

Article

Shagar's Mystical Space: Moving between the Languages of Kabbalah, Hasidism, and Rav Kook

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Abstract: This paper presents an analysis of the conflictual relationship between Shagar's [Shimon Gershon Rosenberg] use of kabbalistic and Hasidic traditions and his search for mysticism via psychoanalysis and Continental philosophy. The study will shed light upon the tension between how Shagar defined and understood mysticism and how he defined kabbalistic language and the gap between his explicit and his implicit attitudes towards Kabbalah. I propose that mysticism was the central religious space that Shagar sought to create from his conflicting stance. Nonetheless, despite Shagar's attempt to present himself as a direct theological descendant of the kabbalistic tradition, by way of his use of terms such as "the shattering of the vessels", "Nothingness", and "silence", I will attempt to expose the dissonance between his yearning for this language and his rejection of it. My main analysis, at the heart of the article, will be based on the not-yet-released recording of his introductory lecture on *Da'at Tevunot*. It will be accompanied by a variety of sources from his books (edited by his pupils) to complete the picture.

Keywords: Kabbalah; Jewish mysticism; Hasidism; Zionism; postmodernism



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1. Introduction

Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (henceforth Shagar) (1949–2007) was not a kabbalist, but he wished to be a mystic. Shagar oscillated between the search for a singular intimacy of presence and unmediated encounter with the divine and a reflective, self-conscious stance that negated this unmediated effort. I propose to identify mysticism as the central religious space that he sought to create from this dualism. In his work, the raw materials of the various languages of the Jewish tradition (Talmud, Halakha, Kabbalah, and Hasidism), academic literature dealing with this tradition, and philosophical works (that he read in Hebrew translation) are fused and then deconstructed, so as to create a vacant space for the encounter with Nothingness, a major theme in mysticism.¹ For him, in the movement between internal and external, between Torah and religious belief on the one hand and secular philosophical, academic, and psychoanalytic theories on the other, a third space opens up and is crafted. That space is neither internal nor external but rather mystical. Shagar sought to overcome the dualism of his existential experience by moving back and forth between the two antipodes, without fully subjecting or restricting himself to any one perspective or approach.

In this article, I will suggest that, for him, it is precisely this movement that enables the longed-for mystical experience. Indeed, the very same liminal space created by this movement is the space in which creativity and mysticism can take place. Although one can argue with the designation of Shagar as a mystic or a kabbalist, this article will nevertheless seek to emphasize the centrality of mysticism as a fundamental goal of his spiritual approach. The constant repetition of the term "mysticism" in his teachings, the amount of time he devoted to teaching Hasidism, and the amount of time he devoted to seclusion and meditation² all attest to his attempt to recreate a living religious-mystical experience. Nonetheless, I will argue that despite Shagar's attempt (and that of several scholars exploring his work) to present himself as a direct theological descendant of the kabbalistic tradition by way of his use of terms such as "the shattering of the vessels," "Nothingness,"

and “silence,” there is dissonance between his yearning for this language and his rejection of it. On the one hand, I will emphasize that there is a chasm between his theological and linguistic stance and the Kabbalah in its original context; on the other hand, I will claim that this is precisely where his innovation lies. The article will be based on a selection of his writings as published and edited by his various students, as well as his unreleased recorded lectures on the kabbalistic teachings of Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto.³

Shagar oscillates between the search for a singular intimacy of presence and unmediated encounter with the divine and a reflective, self-conscious stance that seeks to observe itself through languages external to it, thereby negating the effort to remain unmediated. The conflict between the internal and the external, between the language of internal religious faith and a reflective analytical stance inspired by secular theories, stands at the heart of Shagar’s thought.⁴ Yet, the movement between these positions can create a third space of mystical experience, which may be central in understanding his religious consciousness and his work as a Torah scholar. I maintain that the continuity and compatibility of Kabbalah and the languages of modern and postmodern philosophy⁵ that he presents in various places actually reflect the uprooting of these different languages from their original contexts by way of misreading and creative hermeneutics. They also reflect his ambivalence about full identification with either one of them. In failing to identify fully with either of the languages, instead, translating them into one other, his thought disintegrates over and over again; it is precisely this movement that, for him, enables the longed-for mystical experience; indeed, the very same liminal space created by this movement is the space in which creativity and mysticism can take place.⁶

2. Methodological Remarks

Most of the books that have come out under Shagar’s name are comprised of essays heavily edited by his students. We may regard these books not as independent compositions, but rather as works that combine the words of Shagar with the interpretation and insights of his students. In this sense, Shagar’s teachings are similar to those of various Hasidic rabbis and teachers, which were reworked by their circle of students. For methodological clarity, I will note which sources are based on his own words, which I have transcribed directly from recordings of his lectures or taken from his unedited notebooks and which are from the reworked material in the books edited by his students. However, all of the sources should ultimately be understood as oral transmission; his teachings already included his students when he composed the drafts, and certainly when they were delivered to and heard by the audience of students at his talks and lectures. Therefore, it would be most accurate to see this article as dealing with the thought of Shagar’s circle, and not just of Shagar. The core analysis of the article will be based on the not-yet-released recording of his introductory lecture on *Da’at Tevunot*. I will then turn to other sources from his books to complete the picture.

Despite the efforts of certain circles, such as those of Shagar and Drob⁷, to present Kabbalah as a potential theological solution to the crises of the believer in the postmodern era, as a scholar of Kabbalah and Hasidism in their historical contexts, it is hard for me to accept their joint call as a credible representation of these concepts in their original contexts. On the one hand, Shagar displayed a systematic interpretive effort to depict the kabbalistic conceptual system as suited to postmodernist theological sensibilities—as Miriam Feldman Kaye showed with the concepts of the vacant space (*hallal panui*), the Infinite (*Ein-Sof*), the shattering of the vessels, and others.⁸ On the other hand—as shown by Biti Roi—he interpreted and deployed these concepts by means of misreading and reappropriation.⁹

At the outset, I want to emphasize my adoption of Huss’ distinctions regarding the use of mysticism as a concept in the context of Kabbalah and Hasidism (Huss 2020, pp. 35–101). Hence, I see Shagar’s use of the word “mysticism”—similar to that found in the modern academic research of Kabbalah—as a modern structure that transfers kabbalistic and Hasidic languages to the realm of religious studies and subordinates them to Western agendas that tend towards universality. Shagar’s repeated use of the term “mystic” to give

meaning to religious experience, to the performance of the commandments, to religious belief, to Torah study, and to the textual heritage of Kabbalah and Hasidism already indicate both the chasm and the longing to skip over that chasm, to meld and to bridge between modern Western language and the internal Jewish heritage.¹⁰ Shagar used the words “mystical” and “mysticism” similarly to their contemporary usage—to express a broad and undefined range of perspectives on the human condition, mostly religious or theological, but which is actually a generic name for something larger (Garb 2004). He uses the word “mystical” to designate an object of the imagination, of desire, of longing for powerful experiences which grant daily life a dimension of otherness, emotion, and fantasy. The mystical experience in his writings is characterized by a variety of expressions: silence, prayer with an awareness of the presence of otherness, observation of the magical effect of the commandments, play and delight in Torah study, the conscious psychological stance of negating the dualism between object and subject, the fantastic and imaginative dimensions, fantasy, emotion, ecstasy, and delight. Though we will touch on some of the different expressions characteristic of mysticism for Shagar, the goal of this article is not to present a phenomenological portrait according to the research models of mysticism or religion. Rather, the goal of this article is to establish the role of the mystical dimension for Shagar as an object of conflicting yearnings and to show how Kabbalah—although it *prima facie* represented the mystical for him—actually failed to deliver the desired fulfillment of mystical yearnings, providing only the path to and from this fulfillment.

3. The Cultural Context and the Mystical Possibilities of the Modern and Postmodern Eras

Gershom Scholem contemplated whether Jewish mysticism was possible in his day. He concluded that no autonomous or original Jewish mysticism had arisen in the last 200 years.¹¹ He wondered whether new mystical interpretation was possible for a generation that did not accept the divine revelation of the Torah as certain. These doubts are relevant to the discussion of Shagar’s mysticism, as well. Shagar consciously and deliberately attempted to deal with the undermined certainty of faith in his pursuit of a new contemporary public mysticism. In this attempt, Shagar consciously grappled with the erosion of the certainty of faith and maintained an openness to the language of the secular. In fact, Shagar saw himself as the continuation of the reknown prominent theologian and leader of Religious Zionism, Rav Avraham Yitzhak ha-Cohen Kook (1865–1935) and reinterpreted the latter’s mystical call for the sanctification of the secular and even the external—not through fossilized dogmas, but through the renewal of vital religious experiences capable of addressing the challenges of the times.¹²

Shagar understood New Age culture, neo-Hasidism, and popular religiosity to be the flip side of postmodernist culture (Feldman Kaye 2019; Persico 2014, pp. 291–93). From his perspective, “mystical emotion” is the nucleus that characterizes New Age phenomena and the fiction typical of the postmodern period (See (Shagar 2013b, pp. 54–63)). He enthusiastically described the latent possibility and potential that exists in the state of doubt and postmodern nothingness as a basis for mystical experience and religious rejuvenation.¹³ He saw a new openness to mysticism, enabled by historical developments within Religious Zionism. This was composed of two steps: (1) the transition from the ideological to the existential and (2) the transition from the existential to the mystical. He claimed that the transition from the ideological to the mystical resulted from a loss of faith in the grand narrative and, as he put it, from “the excessive ideological indoctrination that plagued Religious Zionism.”¹⁴ The transformation from the existential to the mystical, according to him, resulted from the fact that narcissistic involvement in the personal-existential is, in his opinion, a dead-end, which then motivates a person to seek true renewal from outside himself (Shagar 2013b, p. 57). Shagar also connected the postmodern deconstruction of identity with the kabbalistic concept of “shattering of the vessels”; however, only by taking this “shattering” out of its context was he able to infuse it with this new meaning.¹⁵ He reread this to be the shattering of the grand narrative and of faith in absolute truth—as the

possibility of making the vessels of consciousness more flexible, thus permitting new revelatory experiences of the divine. All of this was enabled by the advent of postmodernism.¹⁶ At this juncture, I want to explore the complex function of Kabbalah, alongside Hasidic teachings and psychoanalytic theories, in the realization of Shagar's mystical objectives.

4. Between the Parable and the Explanation, Language, Kabbalah, and Mysticism: Between the Unmediated and Reflective Awareness

Shagar presented a series of lectures on Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto's (1707–1746, Italy) *Da'at Tevunot* at Yeshivat Siach. As stated in the first lecture, he chose this book as a way to camouflage his desire to teach Kabbalah and engage with mysticism. The very choice to teach Kabbalah through *Da'at Tevunot*, a work concealing kabbalistic ideas in philosophical language, and the ways in which he justifies it in the introductory lecture to this series, reveal the structural tension in Shagar's teachings between language and mysticism, and even between Kabbalah and mysticism. This conflict between the reflective stance on the one hand and the yearning for innocence and involvement with the real and untranslated on the other is a foundation of many discussions found in Shagar's teachings. Shagar dedicated the first lecture in the series to a discussion of the allegorical reading (mashal ve-nimshal) of the most influential kabbalist in the modern period, Rabbi Isaac Luria's (Ari) (1534–1572, egypt and Zefat) Kabbalah.¹⁷ There, he describes the Sephardic kabbalistic yeshivas as an embodiment of unmediated Kabbalah. From this, it appears that Shagar was enchanted and enthused about the possibility specifically created by Sephardic Kabbalah. Immersed as it was in unreflective kabbalistic language, it allowed for a true encounter with Kabbalah. Yet despite Shagar's enthusiasm about this possibility, in most of his lectures, he engaged in Kabbalah in the manner of Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto's school—attempting to find dimensions of existential meaning. Hence, there is a dissonance between Shagar's need and penchant to search for meaning and to elucidate the Torah, existence, Kabbalah, and philosophy and his yearning for simplicity and unmediated experience. On the one hand, Shagar wanted to teach Kabbalah. On the other hand, he chose not to teach the classical lurianic kabbalistic work, *Etz Haim* by Haim Vital, but rather to teach it through a work translating kabbalistic ideas to philosophical terms.. Shagar introduced the teaching with the following declaration:

As you can see from the program, the plan is to study Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto's *Da'at Tevunot* over the course of the semester. In fact, *Da'at Tevunot* is just a platform or a camouflage—I want to teach ideas in Kabbalah, the inner Torah. We can call this an introduction to Kabbalah. But so that they don't say that we are studying Kabbalah, then *Da'at Tevunot*. This already brings us to the introduction: It is actually a book of Kabbalah in which Rabbi Luzzatto deals with the Kabbalah of Rabbi Isaac Luria, of blessed memory. However, it is a book of Kabbalah that is not written in the language of the Kabbalah. In this regard, it is possible to add Rabbi Luzzatto to Maharal on one side and Rav Kook on the other, in that both of them were also kabbalists without the language of the Kabbalah.¹⁸

It is true that he justified the choice as a type of camouflage from the outside, “so that they will not say that we are studying Kabbalah.” Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that he was concerned about criticism from the outside about the study of Kabbalah; he taught many things which could have elicited polemics or opposition. Instead, I understand this statement as apologetic; it reveals his own hesitations rather than concern about criticism from without. Despite his description of the exciting possibility of study in the unmediated language of the Kabbalah, these words remain only a type of appetizer and a signal of his yearning for a world that he could only justify from the outside but could not adopt. Accordingly, the actual lectures on *Da'at Tevunot* remained reflexive, reflective, and cerebral—regarding philosophical questions about the nature of existence and the creation of man. The course of the lectures and his choice of *Da'at Tevunot* undermined his personal testimony at the beginning of the lectures about his own development with

regard to the language of the Kabbalah since his youth. In his opening, he cited the words of Rabbi Luzzatto, which stand as a reflection on Luzzatto's interpretive kabbalistic project concerning the difference between the parable and its explanation in Lurianic Kabbalah (Luzzatto 1937, letter 50).

To explain Rabbi Luzzatto, he testifies to his identification with Luzzatto's approach in his youth. This comes alongside his critique, as expressed through the words of Rav Kook, about the translation of mystical language into something else:

As a youth, I completely identified with this statement—what difference does it make to me whether it is above or below or if it is lacking? That does nothing for me! What is the point of knowing that there are several types of lights above the administration of the world, when we don't know what this means? What guidance comes to the people that are administered through them? That is essentially also Rabbi Luzzatto's concern, and also, to some extent, obviously that of the Hasidim [. . .].

I would like to try to explain and deepen this point. For that reason, I would like to now read a letter from Rabbi Harlap that also deals with terminology. In fact, this letter is connected to or relates to a letter from [Rav Kook] himself in the *Letters of Rabbi Avraham Yizhak HaKohen [Kook]*, Volume II, Letter 378. This letter [by Rabbi Harlap] is found in *Had Harim*, Letter 8, page 21.¹⁹ And essentially what he says here is something that [Rav Kook] himself wrote in *Orot Hakodesh*, Volume I. There he says "that secrets must be explained and understood specifically through secrets, and not through revealed things [. . .]" Essentially, the Rav is, to a certain extent, writing here against himself. Indeed, *Orot Hakodesh* makes use of kabbalistic terms, but it is not a book of Kabbalah. Yet the Rav is saying that this is not the ideal situation. He is saying that you actually must use the language of the Kabbalah itself, the language of Rabbi Luria, of blessed memory; and that the attempt to translate it into other terms and another language and the like—such a translation is actually inferior to the study of the Kabbalah in the language of the Kabbalah. He is saying that the hidden must be revealed by the hidden.²⁰

Here, Shagar pointed out the contradiction between Rav Kook's claim in his letter and what he actually wrote in his books. Although Rav Kook asserts that "the hidden must be explained by the hidden"—meaning that one should explain mystical words in mystical language and not in another language—Rav Kook's writings show a systematic effort to translate mystical terms into a new Hebrew language.²¹ Hence, Shagar concluded that Rav Kook was writing against himself. Similarly, I would like to claim that Shagar was also teaching here against himself. On the surface, he determined—or accepted—his inferiority compared to the "true" kabbalists. However, I believe that his discussion about the unmediated language of Kabbalah is nothing more than a longing for a lost Garden of Eden that he does not attempt to rebuild or reveal anew. That is to say, although he casts his identification with Luzzatto as something from the past and espouses a new stance, I claim that this transition is not an abandonment of Luzzatto's approach, but rather a path to examine and critique it from the outside. His very ability to critique his dominant approach—which seeks to give meaning and to translate—and present unmediated language as an object of desire creates the a movement of longing between the reflective language and the mystical language, which is itself the movement of longing. This longing is central to the movement towards the mystical past. The lack of personal satisfaction with reflective language, without giving up on it entirely, is itself that which enables the shattering of the vessel, silence, and transition to the mystical.

In his teachings, he translated the language of the Kabbalah into a new Hebrew language influenced by Jewish and non-Jewish traditions, following the path of Rav Kook. However, in his emphasis on tension and conflict, and his rejection of the harmony characteristic of Rav Kook's writings, he sought to establish a new language of multiple languages and their encounter. As he says elsewhere, "the latest model—and to a certain extent, the

most exciting model—is that of multiple identities [. . .] This is not the possibility for harmony found in [Rav Kook], but its opposite: Each one of the worlds appears in its full strength; and the greater the distance between one world and the next, the greater explosive religious power produced by the encounter of these two differing foundations.” (Shagar 2013a, pp. 201–2).

Shagar described Sephardic Kabbalah in romantic, Orientalist terms.²² In one lecture, he pined for the comfort with the kabbalistic language through which the Sephardic kabbalists contemplated existence:

Here I want to ask myself whether it is only a question of technique. Someone who began to study with the Sephardic kabbalists asked me if this could accomplish something for him. Here I want to explain this stance from *Orot HaKodesh*, “that secrets must be explained precisely with secrets.” There is something deep here with which I strongly identify. When I was young, I identified with the Hasidic position and with the position of Rabbi Luzzatto. But in light of the Rav’s words [. . .] When someone studies Kabbalah in the language of the Kabbalah, he does not ask himself about the meaning of the matter. He does not define things to himself. He is studying a language. He is learning to speak in a language. However, in fact, he is not just learning to speak in a language, but he rather begins to think in this fashion. He begins to see the world in this fashion. The best parable is actually in the similarity to modern theories about the learning of language [. . .]

Now that is the reasoning. Of course, that is the reasoning. I don’t speak in the language of the kabbalists. That is the excuse for why I am teaching this here.²³

Shagar depicts the Sephardic kabbalists as relating to the teaching of Rabbi Luria as true reality and, accordingly, not asking any questions about its elucidation and meaning, as would be the case in Luzzatto’s school. In contrast, for Shagar, Luzzatto’s study of Luria’s teachings places itself between the parable and its explanation, between the signifier and the signified. In other words, it displaces the real and the mythical in Luria and repositions them on the plane of the mystical and the philosophical. It is true that in *Devarim, HaDevarim*, Shagar continues to critique himself as a “*lamdan* (Talmudic scholar),” who is not capable of approaching the thing without reflection. However, immediately after this expression of yearning for the unmediated language of Kabbalah, he moves on to grant it meaning and force by way of Wittgenstein’s theories of language:

From this angle, I am very supportive—this is very difficult for us on a personal level; I don’t know if the thing is possible. I feel strongly that the Sephardic kabbalists are right. In other words, you learn to speak the language, to use it. Then you begin to see it in the world. You look at a person and you see a *parzuf* (a mystical face). You say his source is from the ox of the Chariot or something like it. Expertise in the language molds the world. You already see the world in the way that the kabbalistic language molds it. [. . .] It is impossible to translate [the English word] “like” into Hebrew. To like is to like. Only an Anglo-Saxon can like. One who does not have this thing can love or cherish, but it is not the same thing. A language creates psychic possibilities that do not exist in another language [. . .] Once you give it some sort of analytical reduction structured by whatever field, it is already not reality. You have already missed the essence of the thing itself. And there is a deep point here. The specific condition for the language is innocence, an innocence like that of a child. Here is the crux of the disagreement. The Hasidim—and the Hasidim would certainly disagree with what I am saying—and Luzzatto are already not operating on the level of simplicity but are rather taking a stance that seeks meaning. For them, circles and lines turn into something physical. But from the inside, it is not physical, it is reality. It is the language that gives reality its spiritual existence. It does not see it from the outside but is rather inside the thing itself.²⁴

These words reflect a frequently repeated move through which Shagar expresses the rift between his aspiration for the “mystical” and his reflective stance. Though he presents himself as opposed to the Hasidim and Luzzatto, his actual teachings adopt their approach. His books and lectures also testify to his identification and involvement specifically with Hasidism, with Rav Kook, and—in the context of these lectures—Luzzatto. Regardless of his describing the home language as the ideal and his explaining the problematic of translation, he is actually justifying his desire to learn different languages. He gives the example of the word “like” in English and claims that only an Anglo-Saxon can “like”—a word which cannot be translated as “love” or “cherish.” This argument actually justifies the pull to learn many “languages” in order to create a diversity of experience. Thus, the language of Kabbalah is another language that enriches psychic experience. However, as with other languages, one must also overcome it to reach the point of mysticism—which is an oceanic pre-linguistic experience that negates the dualism of subject and object, as per the universal designation of mysticism borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis.²⁵

Moreover, there is a gap between Shagar’s definition of mysticism and his definition of Kabbalah: Mysticism is a pre-linguistic condition, an oceanic experience of oneness, a negation of dualism between subject and object, whereas Kabbalah is a language. Granted, Kabbalah is meant to serve as a bridge to the mystical experience. However, it is still an “intermediary” screen that conceals the unmediated experience.

How does he suggest dealing with the tension between the reflective stance to which he was drawn and the search to negate language? He describes the model of multiple identities as one that enables multiple languages and multiple positions and that—through the interplay between various states—creates religious tension and creativity. It is neither a schizophrenic model nor a harmonistic one. Rather, it is one of movement. There is no binary choice here of choosing one as opposed to another. It is rather the very movement between the antipodes of the space, between ascending and returning (*ratzo vashov*), that enables a new religious language that then engenders new mystical experiences.

It appears that, for Shagar, the mystical objective and experience—an aspect of the “lost Garden of Eden”—was the negation of dualism between subject and object, and between inner and outer. However, it is not clear that this is possible within the framework of the existential, reflective experience in which he established his teachings. Moreover, despite his presentation of postmodernism as having the potential to liberate one from rationalism and to arrive at mystical experience, a deep awareness of the many types of possible conversations that can exist may prevent one from the devotion to a specific conversation that will liberate one’s consciousness as he describes in his articles on “The Understanding of Language” and “On that Day.” On the one hand, understanding language as a game or as performative speech does not require correspondence between religious language and a logical or external reality, and so liberates one towards the mystical. On the other hand, the very awareness of the game, of being involved in one conversation among many types of other conversations, dullens and weakens the “home” language and alienates one from it. Thus, even though Shagar described mysticism as the longed-for goal of religious practice, it appears that his concept of mysticism is based upon complexity, layering, translation, and the movement between inner and outer.

5. Between the Linguistic and the Real, Eros and Longing: Between Hasidism and Kabbalah

Shagar defines faith as being rooted in the encounter with of the real: ‘And, in truth, my faith is mystical; it is a faith without letters or words [. . .] I believe, like the kabbalists who concentrate on the *Ein-Sof* with the understanding of the heart’ (Shagar 2013b, p. 418). In this excerpt, faith is prior to any other experience and particularly prior to the experience of language and reflective experience. However, in the second stage, this faith must also be expressed through language and must encounter dualities and dichotomies. The return to faith after the experience of duality—even if it is no longer a kind of acceptance of the self—is achieved by freedom, by a leap of faith. The inclusion of the term at the end of

the quoted excerpt, “the *Ein-Sof* with the understanding of the heart,” expresses the gap between God’s existence and how people conceive of it in their heart, on the one hand, and the movement towards, and dialogue with, the “home” language on the other.²⁶ In doing so, he leaves us with the impression that the postmodernist language, borrowed from the psychoanalytic literature translated into Hebrew, fits well with the Jewish mystical tradition. This would make Shagar, as it were, one more link in the chain of kabbalists. In fact, however, there is a fusion of completely different axioms, values, and objectives. He expresses the rift that he experiences between the languages and then uses an amalgam of modern concepts—that have not the faintest connection to Kabbalah—to express his yearning for the real, even if it is already lost. He attempts to bridge the gap through a translation into the language of the kabbalists. However, it should be clear that this act of translation takes the kabbalistic expression out of its context and gives it a new theological interpretation. Yet it is precisely this distorted reading that enables a type of rapprochement—without a full union or complete synthesis—of the languages between which Shagar is torn.

In another article, “On the Brink of Faith,” (Shagar 2014, pp. 19–64). where he interprets and newly reframes Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi’s teachings about language, Shagar describes this yearning as one for a second innocence, a longing for childhood. This innocence is characterized by lack of awareness and lack of reflectiveness and—thereby—a lack of dualism between object and subject. He cites additional attributes of the ecstatic experience that comes from the Chabad technique of introspection, which places man in front of the divine Nothingness and Infinity.²⁷ He describes this experience as likely to arouse dread, fear, and shock at the loss of the reality of the world; at the same time (or alternatively), it enables freedom, delight, and great longing.²⁸ Delight and danger are found at the core of the mystical experience, as will be explained below. Later, he distinguishes between an experience that arouses trembling and fear and one that brings delight—the difference is in the ability to relinquish one’s hold on what is, one’s hold on familiar reality, and in the need to justify it with external reasoning. He accordingly describes the result of this introspection.²⁹

From the brightness and fullness of this description of ecstatic experience, it appears that Shagar is calling upon the listener to have such experiences—albeit with the reservations that one may not be capable of it or may not want it. He therefore limits this type of experience, at least for himself, to specific times. Furthermore, he discusses “islands of time” in which experiences of this type take place, such as during prayer or on Shabbat; he also describes experiences similar to the ecstasy that comes through the ability to free oneself, to experience full and living experiences of presence and of encounter with Nothingness, although they do not necessarily reach the fullness of ecstasy, as expressed by total negation of the self. Perhaps this reluctance springs from the processes of ascending and returning (*ratzo vashov*), which does not allow for the existence of either state of consciousness completely and fully.³⁰ This is how Shagar infuses the postmodernist approach with mystical meaning, seeing in the multiplicity of meanings an expression of the emptying-out of essential meaning in language and seeing in the multiplicity of languages a tool for the encounter with the infinite light of the divine.

In a lecture on the sixth teaching of R. Nahman of Bratslav’s (1772–1810) *Likutei Moharan*, a collection of his creative hasidic exegeses, Shagar relates to an additional aspect found at the center of his mystical space, the concept of yearning and longing. I have already suggested earlier that this concept exists in the tension between the inner and the outer (Shagar 2012, pp. 71–72). According to Shagar, longing acquires greater depth and mystical excitement in the stories and teaching of Rebbe Nahman, (Shagar 2010, pp. 16–19). It is possible that he used these longings themselves to address the rift between the inner and the outer, a move that Shagar calls a “mystical stance.” There is a characteristic in the yearning for holiness that is higher than holiness itself, claims Shagar in the footsteps of Rebbe Nahman and Rav Kook. For the yearning maintains the characteristic of infinitude, whereas the attainment of holiness constrains it (Shagar 2012, pp. 419–11).

Nevertheless, even in his lectures on Rebbe Nahman, Shagar did not designate the longing for Nothingness and the negation of reality as the only callings. Hence in his lecture on the thirty-first teaching, he emphasizes the need for the affirmation of reality, the joy that is expressed in the consciousness of Being, and thanksgiving for that which is. This represents a movement that is the opposite of that towards yearning but rather brings a person back to his immediate existential presence (Shagar 2012, pp. 411–12). My claim is that it is not the yearnings alone that create the mystic but rather the actual, constant movement created by Shagar in his contradictory demands for both “ascending” and “returning”—for longing and for making peace with reality.

6. Concluding Discussion

Shagar adopted the kabbalistic concept of unification of the male and the female to implant the experience of the Torah with a mystical meaning of an unequivocally erotic nature.³¹ Shagar’s use of the terms “light” and “delight” to describe the mystical experience, alongside the terms of the unification of the male and the female which present the mystical experience as an erotic one, resonate well with the academic reading of the Zohar, that Shagar could have accessed, as seen, for example, in Yehuda Liebes’ article “Zohar and Eros.”³²

All this can be summarized in an excerpt that Shagar wrote to himself in a personal notebook:

The question then is not about studying Kabbalah, but rather about living a mystical life—a life that does not only experience the outer husk of reality. Dreams, paying attention to the inner life, to happenings, to conceptions, etc. Realizations [. . .] the delight that is in the Torah. It can be said that the raw materials of the conceptualization of that which is hidden are the raw materials of delight—it is connected to the principle of delight, as opposed to Freud’s principle of reality. If so, the goal is returning from reality to delight, and that is the danger.³³

Integrated with concepts that he drew from psychoanalysis, he defined mysticism—in a way that deviates from the language of Kabbalah—as a psychic experience of connection and attention to primary and childhood layers of existence separated from outer reality. This is a dangerous perspective that causes a person to withdraw internally into the mysteries of his soul, into a place of play, an unmediated place, without reflection. Such a state of consciousness allows a person to encounter God as a subject of love, eros, and cleaving. As he puts it in the same notebook, “Mysticism is eros on its highest level. The libido is focused on the divine ‘object’, and hence the connection they found between mysticism and eros.”

Of course, although he presents himself as a part of this continuum, it is worth emphasizing the magnitude of his innovation with regard to the traditions upon which he relies, such that he was able to create a new religious calling.³⁴ He veers away from the language of the Kabbalah to speak about mysticism, and specifically to use a translation into “external” concepts that draw from Freud to explain the experience for which Shagar longs. If so, Shagar’s mystical experience is not dependent upon the language of the Kabbalah, but rather tied to the movement between the psychic experience of delight and withdrawal from reality on the one hand, and the awareness of its danger and the return to concrete reality on the other. Shagar integrated the multiplicity of languages in his learning to create a movement between them, a movement that would enable a liminal space for a temporary but delightful sojourn in Nothingness.

7. Summary

This article has attempted to present Shagar’s shaping of the mystical space as created by the conflict between the intimate and homelike on the one hand, and reflection and externality on the other. An analysis of his articles reveals how he read and made use of both Torah literature and postmodernist literature to create new mystical thought. In his

introductory lecture on *Da'at Tevunot*, he apologizes for this reflective stance. Although he maintains that it was only in his youth that he did not see any value to the Sephardic Kabbalah, which, according to him, does not explain itself and is not translated into another language of meaning, he nevertheless adopts the approach of Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto throughout his lectures. In the movement between reflectiveness and a language of translation and meaning on the one hand and language that does not require justification on the other, Shagar created a movement of longing towards the mystical. The internal contradiction is inherent in his thought, throughout his various lectures. Perhaps he thereby sought to actualize the possibility that the very transition between these psychic stances enables a space for mystical experience.

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Notes

- 1 On Nothingness, see (Zechariah 2018). For a short analysis of the role of nothingness in Medieval kabbalah, see (Matt 1995); For the role of nothingness in the apothestic atheology of an american contemporary, Thomas Altizer (1927–2018), and the broader history of it in Christian and Buddhist aphophateism, see (Wolfson 2019).
- 2 Based on the oral testimony of his student Rabbi Elhanan Nir.
- 3 These recordings can be accessed through the Institue of the Writing of Shagar, Alon Shevut, managed by his widow Miriam Rosenberg, available via sgr@zahav.net.il.
- 4 See, for example, his lecture on the relationship between Torah and academia, which can be found in edited form as (Shagar 2013a).
- 5 Shagar dealt with postmodernism and its contribution to mysticism in several places, and we will deal with some of them in this article. For the main principles of his understanding of the relationship and contribution of the postmodernist spirit to the revival of mysticism, see (Shagar 2004) and (Shagar 2013b). The essence of his perspective on the subject can be found in the article “On Mysticism, Postmodernism and the Modern Era” in (Shagar 2013b). Miriam Feldmann Kaye dedicated her doctoral thesis to the thought of Shagar and Tamar Ross in light of the challenges of postmodernism and subsequently reworked it. See (Feldman Kaye 2019).
- 6 For the use of the Winnicottian terms of “potential space” and “holding” in order to understand spiritual phenomena, see (Simmonds 2014).
- 7 Compare, for example, (Drob 2009).
- 8 Feldmann Kaye, *Jewish Theology*, 65–80.
- 9 Biti Roi adopted Harold Bloom’s concept of misreading in order to understand Shagar’s use of his kabbalistic and Hasidic sources in her paper “Letters and Broken Letters: On the Zoharic Hasidic Language in the Thought of Shagar,” presented at the Conference on the Thought of Shagar, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel, 5 March 2021.
- 10 For a partial discussion, see (Zechariah 2018, pp. 30–61).
- 11 (Scholem 1976, pp. 71–83). However, in the continuation of his article, he does ascribe tremendous significance to the teachings of Rav Kook, together with those of Arele Roth.
- 12 Rav Kook’s confrontation with the challenges of his day is a salient feature throughout his thought. Shahar Rahmani addresses this in his doctoral thesis, written under the supervision of Dov Schwartz; following his thesis, he published a new annotated version of (Kook 2014). For more on this book and its context, see *ibid.*, pp. 263–309.
- 13 On secularization theories and the options presented by the New Age, see (Hanegraaf 1998). On the context of contemporary Kabbalah, see (Huss 2007; Werczberger 2011, pp. 107–25; Kahane 2008, pp. 38–39; Persico 2016).
- 14 In other places, he elaborated on his explanation for the ideological abandonment of Zionism and the transition to post-Zionism. See (Shagar 2013b, pp. 152–58). For more on the use of New Age mysticism in the Israeli context, especially in the religious community, see (Cherlow 2016).
- 15 (Shagar 2013b, pp. 63–66). For deconstructivism and its connection to the experience of holiness, see (Zur 2008). On the kabbalistic shattering of the vessels, see (Garb 2020, pp. 51–55).
- 16 On postmodernism, the New Age, and Shagar, (Garb 2009, pp. 115–17).
- 17 For Luzzatto’s allegorical reading of Lurianic Kabbalah, see (Garb 2014, pp. 164–84).
- 18 My transcription from the recording of the first lecture on *Da'at Tevunot*.

- 19 (Harlap 1943, letter 8, pp. 22–23). Letter 8 was written in Jerusalem on the Tenth of Elul, 5671 (1911).
- 20 (see note 18).
- 21 For an analysis of Rav Kook’s esoteric-kabbalistic language, see (Avivi 2018, pp. 39–75).
- 22 For the adaptation of Said’s critique of Orientalism, to the context of modern kabbalah scholarship relationship, see (Anidjar 2002, pp. 102–65).
- 23 (see note 18).
- 24 (see note 18).
- 25 Regarding the oceanic mystical experience which represents the undivided connection between the child and the mother, see (Freud 1930, pp. 9–10).
- 26 For the meaning for this phrase in its historical context (Wolfson 1994, pp. 125–63). For a phenomenological reading, see (Lifshitz 2015, pp. 33–61).
- 27 Shagar might have read Hebrew versions of Elijah’s studies about nothingness. Compare, for example: (Elijah 1993).
- 28 Shagar, “Language of Faith,” 44.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 On experiences of ascending and descending and how this concept is understood in different Hasidic traditions, see the work of Shagar’s student (Nir 2011). About ascending and descending in Habad (Elijah 1993, pp. 25–27; Schwartz 2011, pp. 57–58; Ornet 2007).
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 (Lieberman 1994). Compare to Wolfson’s analysis in (Wolfson 2005).
- 33 Access was provided by the generous permission of Miriam Rosenberg.
- 34 Regarding Shagar’s subversive call in another story from Rebbe Nahman, see (Kosman 2008).

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