, however, who is being addressed by Satan, by the demons or by the rooster, and all of these monologues remain “closed” in form.⁴⁶ This problem led Bashevis to employ only human narrators in his later monologues, some of which will be discussed below.

8.3. Mystical Motifs in the Short Stories with Anonymous Omniscient Narrators

While Bashevis developed the monologue form by introducing various human narrators, he continued to write short stories in the third person, told by an anonymous omniscient narrator. Some of these stories also deal with the world of the demons and with the celestial world and include some interesting Jewish mystical motifs.

One story set in the world of the demons is ‘שידה און כוזיבא’ (‘Shiddah and Kuziba’) in the collection *גמפל חם*.⁴⁷ Shide is a female demon sitting with her sick child Kuzibe by a subterranean river. The child is afraid of human beings and has nightmares about them. His mother explains to him that human beings, whom she calls “דער טעות פון גאָט” (God’s error), only have power on the surface of the earth and do not tend to disturb the demons living underground.⁴⁸ In the second part of the story, however, the two demons are disturbed in their abode by human drilling activity in the rocks, underneath which they live. First they see “פּוּקען” (sparks), then broad daylight and even several human beings. Kuzibe faints and Shide is so frightened that she starts to pray to Satan, to Ashmeday and to Lilith. Finally she decides to go into “גלות” (exile) and look for some caves or dark places on earth. The story ends with Shide’s hopes for a demonic version of the End of

⁴⁶ Cf. Ch. Simeruk, ‘Monologue as Narrative Strategy’, in: D.N. Miller (ed.), *Recovering the Canon*, 106.

⁴⁷ ‘שידה און כוזיבא’, in: *גמפל חם*, 189-194, translated as ‘Shiddah and Kuziba’, in: *The Spinoza of Market Street*, 89-96.

⁴⁸ *גמפל חם*, 89 f.

Days, when darkness would win the last battle and all light would be extinguished.⁴⁹

The story is once again replete with Jewish demonology, mentioning Satan, Ashmeday and Lilith and giving a detailed description of a demon's appearance, a subtle body of spiderweb, chicken's feet, wings and horns. The traditional demonic places of abode are mentioned, both underground and in dark, waste and ruined places on earth. Shida also refers to the "תהומא דנוקבא רבא" ("the maw of the great abyss"), mentioned in the *Zohar* as the place to which demons return on Shabat, when she dreams about the honours bestowed on her husband Hurmiz in this subterranean place.⁵⁰ Her husband is said to study the secret of silence in a demonic *yeshivah*. In connection with this, the anonymous narrator of the story informs the reader that there are several levels of silence and that "גאט אַליין קלעטערט אַלץ" (the purpose of silence is God), but "דער תכלית פון שטילקייט איז גאט" (God Himself climbs more and more deeply into His own Self), into His own depth.⁵¹

This statement is based on the Lurianic idea of *Zimzum*, of God's contraction and withdrawal into the depth of Himself prior to the creation of the world.⁵² The "פונקען" or "sparks", intruding the world of the demons, are once again an allusion to the Lurianic idea of the "sparks" of Divine light, scattered during the cosmic catastrophe of the "breaking of the vessels". The motif is once more employed by Bashevis to express the idea of glimpses of redemptive good appearing in a context of darkness and evil and, of course, the demons in his story are frightened by this appearance.⁵³

While 'שידה און כוזיבא' is set in the world of the demons, two of Bashevis's short stories, included in the collection *מעשיות פון דינשערן אויוון*, are set among various angels in the celestial world: 'די גארדעראב' (translated as 'The Warehouse') and 'יחיד און יחידה' ('Jachid

⁴⁹ Ibid., 192-194.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 192. Cf. G.Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 323.

⁵¹ גימפל חם, 191.

⁵² See: Section 3.4.1, 82 f.

⁵³ See: Section 3.4.2, 89.

and Jechidah').⁵⁴

The action in 'די גאָרדער־אַב' (celestial cloakroom) "הימלישער גאָרדער־אַב" (in the first Heaven), where naked souls are waiting to be issued with new bodies from the angel "בגדיאל". The souls complain bitterly about the unsuitable bodies that are given out to them, and about the behaviour of the responsible angels.⁵⁵ They wonder about God, who remains conspicuously absent, as one agnostic soul puts it: "ער דאַרף ערגעץ וווינען אין זיבעטן הימל, אָבער פאָלג מיך אַ גאַנג. דאָ איז ער נישטאָ." (He is supposed to dwell in the seventh Heaven, but that is quite a distance. Here He is absent.)⁵⁶

Here we find another parodic reference to God's withdrawal in the act of *Zimzum* and the hiding of God's face, which time and again appears in Bashevis's writings. Bashevis's characters tend to express thoughts of God's concealment or absence in the face of suffering or the feeling of utter meaninglessness. In this story the feeling of "cosmic meaninglessness" is multiplied in a grotesque manner, since here it is not a human character who feels exiled from the celestial "source of meaning", but the inhabitants of Heaven, where God is supposed to dwell.⁵⁷

The same celestial setting and the same skepticism can also be found in Bashevis's 'יחיד אין יחידה'. In this story an agnostic soul in a "היכל" (Heavenly palace) disbelieves in God and blasphemes openly. This female soul named Yekhide is therefore condemned to lose her life in Heaven, to be taken away from her beloved Yokhid and to be sent down to earth. But Yekhide also disbelieves in earth. According to pious celestial teaching, a soul in Heaven that dies, is soon covered with a slimy substance called semen, and grows into a child in a woman's womb. It has to endure the pain of birth, growth and toil and

⁵⁴ 'די גאָרדער־אַב', in: מעשיות פון דינשערן אויוון, 119-130, translated as 'The Warehouse', in: *The Séance*, 125-134; 'יחיד אין יחידה', in: מעשיות פון דינשערן אויוון, 195-207, translated as 'Jachid and Jechidah', in: *Short Friday*, 72-79.

⁵⁵ מעשיות פון דינשערן אויוון, 119-124.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁷ Cf. G. Farrell, *From Exile to Redemption*, 26 f.

purify itself, before it is allowed to return to its Heavenly source. But Yekhide is convinced that a soul that dies, only rots for a short time, before it disintegrates into darkness.⁵⁸ Thus she pleads with the “מלאך המוות” (angel of death), not to take her away. The angel of death tells her that she will get used to life on earth, which is nothing but death from a celestial perspective. But on earth there is also “בחירה” (free will). Earthly existence, says the angel of death, is nothing but a rehabilitation for souls that have transgressed.⁵⁹

Yekhide indeed finds herself on earth, having forgotten everything about her life in Heaven. She meets a man named Yokhid, who disbelieves in souls, in God and in free will. But in a dream they both return to their Heavenly source, they recognize each other and realize that there is a God, that there is a meaning in creation and that there is “זיווג, ייחוד, בחירה” (coupling, unification, free will).⁶⁰

The theme of “בחירה” or “free will” appears frequently in Bashevis’s works and is closely connected to Luzzatto’s teleological interpretation of the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*, as explained earlier.⁶¹ In fact, the idea of *Zimzum* is explicitly mentioned at the beginning of the story, where it is connected to the angel Purah, the angel of forgetfulness. The omniscient narrator states that souls tend to forget their “שורש” (“root” or “source”):

“פורה, דער מלאך פון שיכחה, געוועלטיקט אומעטום אויסערן אין-סוף. פורה איז צימצום, הסתר פנים.”

(Purah, the angel of forgetfulness, rules everywhere beyond the *'Ein-Sof*. Purah is *Zimzum*, the hiding of God’s face.).⁶²

In this story once again we find an allusion to the idea that the purpose of God’s concealment in the act of *Zimzum* was free will. But the statement about Purah can also be understood to signify that the reason, why both human beings on earth and souls

⁵⁸ מעשיות פון דיגשערן אייוון, 195 f.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 198-200.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 201-206.

⁶¹ See: Section 3.4.1, 84-87.

⁶² מעשיות פון דיגשערן אייוון, 195.

in Heaven experience God's withdrawal and the hiding of God's face, is forgetfulness, is unawareness of the ultimate source of meaning. This is the case with Yekhide both as a soul in Heaven and as a human being on earth, until her dream helps her to recognize her Heavenly origin, the purpose of God's creation and the existence of free will.

In both of these stories Bashevis employs traditional Jewish images of Heaven, including angels singing "שירה" (the Song at the Sea), "כרובים" (cherubs), "צדיקים" (righteous people) sitting in "גן-עדן" (the garden of Eden / Paradise) and eating "לווייתן" (Leviathan), as well as the traditional idea of the seven Heavens in 'די גאָרדערעך'. Some of his angels are invented, like the angels "בגדיאל" (Begodyel) and "מלבושיאל" (Malbushyel). Others are familiar from the traditional Jewish sources, like Purah, the angel of forgetfulness and Dumah, the angel of death, as well as "מטטרון" (Metatron), who is mentioned in both stories and is referred to in 'יחיד און יחידה' as "מט"ט שר-הפנים" (Metatron, the Prince of the Countenance).⁶³ Metatron has the most exalted position in Jewish angelology and is frequently mentioned in kabbalistic literature. According to *Likutei ha-Ran* (13th century), the world of the souls is supposed to correspond to Metatron. According to *Sefer ha-Tmunah* (Lemberg, 1896), he "rules from the earth to the heavens in their entirety" and "brings the souls to the body".⁶⁴

In fact, both stories are built around the idea of souls in Heaven being given bodies and being sent down to earth. This idea is also closely connected to the concept of "גלגול" (transmigration of the soul), which is frequently found in kabbalistic sources from the *Sefer ha-Bahir* onwards. Both of Bashevis's stories employ the kabbalistic idea of the transmigration of the soul as a punishment for and rectification of sins committed in a previous existence. They also include the doctrine of transmigration into animals or plants, advanced by the Safed Kabbalists.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid., 126, 195.

⁶⁴ M. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 74, 85. Cf. also: G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 377-381.

⁶⁵ מ. אידל, *מגות קבלה*, 125-129, 199-201. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 344-348. See also: Section 5.4.2, 169 f.

But although Bashevis employs traditional Jewish angelology and the familiar kabbalistic concept of the transmigration of the soul, he subverts the conceived ideas of the celestial world by presenting grotesque images, such as the queues of naked souls waiting for their bodies in a Heavenly cloakroom, of agnostic souls in Heaven disbelieving in earth, and of an absent God, whose very existence is doubtful even to the inhabitants of Heaven. On the other hand, the experience of God's concealment is connected to the idea of the primeval Divine act of *Zimzum*, whose purpose can be understood to be free will. Thus 'יחיד און יחידה' ends with Yekhide's realization that there is a God, whose creation has a purpose, and that there is free will. In 'די גארדערע' the new bodies given out to the souls correspond exactly to the transgressions that they are supposed to rectify, which allows the conclusion that there must be a Heavenly "באלעבאָט" (master), who directs the procedures with wisdom, although no-one has ever seen Him. The story ends with one soul's philosophical question to the angel Begodyel, if he thinks that the world is a "קדמון" (something original, un-created, that has always existed). Begodyel's answer is: "ביים כל-יכול איז אלץ געמאָלט." (Everything is possible to the Almighty).⁶⁶

The three stories with anonymous, omniscient narrators discussed so far, are either set in the celestial world among angels and souls or in the world of the demons. But there are also several stories, set in our sublunar world, which deal with the subject of the Heavenly spheres, angels, demons and "גלגולים" (transmigrated souls).

In Bashevis's 'דער שוחט' ('The Slaughterer') the *rebe* of Turzysk tells the unwilling ritual slaughterer Yoyne Meyer that the souls of "צדיקים" (righteous people) אין "ווערן אָפט מגולגל" (often transmigrate into animals) and if the slaughterer kills these animals in accordance with the halachic regulations, he enables the *Tikun* or redemption of these

⁶⁶ מעשיות פון דינער און יחידה, 130.

souls.⁶⁷ This is, of course, another example of the Safed Kabbalists' doctrine of the transmigration of souls into all forms of existence.

As Yoyne-Meyer becomes more and more disgusted by his profession, he begins to question the Almighty. He admits that, in order to create the world, the "אין-סוף" (*'Ein-Sof*) had to dim His Divine light, and that there cannot be "בחירה" (free will) without suffering. But he does not understand, why animals have to suffer, since they do not have free will.⁶⁸ Here once again the teleological explanation of *Zimzum* as having occurred for the sake of free will is expressed by one of Bashevis's characters.⁶⁹ But this time Bashevis gives this idea a particular twist by adding a question about the suffering of those creatures without any free will, the animals.

Disgusted by his work as a ritual slaughterer, Yoyne Meyer tries to find solace in his studies, but realizes that the Torah is full of descriptions of murder and animal sacrifices. He only finds consolation in the descriptions of the "עולמות עליונים" (higher spheres) in kabbalistic works, like Immanuel Hai Ricchi's *Mishnat Ḥasidim*, Moshe Cordovero's *Pardes Rimonim*, Ḥayim Vital's *Ez Ḥayim*, as well as in the *Sefer Yezirah*.⁷⁰ Yoyne Meyer also enjoys looking at the nocturnal sky. The sight of the glittering stars makes him realize that above the "עולם העשייה" (World of Action, i.e. our sublunar world) there are higher worlds full of "מלאכים, שרפים, אופנים, חיות הקודש" (angels, seraphs, celestial wheels, holy creatures) and that in "גן-עדן" (Paradise) the righteous are studying the secrets of the Torah and weaving crowns for the *Shekhinah*. He is convinced that the nearer one gets to the Throne of Glory, the brighter is the light and the fewer are the "קליפות" (*Klipot*).⁷¹

The association of the nocturnal sky with the higher spheres is already familiar from

⁶⁷ 'דע' שוחט', in: מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון, 28; cf. 'The Slaughterer', in: *The Séance*, 18.

⁶⁸ מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון, 30.

⁶⁹ See: Section 3.4.1, 84-87.

⁷⁰ On these works, see: Section 2.5, 46 f., 49, 51.

⁷¹ מעשיות פון דינטערן אויוון, 31.

several of Bashevis's works, as are the images of the angels, the righteous in Paradise and the braiding of crowns for the *Shekhinah*.⁷² The *Klipot*, the forces of the *sitra 'ahra*, formed from the shards of the broken "vessels", according to Lurianic Kabbalah, are associated here by Yoyne Meyer with our sublunar world, which he experiences as a world of slaughter and of "גשמיות" (corporeality). But it is only by reaching the higher worlds after one's death, that one can escape both from corporeality and from the forces of evil.⁷³

Thus Yoyne Meyer, who cannot cope with the sufferings of animals in our corporeal world, becomes mad and finally dies at the end of the story. Before he dies, he accuses God Himself of being a "שווחט" (slaughterer) and a "מלאך-המוות" (an angel of death). He is convinced that not even the Messiah will be able to redeem a world, where animals are being slaughtered, although they all contain a "ניצוץ אלוקים" (a spark of the Divine).⁷⁴

In Bashevis's 'דער טויטער קלעזמער' (translated as 'The Dead Fiddler'), the theme of "גלגולים" (transmigrated souls) appears again.⁷⁵ In this story, a young girl, named Libe Yentl, is possessed by a dybbuk, the restless spirit of a dead musician. While the girl's father, R. Sheftl, and the rabbi of the town try to exorcise the dybbuk by blowing the shofar and by employing various amulets and mystical works, like *Sefer Yezirah*, *Sefer Razi'el* and *Tikunei Zohar*, a second dybbuk enters Libe Yentl, this time a female one. The two spirits start to argue. Then they plan their wedding. Finally they are exorcised. But R. Sheftl, his wife and Libe Yentl die one after the other. The inhabitants of the town, who try to understand the secret of the demonic possession, are forced to

⁷² See: Section 2.3, 28 f., Section 5.4.2, 166-168, Section 6.5, 237 f., Section 8.3, 295 f.

⁷³ מעשיות פון דינשערן אייוון, 31. On the *Klipot*, see: Section 3.4.2, 87-89. On the association of our sublunar world with the world of the *Klipot*, see also: Section 5.4.2, 168.

⁷⁴ מעשיות פון דינשערן אייוון, 37, 40.

⁷⁵ 'דער טויטער קלעזמער', in: מעשיות פון דינשערן אייוון, 209-251, translated as 'The Dead Fiddler', in: *The Séance*, 31-63.

admit that Heaven and earth have conspired that the truth will forever be concealed.⁷⁶

This realization is, of course, closely connected to the idea of God's withdrawal and concealment, which causes the human experience of meaninglessness and the concealment of truth.

In 'די שוואַרץ חתונה' ('The Black Wedding') generations of the family of the *rebe* of ציווקעוו (possibly the Ukrainian Цювка across the Polish border) are tormented by demons, who seem to be revenging the exorcism of a dybbuk by Rabbi Arn Naftole's grandfather. When the rabbi, who was experimenting with practical Kabbalah, finally dies, his daughter Hindele is married off to a divorced man, whom she perceives as a demon.⁷⁷ But although Bashevis once again employs ideas about Jewish demonology, demonic possession and the defence against demons with the help of *Sefer Yezirah* and various amulets, Hindele's perception of the surrounding world as being inhabited by evil forces can also be understood in psychiatric terms.

While the reality of the demons in 'די שוואַרץ חתונה' remains ambiguous, the demon in the story 'טייבעלע און הורמיזא' (translated as 'Taibele and Her Demon') is clearly a human being, the assistant teacher Elkhonen, who poses as the demon Hurmiza, in order to seduce the deserted wife Taybele.⁷⁸

There are a few more short stories with anonymous, omniscient narrators in the volume *גימפל חם*, which contain Jewish mystical references, in particular 'לא על אנש רחיצנא' ('I Place My Reliance on No Man') and 'משניות' (Mishnah).⁷⁹ The stories 'די קליינע שוסטערלעך' ('The Little Shoemakers') and 'מ'דאָרף זיין בשמחה' (translated as: 'Joy') have

already been referred to, in connection with the theme of concealment and revelation.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ מעשיות פון דינסטערן אויוון, 209-251.

⁷⁷ 'די שוואַרץ חתונה', in: *גימפל חם*, 301-309, translated as 'The Black Wedding', in: *The Spinoza of Market Street*, 25-35.

⁷⁸ 'טייבעלע און הורמיזא', in: *מעשיות פון דינסטערן אויוון*, 73-88, translated as 'Taibele and Her Demon', in: *Short Friday*, 9-19.

⁷⁹ 'לא על אנש רחיצנא', in: *גימפל חם*, 256-264, translated as 'I Place My Reliance on No Man', in: *Short Friday*, 174-182; 'משניות' in: *גימפל חם*, 265-274.

⁸⁰ See: Section 3.4.1, 83 f.

The apocalyptic tale 'דער באַל' (translated as 'The Gentleman from Cracow') has also been mentioned earlier, in connection with the concept of *Tikun*.⁸¹

8.4. Mystical Motifs in the Hasidic Monologues

The last category of Bashevis's short stories, which has to be considered in this context, are the monologues of various ḥasidic speakers, since they contain a number of Jewish mystical motifs. In fact, over the years Bashevis developed the monologue technique in his ḥasidic tales, turning from the "closed" monologue of the young *ḥasid* Borekh Rakhever, telling the story of his father-in-law, a former *mitnaged* who became a *ḥasid*, in the story 'די עצה' ('A Piece of Advice'), to several tales, consisting of a series of three monologues, after which each of the narrators hears the reactions of the other two.⁸²

There are three such ḥasidic tales, which include the monologues of the same three narrators. These are 'דריי מעשיות' ('Three Tales'), 'מעשיות פון הינטערן אויוון' ('Stories from Behind the Stove') and 'גרייזן' ('Errors').⁸³ Each of the three speakers in these stories, Zalmen Glezer, R. Leyvi-Yitskhok Amshinover and Meyer Tumtum, is characterized by a unique style of language. The series of three monologues are set within the frame of a gathering of these men in the Radzymin ḥasidic *shtibl*, introduced by an anonymous narrator who, as Chone Shmeruk puts it, conjurs up an "authentic picture of the development and spread of the Hassidic tale".⁸⁴

The earliest of these tales is 'דריי מעשיות', which Bashevis dedicated to Arn Tseytlin.⁸⁵

During a gathering in the Radzymin *shtibl*, Zalmen Glezer tells a story about his encounter with a sorcerer, from whom he only managed to escape on account of a 'קמיע'

⁸¹ See: Section 3.4.3, 97 f.

⁸² 'די עצה', in: גימפל חם, 44-50, translated as 'A Piece of Advice', in: *The Spinoza of Market Street*, 135-144.

Cf. Ch. Shmeruk, 'Monologue as Narrative Strategy', in: D.N. Miller (ed.), *Recovering the Canon*, 111.

⁸³ 'דריי מעשיות', in: דער שפיגל, 136-150, translated as 'Three Tales', in: *Short Friday*, 137-149; 'מעשיות פון הינטערן אויוון', in: דער שפיגל, 7-25, reprinted in: דער שפיגל, 151-166, translated as: 'Stories from behind the Stove', in: *A Friend of Kafka*, 61-76; 'גרייזן', in: דער שפיגל, 167-179, translated as 'Errors', in: *Passions and Other Stories*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975, 43-55.

⁸⁴ Cf. Ch. Shmeruk, 'Monologue as Narrative Strategy', in: D.N. Miller (ed.), *Recovering the Canon*, 111.

⁸⁵ 'דריי מעשיות' was first published in די גאלדענע קייט, 50 (1964), 282-292.

(an amulet) from the *magid* of Kozienice. R. Leyvi-Yitskhok tells the assembled company about a young man who could appear at two places at the same time. No amulets could help against this black magic.⁸⁶ Meyer, the eunuch, finally tells the tale of a child, who grew too fast. They named the child “ניוקא” (Aramaic: “suckling”) after a similar case in the *Zohar*. Before the boy was two years old, he studied the Talmud. At five he already had a long beard and studied kabbalistic works such as the *Tikunei Zohar* and the *‘Ez Hayim*, as well as the *Sefer Yezirah*. The child was married to a girl of fourteen, but died three months after the wedding as an old man. Meyer Tumtum explains that this child was a “גילגול” (transmigrated soul) of a saint. The *rebe* of Warka had revealed that it was supposed to become the Messiah, but that Satan had interfered. Meyer concludes his story by saying that sometimes a soul is sent down to earth “וואָס דאַרף אַלץ מתקן זיין אויף דער גיך” (which has to repair everything quickly). He says that mistakes can only be corrected in our sublunar world, which he thinks is the “עולם הקליפות” (world of the *Klipot*), but also the “עולם התיקון” (world of cosmic restoration).⁸⁷

In this story Bashevis once again employs the motif of the *gilgul*, as well as the Lurianic concept of *Tikun*. Like Yoyne Meyer in ‘דער שוהט’, Meyer Tumtum experiences our sublunar world as a world of the *Klipot*. But unlike him, he also knows that in accordance with Lurianic Kabbalah, the concluding actions in the process of *Tikun* are reserved to the activities of human beings in our imperfect world.⁸⁸

In ‘מעשיות פֿון דיגטערן איוון’, the second series of tales narrated by these three men in the Radzymin *shtetl*, Zalmen Glezer tells the story of a storehouse, which disappeared and reappeared to the greatest dismay of the enlightened men in the *shtetl*.⁸⁹ R. Leyvi-

Yitskhok tells his two companions about the *rebe* of Kapelnice, to whom he used to travel

⁸⁶ דער שפיגל, 139-145.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 146-150.

⁸⁸ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 142 f.

⁸⁹ די גאָלדענע קייט, 66 (1969), 18-28. The story was first published in מעשיות פֿון דיגטערן איוון, 8-13.

with his father. After the *rebe* had died, the narrator was praying with a group of *hasidim* and had the feeling that he could hear the droning of souls, asking the Creator, for how long the “חושך-מצרים” (darkness of Egypt) had to last and for how long the “נצוצות דקדושה” (sparks of holiness) had to remain captured among the *Klipot*. It is at this point that the *rebe* appeared to his *hasidim*.⁹⁰

Meyer Tumtum’s response is that death does not really exist, since everything is a “חלק אלוהי” (part of God above). The soul never dies and the body never really lives. He then proceeds to tell about his own initiation to Kabbalah. When he was sixteen, he began to study kabbalistic works, like the *Zohar*, the *Pardes Rimonim*, the *‘Ez Hayim* and the *Mishnat Hasidim*. He also asked a Babylonian Jew, who was visiting his *shtetl* at the time, to teach him practical Kabbalah. The Babylonian miracle worker left him with a book of spells, “כוונות” (religious intentions) and “צירופי-אותיות” (combinations of letters). But when Meyer tried to conjure up an angel, a “לאַפֿיטוט” (minor demon) appeared instead. Not being able to get rid of the demon, Meyer escaped to the *yeshivah* of his *rebe* in Parczew, taking the *Sefer Yezirah* with him for the sake of protection, and he remained there for twenty years.⁹¹ In response to Meyer’s story, Zalmen Glezer asks him, why God created the evil hosts in the first place, and Meyer explains that this was for the sake of “בחירה” (free will). He also mentions a comment by the Babylonian Jew that, when “דער אין-סוף האָט זיך צומצט געווען און איבערגעלאָזט אַ מקום-פֿנוי” (*‘Ein-Sof* contracted Himself and left an empty space), a “משוגעת” (craziness) arose. The *Klipah* is crazy and our “עולם העשייה” is nothing more than a madhouse.⁹²

Meyer Tumtum’s monologue is replete with mystical motifs. Several kabbalistic works are mentioned explicitly. When Meyer tells his friends about his desire to study practical Kabbalah, he refers to some of the same experiments, which appear frequently in

⁹⁰ מעשיות פון דינטערן אױון 14-19. On the “sparks of holiness” being captured among the *Klipot*, see: Section 3.4.2, 89.

⁹¹ מעשיות פון דינטערן אױון 20-24.

⁹² Ibid., 24 f.

Bashevis's works, the tapping of wine from the wall and the transformation into a "רואה-ואינו-נראה" (someone who sees, but is not seen). The power of language to create living beings is mentioned, as is the protective quality of *Sefer Yezirah*.⁹³ Meyer Tuntum's explanation for the creation of the forces of evil for the sake of free will is again connected to the teleological explanation of *Zimzum*.⁹⁴ In fact, the Divine act of *Zimzum* is referred to explicitly and given a grotesque twist by the statement that the creation of an empty space during the process of *Zimzum*, led to the rise of craziness in our world.

The third story with the same trio of narrators is called "גרייזון" ('Errors').⁹⁵ At first Zalmen Glezer tells the story of a member of the Czarist family who made a mistake in the name of an angry Polish nobleman with catastrophic consequences.⁹⁶ This is followed by R. Leyvi-Yitskhok's tale of a rich man in Szczebrzeszyn, who was tormented by demons that had power over his house on account of a serious mistake in all of his *mezuzot*. The famous scribe, who had written the *mezuzot*, was a secret Shabbatean and he had replaced the letter "ד" in the phrase "ה' אחד" (The Eternal is One) with the letter "ר", so that it read "ה' אחר" (The Eternal is another one).⁹⁷

This tale testifies to the belief in the inherent mystical power of the Hebrew language, especially of holy names, which is frequently upheld by characters in Bashevis's works.⁹⁸

It also refers to the belief of radical Shabbateans after Shabbatai Zvi's apostasy that the Messiah was not going to come, before the generation had become "כולו-חייב" (completely guilty), and who therefore tried to lead Jews to commit all kinds of transgressions.⁹⁹

⁹³ See: Section 3.2, 66-70, Section 6.3.1, 205 f. and 6.4.2, 220 f.

⁹⁴ See: Section 3.4.1, 84-87.

⁹⁵ 'גרייזון' was first published in פארווערטס, 10 and 11 November 1972.

⁹⁶ דער שפיגל, 167-170.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 170-174.

⁹⁸ See: Section 3.2, 66 f., 70 f., Section 4.4.2, 139 f.

⁹⁹ דער שפיגל, 173. See: Section 3.5, 108-110.

The series of stories about mistakes is concluded by Meyer Tumtum, who tells the tale of the rabbi of Belczów, the head of a *yeshivah*, who hesitantly decided to publish a religious work in his old age, but was afraid of possible mistakes in his work. He therefore revised the work together with his best student, whom he also sent to Warsaw to supervise the process of printing. But despite all of this care, the rabbi found a serious printing error and in his anger he told his student to become a shoemaker instead of a rabbi. The student took the rabbi by his word and learned the craft of shoemaking. Much later, when the rabbi had died and his student had become the new rabbi and head of the *yeshivah*, he told all of his students to learn a trade. At this point, Zalmen Glezer comments that something good came out of this mistake, and Meyer Tumtum responds with the statement, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that in reality there are no mistakes, since everything comes from the 'Ein-Sof. There are such worlds, he says, where all mistakes return to the truth.¹⁰⁰

Meyer's response here is very similar to his statement in 'מעשיות פון הינטערן אויוון' that there is no death, since everything is part of God. It is an expression of the ḥasidic teaching of God's immanence in the world, which is also expressed by Bashevis's father in *מײַן טאַטנס בית-דין שטוב*.¹⁰¹ The idea of worlds, where all mistakes will return to the truth, is another very original expression of the concept of *Tikun*.

Three other stories consist of monologues of principal speakers, set within a frame, which describes a gathering of men in a ḥasidic *shtibl*. In 'דער פרוש' ('The Recluse') a young man named Nakhmen tells the story of how he became a recluse after his bitter disappointment with the head of his *yeshivah*, whom he had considered to be a "גאון און ניסתר" (genius and hidden saint).¹⁰² In 'מעשיות אין אַ ווינטערנאַכט' (translated as: 'The

¹⁰⁰ *דער שפיגל*, 174-179.

¹⁰¹ *בית-דין שטוב*, 62. See: Section 1, 15, 19 f.

¹⁰² *דער שפיגל*, 194-210, especially 208. 'דער פרוש' was first published in *די גאָלדענע קייט*, 75 (1972), translated as 'The Recluse', in: *A Crown of Feathers and Other Stories*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974, 224-239.

Blizzard') Bendet tells three stories to two men in the Turzysk ḥasidic *shtibl* in Biłgoraj. The first person narrator of the frame story, a young boy, is also among his listeners. This boy can easily be identified with Yitskhok Zinger in his youth.¹⁰³ None of these stories contains any significant kabbalistic references other than the mystical works that are mentioned.¹⁰⁴

In the third of these stories, a ḥasidic tale entitled 'אַנדרוגינוס' (The Androgyne), several kabbalistic references can be found.¹⁰⁵ During a gathering of *ḥasidim*, R. Leyzer Valden, an old "קאַצקער חסיד" (Kock *ḥasid*), tells the story of R. Motele, the *rebe* of Parczew, and his union with an androgyne. R. Motele was a widower, who had never remarried. He was only interested in his Torah studies and his quarrels with the Almighty, while his court was declining and falling to pieces. The androgyne, named Shevakh, had come to the area from the big city, where she had been discovered by a merchant's son, who was impressed by her erudition and wanted to marry her. But when he found out that she was an androgyne, he divorced her immediately and she went to Parczew, where she was welcomed by the *rebe*. At first R. Motele took her on as his "שמש" (beadle), then he married her. She "הָאָט געטײלט שיריים" (distributed the remnants of her meal) like a *rebe* and danced with the *ḥasidim*, just like Hodl, the daughter of the Baal Shem Tov. On account of R. Motele's union with Shevakh, his court began to flourish again and when he died, Shevakh published all his writings.¹⁰⁶

The *ḥasid*, who tells this tale, comments on the phenomenon of the androgyne, stating that in the same way that "דער גוף האָט בייַדע בחינות" (the body has both genders), so does the soul, and that there are, in fact "טאַפלטע נשמות" (twin souls). He also says that

¹⁰³ 'מעשיות אין אַ ווינטערנאַכט' was first published in די גאַלדענע קייט 78 (1973), translated as 'The Blizzard', in: *A Crown of Feathers*, 63-79.

¹⁰⁴ The *Ma'avar-Yabok* and the *Reshit Hokhmah* in 'דער פּרש', דער שפיגל, 196, 210 and the 'Ez Hayim in 'מעשיות אין אַ ווינטערנאַכט', דער שפיגל, 211.

¹⁰⁵ 'אַנדרוגינוס' was written especially for Chone Shmeruk's anthology of Bashevis's short stories, דער שפיגל, Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975, 180-193.

¹⁰⁶ דער שפיגל, 191-193.

according to kabbalistic literature, the “בחינה פון זכרות און נקבות” (category of masculinity and femininity) can be found in every human being.¹⁰⁷ R. Leyzer’s comments are based on a talmudic idea, which was developed in later kabbalistic writings. According to a talmudic passage, also quoted by Rashi, the primeval Adam was created as a two-faced androgynous being that was later separated. This is inferred from the verse in Gen 1, 27, in which it is stated that God created “אדם” (Adam / the first human being) in God’s image, using the singular form “אותו” (him), followed by the statement that God created “אותם” (them) male and female, using the plural form.¹⁰⁸ In Lurianic Kabbalah, “אדם” (the first human being) “on the anthropological plane” corresponds to “אדם קדמון” (the primordial Adam), consisting of both male and female *Sfirot*, on the Divine plane. Adam’s sin and subsequent fall on the human plane repeats the breaking of the “vessels” assigned to the *Sfirot* of the Divine ‘*Adam Kadmon*’, as a result of which “none of the worlds is located in its proper place”. The crucial point in the Lurianic discussions is that it is also up to human beings to conclude the subsequent process of cosmic restoration or *Tikun*, which was already begun by Divine “supernal lights”.¹⁰⁹

R. Leyzer is, of course, fully aware of these kabbalistic ideas. His statements imply that the “original ideal of Creation” in the first androgynous Adam repeats itself in another androgyne. Shevakh with her androgynous body and spiritually whole “טאָפּלטע נשמה” (twin soul) therefore has enormous potential for “spiritual recuperation”.¹¹⁰ Her union with R. Motele is a vision of *Tikun*, beginning with a restoration of the ḥasidic community in Parczew, which is both physical and spiritual. R. Leyzer speaks of their union as being one of “רוחניות, נישט גשמיות” (spirituality, not corporeality) and compares it, very appropriately, to the “זיווגים אין הימל” (couplings in Heaven), referred to in the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 189 f.

¹⁰⁸ Gen 1, 27 and Rashi ad locum, cf. also b Berakhot 61a, b Ketuvot 8a and b Eruvin 18a.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 142 f.; *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 279 f.; *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 46 f.

¹¹⁰ Cf. J. Sherman, ‘What’s Jews? Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *Androgyne*’, in: *Prooftexts*, 14:2 (May 1994), 178.

kabbalistic literature.¹¹¹ Until R. Motele's death, his union with Shevakh is filled with a great "שמחה" (joy) in serving the Almighty and with a "חדווה" (bliss), which can only be derived from the "עולמות עליונים" (higher spheres).¹¹² Unfortunately, R. Motele's writings, which Shevakh published after his death, shared the same fate as R. Motele, as R. Leyzer says, they remained concealed. In his concluding statements, R. Leyzer implicitly compares human greatness, which remains concealed, such as R. Motele's and Shevakh's, with God's light, which has remained concealed since the first Divine act of *Zimzum*: "ס'זענען דאָ אַזוינע ליכטער וואָס מוזן בלייבן פאַרהוילן, ווען נישט, וואָלט אויפֿגעהערט די בחירה. ס'זענען דאָ זיווגים וואָס ברויכן זיך קיין מאָל נישט באַהעפֿטן. ס'זענען דאָ אמתן וואָס וואָס קלאָרער " (There are such lights, as have to remain concealed. If not, free will would cease to exist. There are such couples, as never need to copulate. There are truths, which, the clearer they become, the less one sees them.)¹¹³

8.5. Conclusion

Just like Bashevis's four major novels from the years 1933-1961, discussed in the course of this study, several of his short stories are replete with Jewish mystical motifs. After briefly discussing the question of Bashevis's use of Jewish mysticism in his later fiction in general, this chapter has focused on mystical motifs in his short fiction, both earlier and later. The discussion has concentrated on material published in the four collections of Bashevis's short fiction in Yiddish book form between 1943 and 1975.

There are different categories of Bashevis's short stories, stories with a third-person omniscient narrator and various kinds of monologue. The monologues can be divided into those told by supernatural figures and those told by a variety of human narrators. In this chapter different mystical motifs in three categories of Bashevis's short stories have

¹¹¹ דער שפיגל, 191.

¹¹² Ibid., 192.

¹¹³ Ibid., 193.

been identified, in the monologues of supernatural narrators, in the short stories with anonymous omniscient narrators and in the ḥasidic monologues.

Several of Bashevis's short stories represent written monologues of supernatural figures, like various demons or the Evil One himself. These monologues employ a rich demonology and popular images of the punishment of the sinners in Gehenna, as they can be found in various ethical works, written under Lurianic influence. The monologues of the Evil One also include several interesting characterizations of Satan and insights into the tricks he plays upon human beings, employing a considerable degree of kabbalistic terminology. The demonic narrators of two spoken monologues, 'דער שפיגל' ('The Mirror') and 'מעשה טישעוויץ' ('The Last Demon'), are far less malign, speaking in the style of a "ברוך" (wedding jester), combined with the language of religious learning. The two monologues again make use of Jewish demonology, but 'מעשה טישעוויץ' also employs profound mystical motives based on the linguistic cosmology of *Sefer Yezirah*, as explained previously.¹¹⁴ The supernatural narrator of the last story of this genre, the rooster in 'קוקעדודו' ('Cockadoodledoo'), also alludes to the mystical linguistic theory of *Sefer Yezirah*, when he refers to the Heavenly "קוקעדודו". In addition to this, the Zoharic idea of the "זיווג קדישא" or "sacred marriage" and the Lurianic concept of *Tikun*, replete with its sexual imagery, are employed and transplanted into the imaginary world of a rooster.

Among Bashevis's short stories with an anonymous omniscient narrator there is one story set in the world of demons, and there are two set in the world of angels. In these stories Bashevis employs a rich Jewish demonology and angelology respectively. In addition to this, in the stories with a celestial setting he employs familiar kabbalistic ideas about "גלגול", i.e. the transmigration of souls as a means of rectifying sins committed in a previous life. But he subverts the traditional images of the demonic and celestial worlds

¹¹⁴ See: Section 3.3, 78-81.

by describing human life on earth from the perspective of demons and of souls in Heaven respectively. In the two stories with a celestial setting he also presents grotesque images of chaos, confusion and meaninglessness, caused by the Heavenly souls' and angels' experience of a God who remains conspicuously absent, even in the very Heaven, where He is supposed to dwell. God's concealment, however, is explicitly connected to the Lurianic idea of *Zimzum*, whose purpose, in accordance with Luzzatto's teleological explanation is said to be free will.¹¹⁵ Questions concerning the concept of *Zimzum* and free will, as well as the idea of the transmigration of the soul into all forms of existence also feature in Bashevis's 'דער שוואַרצער'. This is supplemented by the unwilling ritual slaughterer's thoughts about our corporeal world as the world of the *Klipot* and his longing for the higher spheres. In several other stories demons, dybbuks and "גלגולים" (transmigrated soul) are mentioned. However, the substantiality of Bashevis's demons and dybbuks remains ambiguous and in some stories their appearance can clearly be understood in psychological terms.

One further category of Bashevis's short stories, which is replete with Jewish mystical motifs, is his series of ḥasidic monologues. There are three ḥasidic tales told by the same trio of narrators during gatherings at the Radzymin ḥasidic *shtibl*. They include tales of supernatural occurrences, "גלגולים", the activities of demons, protection from demons by means of amulets, the inherent power of the Hebrew letters, especially of holy names, Shabbatean activities, black magic and practical Kabbalah. The tales of Meyer Tumtum are particularly full of mystical motifs and kabbalistic terminology. He tells his companions about his own initiation to practical Kabbalah, but also utters profound and sometimes very unusual thoughts about craziness arising as a consequence of the Divine act of *Zimzum* and of the process of *Tikun*, during which all mistakes will return to the truth. Three more of Bashevis's ḥasidic monologues are set within a frame story of a

¹¹⁵ See Section 3.4.1, 84-87

gathering of men in a ḥasidic *shetibl*, one of them narrated by a young boy, who can be identified with Yitskhok Zinger in his youth. The latest of Bashevis's ḥasidic tales, which was included in his 1975 collection *לער שפיגל*, the story 'אנדרוגינאס' (The Androgyne), presents a vision of *Tikun* in the highly unusual union of the old *rebe* R. Motele with an androgyne. The enormous potential of the androgyne as a spiritual descendant of the androgynous "אדם הראשון" (the first human being), corresponding to the "אדם קדמון" (the primordial Adam) on the Divine plane, however, is not recognized by the more mundane *ḥasidim* and her greatness, like that of R. Motele, remains as concealed as God's light after the Divine act of *Zimzum*.

8. Conclusion

דאָס גאָט ברוך הוא זאָל קיינער דערצערנען : דער טויט

וועט דאָן ווערן פאַרמיטן : און לילית וועט ווערן

פאַרשניטן : צום גלות וועט קומען אָן ענד :

און דער שטן וועט ווערן פאַרלענדט :

און יעקב וועט אויפריכטן זיין געצעלט :

און דאָס ליכט פון דער שכינה

מעכט אָנפילן גאָר די וועלט :

אמן סלה :

תם ונשלם¹

LET NONE ATTEMPT TO FORCE THE LORD : TO END

OUR PAIN WITHIN THE WORLD : THE MESSIAH

WILL COME IN GOD'S OWN TIME : AND FREE

MEN OF DESPAIR AND CRIME : THEN DEATH

WILL PUT AWAY HIS SWORD : AND SATAN

DIE ABJURED, ABHORRED : LILITH WILL

VANISH WITH THE NIGHT : THE

EXILE END AND ALL BE LIGHT :

AMEN SELAH :

CONCLUDED AND DONE²

The words of this short poem, written in a stylized archaic Yiddish, are the concluding words of Bashevis's first novel *דער שטן אין גאָר*. They call to mind a significant theme in Bashevis's works, the theme of Jewish messianism, the experience of exile and the hope for redemption. Redemption is understood in both historical terms, bringing an end to the exile of the Jewish people, and in mystical terms, bringing an end to the exile of the *Shekhinah*, who is referred to explicitly in the Yiddish original. After exposing the excesses and the failure of Shabbatean messianism in *דער שטן אין גאָר*, Bashevis presents

¹ *דער שטן אין גאָר*, 189.

² *Satan in Goray*, 159. Jacob Sloan's version of this poem captures the meaning of the Yiddish original, although it is obviously not an exact translation.

the traditional Jewish hope for messianic redemption at the end of the novel, as well as the traditional view that one should not anger God, as it is expressed in the Yiddish, implying that one should not attempt to force God to bring the Messiah, as it is spelled out in the English translation.

In addition to Jewish messianism, Jewish magic and superstition is one of the major themes in Bashevis's works. References to magical and superstitious practices, as well as to the belief in demons and dybbuks can frequently be found in Bashevis's short stories. Examples of this are the stories 'דער טויטער קלעזמער' and 'די שוואַרץ חתונה', as well as the ḥasidic monologues 'דריי מעשיות', 'מעשיות פֿון הינטערן אויוון', and 'גרייזן'.³ From the four novels discussed in this study the theme of Jewish magic and superstition is most prominent in Bashevis's two seventeenth century novels *דער קנעכט* and *דער שטן אין גאָר*.

In both novels it forms part of the ethnographic background of seventeenth century *shtetl* life, exemplified in the *shtetlekh* of Goraj and Pilica respectively. It is also closely connected in both novels to the practices of the Shabbatean movement, whose followers are described as employing Shabbatean amulets and occupying themselves with practical Kabbalah.⁴ In Bashevis's late nineteenth-century novel *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* the magician Yasha Mazur dreams of employing practical Kabbalah for his magical performances.⁵ In the early twentieth-century family saga *די פאמיליע מושקאט* Bashevis presents a variety of characters, some of them modern, enlightened Jews, some of them very traditional ḥasidic and mitnagdic characters. Among his traditional characters there are many who are described as employing Jewish mystical works for magical and superstitious purposes.⁶

All the Jewish magical and superstitious activities described in Bashevis's works testify

³ See: Section 8.3, 299 f., Section 8.4, 301-305.

⁴ *דער שטן אין גאָר*, 78, 81, 119, 160; *דער קנעכט*, 278 f.

⁵ *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, 72, 74.

⁶ *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, 29, 129, 412. See: Section 5.4.1, 162-165.

to the belief in the power of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, by means of which the universe was created, according to the cosmogony of the *Sefer Yezirah*.⁷ Creation and language, the central idea of the *Sefer Yezirah*, is another major theme in Bashevis's works. While in *דער שטן אין גאָרײ* the *Sefer Yezirah* is merely employed for magical purposes by followers of the Shabbatean movement, in *די פאָמיליע מושקאָט* the central idea of the *Sefer Yezirah*, the creation of the universe out of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, is a significant underlying theme of the novel.⁸ The Hebrew letters are associated with the light of the stars in the nocturnal sky, testifying to the majesty of God's creation, and with the light of fire, testifying to the power of the words of the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish texts to sustain Jews, at least spiritually, in times of calamity.⁹ In Bashevis's *דער קנעכט* the beauty of creation is a major theme, and at one point the majesty of the nocturnal sky is likewise associated with Hebrew letters and sacred names.¹⁰ But the most interesting expression of the central idea of *Sefer Yezirah* can be found in *דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין*, where Bashevis links the artist-magician to the Creator-God, who can be understood as the archetypal artist and writer, having formed the universe out of endless combinations of the Hebrew alphabet.¹¹ This parallel has significant implications for the Yiddish writer Bashevis, who employs his own artistic skills to create fictional worlds by means of endless combinations of the Hebrew alphabet in the Yiddish language.¹² Further allusions to this idea can be found in the short story 'מעשה טישעוויץ', in which the narrator, the last surviving Jewish demon after the Holocaust, who sustains himself on Yiddish books, bears a clear resemblance to the author, who in his own Yiddish writings recreates the Polish-Jewish life, which has been destroyed.¹³

⁷ See: Section 3.2, 67; Section 3.3, 74 f.

⁸ *די פאָמיליע מושקאָט*, 81, 160; *דער שטן אין גאָרײ*, 11 f., 68, 294-298, 320, 351, 757 f.

⁹ Ibid. See also: Section 3.3, 76-78.

¹⁰ *דער קנעכט*, 190.

¹¹ *דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין*, 64 f., 92. See: Section 6.3.1, 204-209. See also: Section 3.3, 75 f.

¹² See: Section 3.3, 74-76, 80.

¹³ See: Section 3.3, 78-80.

Apart from the central idea on the creation of the world in *Sefer Yezirah*, various motifs and themes can be found in Bashevis's works, which are connected to the Lurianic doctrine of creation. As mentioned on various occasions, several of Bashevis's characters experience God in the two extremes of concealment and of revelation in creation. The experience of God's concealment is closely connected to the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*, the Divine act of withdrawal and contraction preceding the Divine act of emanation. The two characters, to whom these two extreme experiences of the Divine are most prominently ascribed, are Yasha Mazur in *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* and Yankev in *דער קנעכט*.¹⁴ These two characters, as well as Arele in *די פאמיליע מושקאט*, the *rebe* of Komorów in 'מ'דאָרף זיין בשמחה' and Yoyne-Meyer in 'דער שוחט', also express a particular interpretation of the Lurianic concept of *Zimzum*, namely a teleological explanation, which was developed in the writings of Moshe Hayim Luzzatto. This teleological understanding on the part of Bashevis's characters finds its expression in the statement that the Divine act of *Zimzum*, which made the existence of evil possible, had to occur for the sake of free will.¹⁵

However, the formation of the *Klipot*, the forces of evil, only came about as a result of the second stage in the Lurianic doctrine of creation, the Divine act of emanation, during which the "breaking of the vessels" occurred. In Bashevis's writings these two distinctive stages are often conflated by his characters and a teleological interpretation is given for both. This is the case with Yasha in *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין*, Yankev in *דער קנעכט* and Arele in *די פאמיליע מושקאט*. Rabbi Dan in *די פאמיליע מושקאט* only expresses a teleological explanation of the formation of the *Klipah*, saying that its purpose is "בחירה" (free will).¹⁶ In addition to this several references to the *Klipot* as the forces of evil can be found throughout Bashevis's works, as well as several mock allusions to the "breaking of the

¹⁴ See: Section 6.3.1, 204-209; Section 6.3.2, 209-211; Section 7.5.1, 254-262.

¹⁵ See: Section 3.4.1, 84-87; Section 8.3, 297 f.

¹⁶ See: Section 3.4.2, 87-91.

vessels”, particularly in connection with Rekhele in דער שטן אין גאָר¹⁷. Another recurrent image in Bashevis’s works is the image of “פּונקען” or “sparks” of light in contexts of either physical or metaphorical darkness, alluding to the “ניצוצות דקדושה” or “sparks of holiness” scattered throughout the universe during the cosmic incident of the “breaking of the vessels” and also captured among the *Klipot*, the dark forces of the *sitra ’ahra*. These “sparks” of redemptive good in contexts of darkness and evil can be found in all the four of Bashevis’s novels discussed here, as well as in some of his short stories.¹⁸ They appear most abundantly in די פאַמיליע מושקאַט and in דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין. In the latter they form part of a carefully designed pattern, which accompanies the main character’s journey both back to himself and to his hidden God and leads to his return to Judaism.¹⁹

The last stage in the Lurianic doctrine of creation, “תיקון”, the cosmic restoration of the universe to its originally intended state of harmony, which it never enjoyed since the “breaking of the vessels” is likewise referred to in Bashevis’s works. The completion of *Tikun* encompasses both messianic redemption, the end of the historical exile of the people of Israel, and the end of the mythical exile of the *Shekhinah* and her reunification with the rest of the Godhead. In Bashevis’s writings various characters express the hope for *Tikun* and the importance of human actions towards the completion of this process. Such is the case for example with the old Białodrewna *rebe* in די פאַמיליע מושקאַט, with Yasha in דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין, with Yankev in דער קנעכט, as well as with Meyer Tumtum in ‘דרייַ מעשיות’.²⁰

But in most of Bashevis’s works this hope for redemption remains unfulfilled. In דער שטן אין גאָר Bashevis even presents two extreme experiments to bring about redemption by force. Both experiments are carried out within the framework of the

¹⁷ See: Section 3.4.2, 90-92; Section 4.4.2, 138-142.

¹⁸ See: Section 3.4.2, 88 f., 92 f.; Section 4.4.2, 145-147; Section 5.4.4, 176-186; Section 6.4, 215-233; Section 7.5.2, 264-268; Section 8.3, 292 f.; Section 8.4, 302 f.

¹⁹ See: Section 6.4, 215-233.

²⁰ See: Section 3.4.3, 93-96; Section 6.5, 236-238; Section 7.5.3, 272; Section 8.4, 301 f.

Shabbatean messianic mass movement, and both have catastrophic consequences.²¹ In the short story 'דער קורצער פרייטיק', however, we find one of Bashevis's rare visions of *Tikun*. In this story the union of Shmuel-Leybele and Shoshe on Shabat on the human plane comes to reflect the "זיווג קדישא" or "sacred marriage" on the Divine plane.²² The only longer work of Bashevis, in which a vision of *Tikun* is presented as a real possibility is *דער קנעכט*. In this work the story of true love between Sore/Wanda and Yankev is also fraught with allusions to the "זיווג קדישא" between the *Shekhinah* and her male partner within the Godhead, expressing a vision of redemption, of an end to the exile of both the community of Israel and the *Shekhinah*.²³

This leads us back to the poem, cited at the beginning of this conclusion, with which Bashevis's *דער שטן אין גאָר* is brought to a close, which also expresses the hope for redemption and for an end to the exile. This hope for redemption is expressed in one way or another at the end of many of Bashevis's writings.

In the epilogue of *דער קנעכט* a beautiful vision of redemption is presented in the miraculous reunification of Yankev and Sore after their death, through which the sanctity of their "sacred marriage" is confirmed. By contrast, the epilogue of *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* is highly ironical. The solution to the magician's dilemma and his particular version of a return to Judaism remains highly ambiguous, which we may safely assume to be perfectly intentional. However, Yasha also expresses his hope for redemption and is presented as being sincere in his wish to atone for the transgressions he has committed and to contribute with his prayers and his Torah studies to the process of *Tikun*. In *די פאמיליע מושקאט* all the different models of redemption prove to be failures, and the main part of the novel ends with the impending death and destruction of the Second World War and with a modern

²¹ See: Section 4.4.1, 124-133.

²² See: Section 3.4.3, 99-101.

²³ See: Section 7.5.3, 268-275.

intellectual's nihilistic response, which sees redemption only in death. The last chapter of the Yiddish original, however, which is omitted in the English, hints at the possibility of an alternative by presenting the traditional Jewish hope for messianic redemption and the power of the words of the Hebrew Bible to provide strength to the Jewish people in all persecutions and calamities, until one day the Messiah will come. In the face of the impending destruction of the Second World War this may provide scant comfort, but there is no other alternative.

In *דער שטן אין גאריי* Bashevis exposes the failure of Shabbatean messianism and of the two extreme models to bring about redemption. The last two chapters of the novel do not provide any new vision of redemption after the destruction of the community of Goraj, nor do they provide any answers to the many questions left open by the main narrative. Instead they represent a retreat into the stylization of a moral parable. But despite all the irony contained in Bashevis's stylization, the only hope, which is expressed here, is again the traditional Jewish hope for a messianic redemption in the far-away future, whose time and circumstances only God alone will know.²⁴ "דאָס גאָט ברוך הוא זאָל קיינער דערצערנען" ("Let none attempt to force the Lord"). The Eternal will bring about messianic redemption in His own time. "אמן סלה : תם ונשלם".²⁵ ("Amen Selah : Concluded and done").

²⁴ It is interesting to note, however, that Bashevis had envisaged an epilogue to *דער שטן אין גאריי*, in which the old Rabbi Beynesh, the only one, who had recognized the dangers of Shabbatean messianism and who had disappeared half way through the novel, was supposed to return from Lublin, to help rebuilding the community of Goraj and to reestablish the rigorous observance of traditional Jewish law. – Cf.: Chone Shmeruk, "דער שטן אין גאריי", in: *ירושלמער אַלמאנאך*, 25 פרעקט צו אינסצעניזירן יצחק באשעוויסעס "דער שטן אין גאריי", (Jerusalem, 1996), 268 f.

²⁵ *דער שטן אין גאריי*, 189. *Satan in Goraj*, 159.