

This is a report on a series of lectures given by Moshe Idel at the University of Washington (Seattle) about a year ago. I have divided report into three posts, one for each lecture.

These are not verbatim transcripts: they are summaries of the sort that might be made by anyone from notes made during the lecture. Not everything is included, and most of what Idel said is summarized. I have tried to indicate where I missed things, and what I missed. The initial material is from the flier that was passed out to everyone before the lectures.

Moshe Idel is in no way responsible for my reports of his lectures. I have done my best to be as accurate as I could. At the same time, I should hope that I'm not infringing on his copyright by reporting what he said. --Such are the mysteries of the copyright law!

THE SAMUEL & ALTHEA STROUM
LECTURESHIP IN
JEWISH STUDIES

Moshe Idel

PARDES:THE QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL
PARADISE IN JUDAISM

April 16

Primordial Wisdom: The Philosophers' Quest

April 18

Primordial Light: The Ecstatics' Quest

April 22

PARDES: Between Sefirot and Demonology

The Core of the "Pardes" Tradition: Tosefta Hagigah 2:3-4

Four entered the Orchard (Pardes): Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Akher and Rabbi Aqiva. One peeked and died; one peeked and was smitten; one peeked and cut down the shoots; one ascended safely and descended safely.

Ben Azzai peeked and died. Concerning him Scripture says: "Precious in the eyes of he

Lord is the death of His loyal ones" (Ps. 16. 15).

Ben Zoma peeked and was smitten. Concerning him Scripture says: "If you have found honey, eat only your fill lest you become filled with it and vomit" (Prov. 25:16).

Akher peeked and cut down the shoots. Concerning him Scripture says: "Do not let your mouth bring your flesh to sin, and do not say before the angel that it is an error; why should God become angry at your voice, and ruin your handiwork" (Eccl. 5:5).

Rabbi Aqiva ascended safely and descended safely. Concerning him Scripture says: "Draw me, let us run after you, the King has brought me into His chambers" (Song I:4).

Lecture I: Primordial Wisdom: The Philosophers' Quest
Tuesday 16 April 1991, 8:00 pm.

[This is a precis summary; reporter's comments are in square brackets; otherwise text should be taken as an attempt to transcribe the gist of what the speaker actually said. The result is a rather dry, compressed text; typographical devices have been used to break it up and make it more readable. Some of these may not transpose well to Net text. I have tried to regularize the spellings of Hebrew terms, but I'm afraid I've probably let a number of them vary all over the map.]

[The first lecture was something of a Society event; there was quite a collection of The Better Sort, who actually toughed it out through much of the first lecture, if only for the sake of the reception afterward. Idel's lecture (in thoroughly accented English) made fewer concessions than one might imagine to a non-specialist audience. These lectures are usually edifying cultural events, but Idel used the opportunity to go over material he was working up for a book. imposing countenances, who had a reception for themselves and the speaker afterward.]

First, some general observations in an attempt to locate the Pardes legend in its context.

1: Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism were exoteric in nature: Judaism was seen as being open, to both the elite and the vulgus [the crowd, common

people, hoi polloi] on the same basis. The idea was that the knowledge and practice were to be spread, and could be spread, to all levels of the Jewish nation, and that study of the Torah was open to all. Religious life was not regarded as dangerous.

2. This might seem like belaboring the obvious, but it was not obvious if seen in the context of contemporary cults and religions, in either the world of early Judaism (with the nature religions of neighboring nations) or in the Hellenistic world (with its mystery religions). Judaism insisted on rules binding on all members, and on public rites, as exemplified by the need for a quorum to legitimize certain rites. It was collective, group-oriented, and "nomian," [cf. "antinomian"] that is, oriented toward practicing a nomos, i.e., the Torah. The attitude toward the Commandments was summed up in the saying, "You shall live by them."

3. Thus, in a sense, that Judaism was relatively egalitarian [the speaker actually said "equalitarian"]. The Law was (in principle) available to and incumbent upon everyone, and the Law, the nomos, was the standard. Religious practice was collective, public, non-sectarian, and not dangerous.

This then is how one can describe the first phases of Judaism, the Biblical and what might be called the Classical (i.e. Rabbinic-Midrashic) phases.

But there were also other types of Judaism, cultivated in smaller circles, as exemplified by the Hekhaloth literature. These involved contemplation of the Divine vehicles, or the Divine stature, and involved non-Halakhic techniques for transcending common experiences in favor of achieving a strong but dangerous result: the experience or vision of the Merkavah, or of the Divine body or glory. One finds these efforts expressed in some very ancient texts, which also link them with dangers and the paying of a high price. These efforts lead to awful [or awful] encounters with angels; their result is the experience of a tremendum. It seems to have been less than delightful, and it was reserved for the very few. It is presented in terms that constitute both the statement of an ideal and a warning against embarking on a quest for it.

One of the key exemplary texts is the account of the four sages, the four upright persons, who entered the Pardes, the Orchard or Garden, all but

one of whom were severely damaged by the experience despite their excellent qualities.

This cannot be taken as a historical document, despite the fact that these four did live at approximately the same time. This is not a report of historical events; it should be taken as a collection of traditions about the effects of entering the Pardes. Two results were positive: one person died, but remained loyal; one (Rabbi Aqiva) remained safe. Two results were negative: one person went mad; the other became a heretic.

Instead of reading this as a biographical account, we should read it as a typological account, one describing types of experiences and the types of effects those experiences can have. From its first appearance, this crucial text was not historical, but exemplary.

This text is used in different ways in different settings. In mystical literature, it is used to point out dangers that can befall the mystic. In Talmudic-Midrashic sources, it is used to point out the dangers and achievements that are related to speculations, rather than to experiences. The interpretation of the account depends on the context in which it is used; thus it is a mistake to try to establish a single "genuine" meaning common to all versions.

This account is, then, a parable whose significance is not explicated, as in Kabbalah: the Pardes is an unexplained parable for an unrevealed secret. There is a crucial vagueness here, and one must make the assumption that this sort of vagueness does not represent a defeat but an opportunity - to introduce new meanings to an open text, as in Umberto Eco's account of reading texts as open texts. [Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*.] The Pardes becomes a generalized metaphor for the danger zones of religious experience, seen as something which is good for the few, but pernicious for others.

The Pardes story, then, has been (re)interpreted in a variety of directions; here, we are interested in patterns of interpretation proposed in the Middle Ages (though the history of the interpretation of the story could be continued onward from there).

Today, we talk about Maimonides and the philosophical tradition.

Next: about the ecstatic tradition.

Last: about (a) the Divine Sefiroth and (b) the encounter with the demonic.

In all three streams of interpretation, the

vagueness of the basic story contributed to the richness of the resulting interpretations.

After the Classical (Rabbinic) period, Judaism underwent two major changes, one of which was its transformation into an esoteric religion (at least as understood by some elite masters), a religion having two levels. An esoteric understanding of Judaism was a shared feature of various traditions: the Kabbalah, the classical philosophical schools (e.g. Maimonides), and the Hasidi Ashkenaz and other medieval mystical groups. This move involves [though the speaker did not overtly label it, the second change] the atomization of the collective or the group. The group is important as a mystical tool in some forms of Kabbalah, but it plays a restricted role. The core aim of personal redemption, or the achievement of individual perfection, moved to the forefront. To understand the underlying secrets, and to behave in accordance with them: this was crucial to the Jewish elite in the middle ages. It was a cult of individual attainment, which involved the reading of its sources as secret messages hidden in canonical scriptures, messages connected to the goal of salvation.

There were two models for salvation in those scriptures: salvation as attaining the End, or as returning to the Origin. Thus the effort to obtain salvation meant either hastening the end (collectively, this involved messianism), or reaching back to a lost paradise that had been existing since the beginning. This is why the concept of Paradise is important in understanding the meaning of the Pardes, even though they were not originally as closely connected as it might seem.

"Pardes" actually means an orchard. The actual term for "Paradise," in the sense of the Garden of Eden, was Gan Eden, which in the Septuagint was translated by the Greek word for Paradise [deriving originally from Persian], from which there was a backward linkage to the Hebrew word Pardes. The two ideas, originally different, came to explain or amplify each other. Thus, the dangers associated with Gan Eden [the angel with the flaming sword] and Pardes also converged: both came to represent dangerous ideals, and ideal dangers.

The Pardes story then came to have as a subtext the story of Paradise (Gan Eden). It became a common effort of medieval commentators to explain the story of Paradise by means of the story of Pardes. The attempt to escape ritual and return to Paradise was a threat to Judaism as a religion [i.e., as a religion based on ritual and the Law];

thus, it could not be proposed openly as a goal. Any attempt to enter Pardes then was an entry into a dangerous zone. Classical Judaism was not escapist: that is, it did not involve an attempt to transcend history. The transcendental ideal could stand as an ideal for the few, but it was an ideal that was dangerous to (or if adopted by) the many; it thus had to be reserved to the few to stop escapist religious trends.

Maimonides' interpretation, in summary, took perfect philosophy as the wisdom of Adam, lost but retrievable by some (perfect) persons, e.g., R. Aqiva. To be in Paradise, from this point of view, was to be a philosopher. Philosophy is perfection in the present; Paradise is perfection in the past and in the future. The ideal of philosophy is to exist in continuous contemplation. When the Primordial Man fell: he was [or became] unable to stay in the state of perfect philosophy.

The Pardes story, however, points out a path of return, and suggests an analysis of Judaism as a project of return to perfect philosophy. It points out both techniques and possible problems.

The first part of Maimonides major Halakhic work is where he explains the meaning of Pardes - but of course, since he was a Rabbi, he doesn't explain it openly. He mentions that it is a matter of the [four?] key "themes dealt with in the preceding chapters," leaving the reader to select which of the many themes are the key themes. Though all four of the characters in the story were great men of Israel, not all had the capacity to grasp the subject clearly. For him, then, the Pardes is linked to speculation: it is something to be known, something that must be grasped clearly, rather than a mystical experience. Maimonides states that it is not proper to walk in the Pardes without being filled with bread and meat, i.e., knowledge of what is permitted and forbidden, i.e., without having had a solid Rabbinic education. Why is this? Because knowledge of these things gives composure to the mind. Maimonides presents Jewish law as a way of achieving a certain stability, a mastery of lust and imagination. The Commandments are a sine qua non, the basis for the requisite composure.

The Law, then, gives one the possibility of calming the mind, of mastering imagination and lust, in order to be able ... to study Aristotle. By which he meant, to study the Physics and Metaphysics.

This study has two major dangers. One is the cognitive or classical or Aristotelian: a misunderstanding of physics and metaphysics due to imaginative distortion of reality. One's

understanding [or the clarity of one's understanding] can be spoiled by one's [non-rational] inclinations.

There is also the Platonic danger: the political implications better not understood by the masses, as in Book 1 [Book XIII] of the *Metaphysics*.

Not all of the four Masters, then, were calm enough, educated enough, to grasp Aristotelian metaphysics.

There are two ways of understanding Maimonides' position here: one exoteric, the other esoteric.

The exoteric understanding would take the historical Adam as the perfect philosopher, brought down into a fallen state by the last remnants of desire and fantasy. Thus our current condition of isolation from philosophic truth would be the historical result of Adam's fall.

The esoteric reading, however, is that the state of the Primordial Man is always open to us, always available at any time - as, too, is the sin of Adam. In principle, at least. Kafka has an interpretation of the expulsion from Paradise that can be taken as a key to the esoteric reading of Maimonides' position. According to that interpretation, the Expulsion from Paradise is final, and life in this world is irrevocable. It is eternal in nature. [I.e., it is an event "in eternity," rather than in history.] At the same time we are continuously in Paradise, whether we realize it or not. Thus neither the Expulsion nor the Paradisal state are historical events: they are structures of experience open to each of us. This is also, by the way, the Kabbalistic interpretation developed by Abulafia, who was the first to treat the *Pardes* as an ongoing experience. His interpretation was very similar to Kafka's. "Anyone who enters *Pardes* has to enter in peace and exit in peace."

This spiritualistic reading, that the *Pardes* is not a matter of history but is open to anyone, proposes a spiritualistic typology, a scheme of typical experiences or states that can be actualized at any time. History becomes unimportant. By studying Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah, philosophy, we become aware of what can happen in experience.

This reading seems to do justice to certain passages in Maimonides about people "of the rank of R. Aqiva." History disappears: The Bible, Talmud, Aristotle - all speak about inner experiences related only to the elite because they are dangerous, but which are to be pointed out to the masses to orient them, to give them the sense

that Judaism is more than its ritual.

This approach still assumes that there is danger, but Judaism is here seen as trying to cope with the problem of the dangerous ideal. The ideal may be dangerous, but it is to be cultivated. This formulation becomes a way of balancing ritualistic approaches against the explosion of metaphysical speculations that might endanger the observance of the ritual.

The aim is not merely to propose philosophy but to use Aristotelian psychology and metaphysics to point to meditations on secret Judaism, to introduce a new paradigm for understanding Judaism. Thus, Maimonides was able to begin a tradition of interpretation (which lasted from about the 14th to the 18th centuries) which took ritual as means of introduction to philosophy. This interpretation fortifies the place of ritual, yet puts it in its place, shows that it is not final. It is needed, but in a way to be transcended - by the few, for whom a higher ideal is needed, that of the Pardes.

Next time, we talk not about philosophic speculation but about ecstatic experience, the encounter with a terrible Light, the Primordial Light.

QUESTIONS

Question: The aim is to master the corporeal, which if not understood will distort one's grasp of reality? Then for Maimonides there was a specific absolute reality?

Answer: Yes. He believed a certain metaphysics was true. His was not a modern, Heideggerian philosophy. For him, God was the sum of the intelligibilia, as was the case for other medieval philosophers. God was taken as the great intelligence. There was a negative theology, but there was also a positive theology.

Question: What about the Pardes story and the Ari?

Answer: A very complex issue - and another story.

Question: Kafka wrote about Maimonides-

A: Not about Maimonides, but Genesis.

Q: Genesis then. If the expulsion is eternal...

A: We are expelled all the time from Paradise, but it is here. We are out and in at the same time. It is a matter of each of us. That is why the Fall is not final.

Q: The Halakha becomes then a means - is it time-bound? May there be other means at other

- times for Maimonides?
- A: Halakha remains necessary all the time. It is not like a ladder. Desires are always present. Halakhic discipline is not simply preliminary: it is needed all the time - it too is eternal. [Cf. the Great Chain of Being, or Crowley's understanding of initiatory hierarchy.]
- Q: Why is this in the Mishne Torah, not in the Guide?
- A: To Maimonides, the code of behavior is an introduction to the Pardes. He starts with the Pardes, only then to go on to talk about the Law. The Pardes is integral to the Mishne Torah.
- Q: What then does the RamBam have to say about the Messiah?
- A: There is only one hint - Perfect Philosophy is Paradise, personal salvation. Each of us then is his own Messiah, and we don't need another Messiah - as individuals. As a collective, it is another story. The Messiah is needed to embody a certain political, social, et cetera, state.
- Q: And Halakha is a mechanism to reach that experience?
- A: Yes.
- Q: What about the discussion of the Castle in the Guide?
- A: In III:51 of the Guide of the Perplexed, Maimonides mentions Ben Zoma - among rabbis expert only in Halakha, unable to understand metaphysics. Thus they are outside the castle.
- Q: Is there any significance in this to the fact that some of Maimonides' students were not Jewish, but Muslim?
- A: I'm not aware of any advanced students who were Muslim. There were Muslims who were followers, who studied the Guide...
- Q: But there was a Muslim who studied Aristotle with Maimonides; we have diaries...
- A: I don't know about that.
- Q: Esotericism was widespread-
- A: But Maimonides was not in Baghdad.
- Q: This was in Egypt...
- Q: What is the nature of danger in the Kabbalah?
- A: Danger is associated with individual initiative. Danger enters with the desire for the paranormal, for the transcendent experience, the desire to go beyond the communal experience.

