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PART I

ISRAELI FILM IN A POST-CINEMATIC AGE

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1

TOWARD A "MYSTICAL SOCIETY"

Transcending the "Israeli" in Israeli Cinema

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The idea of "national cinema" has traditionally carried considerable weight in film historiography, predating even the formation of film studies as a distinct academic discipline.[1] During the early stages of its heuristic use, "national cinema" served not only to catalog different modes of film production but also to make essentialist claims about the uniqueness of various national cultures. As such, in Thomas Elsaesser's words, "it used to be assumed—and in more journalistic writing still is—that the films produced in a particular country 'reflect' something essential about this country as a 'nation'"—for example, "the French *nouvelle vague* . . . as belonging to wider and deeper changes in French society and culture"; "Italian neo-realism [as a reflection of] Italian postwar politics and the delicate balancing act between Catholics and Communists"; or "Ealing comedies, the kitchen-sink dramas of the 1960s, and even 'Hammer horror' [in Britain as manifesting] the state of 'England.'"[2] The "essentialist" approach fell into disfavor with "the influx of semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, structuralism and feminism into film theory and criticism in the 1970s and 1980s"; toward the end of the 1980s, however, the concept was reevaluated "through a range of critical studies on national cinemas and careful analytic work on the concept of national cinema itself."[3] This scholarship did much to deconstruct monolithic accounts of national cinema "as a seamless totality that somehow accurately expresses, describes, and itemizes the salient concerns and features of a given national culture." Instead, according to Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie, scholars have often emphasized conflict, figuring films as "one of the loci of debates about a nation's governing principles, goals, heritage, and history."[4]

Filmmaking in Israel became a legitimate subject for scholarly inquiry

around this late 1980s period, mainly due to Ella Shohat's seminal study, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1989). In her volume, Shohat set out to "offer a coherent theoretical and critical account . . . of the development of Israeli cinema."[5] Motivating this account were two interrelated claims: first, that being the product of top-down "enactment of an explicit political ideology, Zionism," Israel is a nation "more invented than others"; second, that Israeli cinema has taken part in this invention and, as such, "demonstrates a striking 'penchant' for projecting 'national allegories.'"[6] Both claims set up a national focus at a time when, as Shohat says, "'nationalism' itself was beginning to be interrogated" by scholarship.[7] Reviewing her own book in a "Postscript" to a new edition two decades later, the writer notes that her adherence to the zeitgeist of scholarly revisionism meant that, "while the book was about 'the national' and 'national cinema,' its reading was not nationalist; rather, it was concerned with dissecting the nationalist imaginary"[8]—or in other words, with exploring how the so-called "Zionist metanarrative" was shaped and reshaped, buttressed but also challenged, on the Israeli screen. Thus envisaged, *Israeli Cinema* presents a highly sophisticated take on the national-cinema paradigm, which abides by the contemporaneous lessons of antiessentialism. It therefore does not view "filmic fiction as a passive reflection of dominant discourse" but rather posits a complex relationship between the "agency of cinema in narrating the nation" and "a broader contested history, one traversed by manifold discursive contradictions."[9]

This is not to say that Shohat's argument was narrowly limited to the geopolitical and cultural borders of Israel/Palestine; in fact, it accrued further meaningfulness by claiming Israeli cinema as an example of global East/West conflicts, through its desire to celebrate a Eurocentric/Ashkenazi Zionist definition of Israeliness and "deny Israel's 'Easternness' as well as its 'Third-Worldness'" (specifically in relation to Arab and Arab-Jew populations).[10] Though expansive, the East/West "comparative framework" nevertheless fed into, rather than offset, *Israeli Cinema*'s national-cinema argument, which "focused on Zionist narratives, images, and discourses [over] their subterranean affinities with discourses elsewhere."[11] Accordingly, the book did not anticipate film studies' subsequent turn toward transnationalism, assuming instead that Israeli cinema is made most meaningful in relation to its national territory, society, history, language and cultural codes.

"Transnationalism" as a critical category has gained greater currency with scholars since the 2000s, with rapid globalization encouraging the "permeability of national borders" and "the decline of national sovereignty." Cinema has aided these processes, for as Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden explain, "the global circulation of money, commodities, information, and human beings is

giving rise to films whose aesthetic and narrative dynamics, and even modes of emotional identification they elicit, reflect the impact of advanced capitalism and new media technologies as components of an increasingly interconnected world-system."[12] The idea of transnational cinema has afforded scholarship the opportunity to highlight the ways by which contemporary filmmaking "transcends the national as autonomous cultural particularity" and "imagines its audiences as consisting of viewers who have expectations and types of cinematic literacy that go beyond the desire for and mindlessly appreciative consumption of national narratives . . . identif[ied] as their own."[13] Moreover, this concept has also served to foreground how "cinema has from its inception been transnational,"[14] in spite of film industries' being subsumed under national terms for the lion's share of their histories. Though deeming these national terms anachronistic, transnational film scholarship has grown to recognize their lingering significance within the geopolitical and cultural landscape. Thus, instead of negating "the nation" as a focal point, it has become increasingly necessary, in Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim's words, "to interpret more productively the interface between . . . national and transnational," so as to ensure that the "transnational model does not bring [in] boundaries, hegemonies, ideologies, limitations and marginalizations of its own kind, or replicate those of the national model."[15]

While these developments were taking place, Israeli cinema studies remained by and large within the confines of the national-cinema paradigm. Indeed, as late as 2008, Israeli film scholar Benny Ben-David noted how "almost nothing written about Israeli cinema digresses from the (simplified) scheme outlined by Shohat. Dozens of texts written in the past and present are obsessively engaged with Israeli cinema through that tiresome perspective on the Zionist metanarrative. In so doing, they provide the Zionist movement and its ideology a measure of agency they may have never possessed, and which they certainly do not possess anymore."[16] Only of late has scholarship begun to shift toward the transnational in its exploration of Israeli filmmaking. This change came about as Israeli cinema grew more globally visible. Hence, "since the early 2000s," Yael Friedman explains, "the previously deflated Israeli film industry has seen a considerable injection of public funding coupled with an intensive investment on the part of public film institutions to position Israeli cinema on the World Cinema map. This includes funding and support for the distribution of Israeli films around the world, as well as the setting up of a growing number of bilateral co-production treaties."[17] The result of such efforts has been that Israeli films "could be produced and exhibited 'outside' of the restrictions of the national space and the confinements of national conflicts,"[18] which in turn facilitated more substantial international acceptance, especially by way

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of festival accolades (most recently exemplified in Nadav Lapid winning the Golden Bear Award for *Synonyms* [2019] at the Berlinale and the Jury Prize for *Ha-Berech* [*Ahed's Knee*, 2021] at the Cannes Film Festival). Faced with such changes, Israeli film scholarship could no longer restrict itself to the parameters of Shohat's influential argument and needed to reappraise its own investments in national criteria.[19]

Contemporary reassessments of this kind have emphasized, to use Elsaesser's term, Israeli cinema's "double occupancy" of trans/national commitments, which gains significance in a globalized era where "our identities are multiply defined, multiply experienced, and can be multiply assigned to us."[20] Under the heading of "double occupancy," these studies often make a similar claim: namely, that Israeli filmmaking adapts nationally familiar content to transnational formats, with the purpose of making the former more intelligible and attractive for a non-Israeli audience. What this claim highlights is that in Israeli cinema, as in other film industries, "the label 'national' . . . has come back . . . as a form of branding, a marketing tool, signifying the local—maybe here, too, reinventing the national—for external, i.e., global use."[21] Consequently, Israeli film scholars are encouraged to capitalize on their longstanding familiarity—via Shohat's original argument—with national mythology, in order to see how it has changed as part of Israeli cinema's growing presence on the world stage.

In this vein, research frequently explores the circulation of Israeli film within the global art-film festival circuit "as another case of world cinema."[22] According to Boaz Hagin, "with few exceptions, Israeli films belong to this category of world-cinema festival films," and like similar films from other countries, "are specifically catered to meet the needs of the festival circuit and foreign viewers, not local film culture."[23] These needs require world cinema to display specific thematic/narrative tropes, including "underdevelopment, exclusion, racism, genocide, poverty, . . . the clash between traditional ways of life and the impact of globalization, . . . the constructions of gender and ethnicity, family values and religion, concepts of good and evil, state authority and censorship, and the role/oppression of women in traditional societies."[24] By partaking in this dynamic, Israeli films apply world cinema's thematic catalogue to "topical and political issues in the region or in Israeli society—such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, wars, and the Holocaust and its aftermath," as well as "conflicts around ethnic and familial identities (such as Georgian Jews in Dover Koshashvili's *Late Marriage* [*Hatuna Meuheret*, 2001] and *Gift from Above* [*Matana MiShamayim*, 2003]), or communities that resist Westernization, such as ultraorthodox Jews in *Ushpizin* (dir. Giddi Dar; 2004) and *My Father, My Lord* (*Hufshat Kayitz*, dir. David Volach; 2007)."[25] The resulting "fusion and hybridity of national and international, ethnically specific and globally

universal characteristics,"[26] is also achieved by stylizing these "glocal" themes in light of aesthetic influences from well-known art-cinema movements like New Korean Cinema or French New Extremism.[27]

Alternatively, Israeli film scholarship has also discussed attempts "to break free from the provenance of world cinema and film-fund and festival films and to find a point of entry into the other system, that of commercial cinema, particularly in this case Hollywood."[28] On such occasions, entry into the "other system" is made possible through mobilizing transnational genres—for example, the Western, the "mind-game," and the horror film.[29] Of these, the latter genre has been particularly rewarding, by way of a case study, due to the recent emergence and success of Israeli horror films, which nowadays "are more likely to be found streaming on Amazon, Netflix, and other international streaming services," than in art-film festivals.[30] According to Olga Gershenson and Dale Hudson, these films "indigenize" global horror, situating its patterns of violence within and against "characteristically Israeli institutions that represent core national values, including collectivism, solidarity, ideals of the 'New Jew,' and commitment to the land, among other Zionist ideals." Such values are not explored in depth within the space of the narrative so much as presented reductively for satirical ends. Israeli viewers can easily pick up the satire, and may even "rethink their assumptions[,] recogniz[ing] that they [inhabit] a self-destructive society and violent state."[31] On the other hand, non-Israeli viewers, who appear to be these films' main target audience, would not be similarly privy to homegrown satirical messages; meaningfulness for them comes in the form of recognizing the globally known national markers of Israeliness, which are emphasized within the filmic text in order to assert local flavor, and trade on the novelty of "bring[ing] familiar horror conventions into an 'exotic' new location."[32]

What this approach ultimately aims to show, in Gershenson's words, is that the Israeli cinema "taking part in these global trends does not obliterate local cultural meanings";[33] rather, even as they are broken down or emptied out, these meanings—and especially national ones—are still asserted as important structures of signification.[34] At times, their significatory role is interpreted along the negative political terms of what Elsaesser calls "impersoNation": that is, "a sort of self-exoticization, in which the ethnic, the local or the regional expose themselves, under the guise of self-expression, to the gaze of the benevolent other, with all the consequences that this entails."[35] Extending Elsaesser's argument, Boaz Hagin and Raz Yosef claim that many Israeli films on the international festival circuit reflect "the beliefs that the native Israeli harbors about what the Western *other* wants Israelis to display. The films, in other words, are Israeli fantasies about what the festival-going *other* desires Israelis to desire."[36] By their account, there *are* "Israeli feature films that refuse to follow

this formula" and do not have their characters "confront centuries of religious oppression, fundamentalist Muslim terrorists, ultraorthodox rabbis, or ethnic tensions or to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, take part in blood-soaked battles, or work through the trauma of the Holocaust." But because they lack "this strong self-othering ingredient, many of these films are not enjoying the same success in major festivals and awards as some other Israeli films."[37]

Other readings look more favorably upon Israeli cinema's trans/national signification, imagining it along the lines of invention rather than impersonation. Nava Dushi, for one, has stressed how, in terms of its transnational operation, Israeli cinema follows Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's model of "minor literature," aimed at "exposing the forces of difference and local particularity as an expression of a people to come."[38] Through their role as exemplars of minor cinema, certain Israeli films, "much like minor literature, are constructed within a field dominated by Western narrative norms and at the same time deconstruct them from within to enunciate that which is unique to their locality."[39] This local does not affirm the commonplace definitions of national Israeliness; instead, it sees them disintegrated through "the intensified appearance of distinctive life experiences," which create "an identity in becoming, refuting the application of closed representational structures and the subordination of difference to sameness."[40] Difference is therefore located on a subnational level, as an Israeli subculture of "new voices that in past formations were marginalized or excluded from national discourse"; yet at the same time, it also connects Israeli cinema to the other cinemas via "a transnational web of themes," which foregrounds equivalent acts of marginalization and enunciates "similar localities in variable social contexts."[41] By joining the voices of Israeli minor films with those of minor films in other parts of the world, Dushi argues, the resultant choir is able to "counteract the homogenizing forces of the global through the local," in what can be called "grassroots globalization."[42]

In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to offer a different reading of Israeli cinema's transnational operation and signification—one that focuses not on how national-local ingredients are presented, but on how they are *transcended*, within the framework of a film. This reading may not apply equally to all Israeli films, including those which the above-mentioned scholarship uses for its transnational arguments. It does stipulate, however, that these arguments do not hold much explanatory power when applied to texts that appear less invested in drawing the nation's boundaries than in dissolving them. Such texts arguably exist within what I termed elsewhere as the "Judaic turn" of contemporary Israeli cinema—a filmic corpus distinguished by its interest in exploring the themes of Judaic life in Israel. My research has focused on those Israeli Judaic-themed films—for example, *Ushpizin* (dir. Dar, 2004), *Hufshat Kayitz*

(*My Father, My Lord*, dir. Volach, 2007), *Hasodot* (*The Secrets*, dir. Nesher, 2007), *Bruriah* (dir. Kushnir, 2008), *Hamashgihim* (*God's Neighbors*, dir. Yaish, 2012), *Tikkun* (dir. Sivan, 2015), *La'avor et Hakir* (*The Wedding Plan*, dir. Burshtein, 2016)—that appeal to Jewish mystical tradition (or kabbalah) so as to effect an ecstatic state of *unio mystica* in its audience.[43] And while this phenomenon was explored in relation to its immediate national audience (Israelis), as offering transcendence beyond the seemingly unbridgeable secular-religious divide and its resultant debilitating ambivalences, it also invites a complementary approach that stresses its transnational meaningfulness. For in the desired experience of unity that these films hope to elicit, not only are the nation's internal divisions abolished, but also those which separate one nation from the next, bringing to the fore a sense of all-encompassing oneness.

We can see the merits of such a transnational reading through a close analysis of a film representative of Israeli cinema's Judaic turn: the fiction feature *Magic Men* (*Haben Shel Elohim*, 2013), directed by veteran cineastes Erez Tadmor and Guy Nattiv. Like other films in this cycle, *Magic Men* is not without its overt references to the familiar tropes of "Israeliness." Nevertheless, through its narrative of international travel, Tadmor and Nattiv's film expresses a desire to traverse national borders, to shed both its Israeliness and its homegrown Israeli audience, and to achieve the status of a product fit for a global market.[44] This departure points to what other Judaic-themed, mystically inclined Israeli films chart out more implicitly—a "transnational imaginary," to use Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake's useful term,[45] which supports the idea of cinema's uninterrupted flow across the globe by evoking, in the spirit of kabbalah, a transcendent vision of cosmic boundlessness.

IT'S A KIND OF MAGIC?

The plot of *Magic Men* follows the recently widowed Avraham, who is asked to represent his municipality in a "twin cities" celebration ceremony in Greece—the country of his birth, from which he fled during World War II, thereafter settling in Israel. Upon his arrival in Greece, Avraham discovers, to his great chagrin, that his estranged son Yehuda—a Chabad Hasid with whom he has had no relations since the latter's repentance process (*hazara betshuva*)—has been sent by the mayor to accompany him on the visit. So, rather than follow the prescribed itinerary, Avraham evades Yehuda, and tries to find an old magician friend who saved his life during the war. His search leads him to Maria, a Greek prostitute, who offers her assistance. Though Yehuda appreciates Maria's help, the two fail to get along, causing her to leave and putting further strain on

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the relationship with the father. To alleviate this tension, father and son finally decide to join forces and locate the long-lost friend, now a catatonic resident of a retirement home. They sneak him out and deliver him to his son, only to discover that this old man is not, in fact, Avraham's friend. They leave the elderly invalid with his family and embark on the journey back to Thessaloniki. As it gets dark, they stop and engage in a candid conversation, during which the son receives a text message from his wife saying she has just delivered a baby girl. Avraham announces his intent to visit the infant, yet this promise remains unfulfilled, for he passes away during the night.

As can be gleaned from this brief synopsis, the most rudimentary way in which *Magic Men* blurs the traditional boundaries of Israeliness is through its functioning as a road movie. In his discussion of recent Israeli films that "investigate the transitions between Germany and Israel,"[46] Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann notes how these texts adopt "significant elements from transnational cinema [like] the motifs of journeys, traveling, and migration";[47] such elements displace the centrality of "origin" and "destination," while enveloping them in a broader and more fluid landscape marked by "interspaces"[48] of transit and encounter. *Magic Men* operates along similar lines. Its narrative highlights travel, both internationally, between Israel and Greece, and nationally, through a road trip across the Greek landscape. In so doing, the film is able to detach itself from the geographical borders of Israel while still retaining its Israeli credentials. The resultant fluidity—resonating with the "unstable and shifting gazes of the traveler, the immigrant, the foreigner, and the *other*"—allows for what Ebbrecht-Hartmann described as a "cinema of encounters,"[49] where national distinctions are subdued in favor of transnational attachments.

"The persistence of a haunting past" is yet another "transnational element"[50] shared by *Magic Men* and the Israeli German cinema of encounters. In both instances, the past in question is that of the Holocaust, whose traumatic memories are revisited through the survivor's journey back to Europe, thereby "combining a transtemporal narrative with a transnational cinematic geography."[51] Thus envisaged, Avraham's return to his homeland in search of a missing comrade transcends distinctions not only of space but also of time; it allows the protagonist to partake in a simultaneous movement across both geographical and mnemonic landscapes. This is a transformative experience, in the sense of transforming Greece "into a closed space of reencountering the trauma of the past."[52] Indeed, that Avraham never manages to track down his friend is indicative of how the traumatic past may be reencountered but not recovered and made whole. In the absence of recovery, an arguably more-radical alternative emerges: that is, when the pursuit of a specific past is abandoned, the notion of past—and, by implication, of present—becomes broader and more inclusive,

encompassing those (like many viewers) who have no personal stake in Holocaust trauma. What contributes to this effect—where temporal boundaries turn out to be less significant, and less significatory—is the choice to address Holocaust memories outside of the evocative Israeli German geo-historical axis. To use Ebbrecht-Hartmann's terms, if Germany is "an uncanny place of the traumatic past's aftermath" and Israel is "its counter-place of Jewish self-defense," then Greece operates as a "third space," where the most blatant symbolic designators of the Holocaust are not asserted, and consequently its historical distinction as a site of cultural-national heritage is potentially transcended.[53]

On the grounds of this transcendence, *Magic Men* manifests a social vision in which people of distinct national groups can come together in transnational unity. Here, characterization and casting play a major factor. The two protagonists may be both Jewish Israeli, yet the actors themselves are distinguishable along other ethnic-national lines, with Yehuda being played by the Jewish Israeli Zohar Strauss, and Avraham by the Palestinian/Arab Israeli Makram Khoury.[54] Their rapprochement as characters on foreign soil thus marks the possibility of overcoming the Israeli (Jewish) Palestinian conflict through a clean break from the actual territory of dispute (and the identity divide it tends to breed). With "Israeli" and "Palestinian" turning into floating signifiers, the stage is set for a more inclusive form of transnational cooperation, clearly visible in the relationship between the protagonists and Maria (portrayed by notable French Greek actress Ariane Labed). Importantly, though Avraham should be fluent in Greek, he communicates with Maria in English, thereby offsetting the cultural specificity of the film's extensive use of Hebrew and, by extension, attracting wider identification from audiences outside of Israel/Palestine.

This relationship holds an even greater transnational appeal when considering the symbolic charge of character names: Avraham, referring to the father of Judaism, and Maria, referring to Mary, the mother of Christianity, and even more so to Mary Magdalene, the repentant prostitute who became Christ's close ally. With these symbolic associations, *Magic Men* gestures toward an expansive Judeo-Christian unity that is not bound by a specific time and place and harks back to shared Semitic roots.[55] This common origin is also surfaced through Maria's fleeting communion with Yehuda, whose name derives from the Hebrew word for "Jew" (*yehudi*) and relates to the Biblical era's Kingdom of Judea (*mamlechet Yehuda*). That, despite their obvious differences, both sides are able to interact and connect, validates the potency of an ancient bond that joins them and renders the vision of Judeo-Christian unity even more palpable. This transnational coming-together, the film seems to suggest, is not contingent on Jewish Israeli inner unity, as marked by Avraham and Yehuda's reconciliation. Rather, as Maria symbolically broadens the scope of unity beyond

Israeli national borders, she also precipitates Israeli inner unity, gently cajoling Avraham into reciprocating Yehuda's affections.

Indeed, affection is significant to the filmmakers' transnational agenda, serving as a potent force of integration between similarly discrete identities. Not all affective expressions are integrative; hatred, for one, serves to divide rather than bridge, as *Magic Men* clearly indicates through references to historical Nazism and its reverberations within Greece's contemporary political landscape (for example, the Greek ultranationalist neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, whose supporters Avraham encounters during a bus ride). Yet these divides, the film also stipulates, can be transcended through the impact of a more compelling emotion—love. Though occupying opposite positions on the religious-secular spectrum, Avraham and Yehuda manage to mend fences through their love for one another; and this love reverberates, in turn, through their emotional bonds with Greek characters Maria and Avraham's childhood friend. Due to the abstract nature of loving emotion, it can effectively serve as the catalyst for social cohesion across distinctive and, at times, oppositional national identities. Not only the film's characters but its transnationally diverse audiences may find themselves impelled toward unity by the invitation to identify with the universal experience of love.

Crucially, the emphasis on love resonates with, if not derives from, certain mystical beliefs in the Hasidic faith associated with Yehuda. The notable weight given by Hasidism to personal piety and devotion via worldly activities led it on occasion to valorize the role of love in spiritual existence—as in the case of Reb Nahman, the originator of Bratslav Hasidism, for whom "consuming, unrequitable love, with all its emotional intensity . . . echoes and reechoes . . . the quest of the *hasid* to approach his rebbe, in every Jew's desire to draw closer to God, even in the romance pulling the solid letters of the Hebrew alphabet to union with their soul, the vocal points."[56] The obvious Romanticist vein of this thinking fed into neo-Hasidism's subsequent attempt to reimagine "Jewish identity as pure feeling, i.e., as liberated from the bonds of ideational or halakhic dogma and centered on an internal emotional connection to the soul."[57] By loosening the constraints of what it means to be Jewish, neo-Hasidic lore allowed Jews to maintain their cultural identity while denying the Jewish ritualism that set them apart from members of their host cultures. Concurrently, for some neo-Hasidic thinkers at least, "pure feeling" became less a marker of Jewish uniqueness than a crystallization of common emotions, thereby enabling an experiential bridge between Jews and other peoples. If informed by this latter attitude, then *Magic Men*'s vision shows itself to be more than "just" transnational, with love affecting a form of *unio mystica*, both truly transcendent and universal.

The potential for mystical unity is evoked in the film through two tropes

that intersect with Hasidic mysticism in significant ways. The first of these is music, which features prominently within Hasidic philosophy as a desired form of worldly devotion, a piety that emerges from the fusion of inner life and everyday reality. On the most quotidian level, this pious form is meant to strengthen the bonds of congregational integrity (as in Bratslav Hasidism, where "music and the joy it arouses . . . became, in the hands of the tsaddik, a potent weapon against the social and economic hardships that weighed on his community").[58] Yet through its intangible emotive qualities, music was also thought to make available an even deeper, *spiritual* bond—one in which "the human spirit and the spirit of God thus meet, uniting in the body of the instrument, of the player himself."[59] As an all-encompassing vision of mystical unity, this Hasidic definition held particular appeal to neo-Hasidic storytellers and thinkers, who used it in their creations so as to support an emotion-centered religiosity, with its inherent potential for bridging between the Judaic and non-Judaic worlds.[60]

Such is also the goal of *Magic Men*'s Yehuda, a prominent Hasidic singer by profession. As shown in a video clip incorporated into the film narrative, his music deploys evangelical messages through a rap style, sung out in English. This amalgamation between sacred and profane signals Yehuda's capacity to bridge transnational divides, even to the extent of establishing a common language with Maria, his most obvious *other* (being Greek, Christian, a woman, and a prostitute). The attempt to establish a lingua franca between these two characters is most noticeable in one scene where Yehuda and Maria are in a hospital waiting room, while Avraham is being treated for a fainting spell. Forced intimacy soon gives way to the surfacing of an emotional common denominator—the love both feel for their offspring—and of a shared attraction to music, made clear when Yehuda teaches Maria to play on his didgeridoo. Through the characters' temporary union, this scene shows how love and music can intertwine on the basis of a shared abstractness, and how this intertwining can potentially facilitate integration even in the unlikeliest of social settings (a message further supported by the symbolic juxtaposition of an aboriginal instrument and the sticker placed upon it, carrying the familiar countenance of Chabad spiritual leader, the Lubavitcher Rebbe).

The universality of communion takes a more explicit mystical bent with the second trope—magic. In the "magical" we find a challenge not so much to geopolitical and cultural differentiation between humans, as to the very distinctions that undergird human rationality. While rational thought is prone to assert categorical separations, magic's challenge seeks to show such separations are more artifice than necessity and, under certain conditions, can be done away with altogether. Rather than see the world—and specifically, human

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society—as made up of discrete units, the magical thus foregrounds a transcending of distinctions that logic deems unfeasible, yet which could be sensed through a fundamental emotive-spiritual capacity to experience transcendence and boundlessness. While this experience is easily associated with the language of mysticism, the filmmakers' choice of the term "magic" confesses the desire not to reduce their vision to a theological and theocentric framework of "miracle." Yet Tadmor and Nattiv are also not keen on ghettoizing their vision to the secular associations of magic, and hence do not denounce the break from rational thought as "trick" or "deception." Instead, and in keeping with a precarious impulse toward unity, the film's transcendence is made to hold the religious and secular poles together, as indicated by the film's dual title—*Magic Men* in English and *Haben Shel Elohim* (Son of God) in Hebrew.

This position, which extricates magic from a secular context and partially mystifies it, is achieved in stages. The first stage of the process occurs early in the film. Avraham is at a local Thessaloniki bar and watches an episode of a television show centered on reconnecting long-lost relatives or friends. While Avraham gazes at the TV screen, the anchorwoman suddenly addresses him directly and announces that his old friend has been out looking for him. Avraham responds to her, and the two converse until the bartender interrupts, and the scene returns to "normalcy." Here, the television show's title—"The Light in the Darkness"—obliquely references mystical revelation, yet the scene seems to indicate that the unexplainable is not so much a sign of universal transcendence as of individual hallucination. This dismissal is then followed up by the complementary foregrounding of magic as a "trick," during a montage scene where Avraham and Maria perform various "magical feats": for example, when he stands to the side of a parked bus and brings his hands together as the automatic doors close; or when they perform swiping motions, seemingly forcing the movement of a nearby revolving door. Since Avraham and Maria's actions do not cause the mechanized effects to occur, and even as objective occurrences, these effects are hardly out of the ordinary, magic in this sequence is explicitly demystified.

The next central scene featuring magic has Avraham and Yehuda putting on a street show for passersby in order to earn some spending money. Their feats are different than those Avraham performed with Maria, indicating a new stage in the film's developing idea of magic. These are no longer obvious tricks whose mechanism is displayed for all to see. Rather, they are acts whose results seem out of the ordinary—especially as they are shot in slow motion—but whose causes are not entirely laid bare. In making it seem more mysterious, magic stops being an impediment and starts acting as a possible bridge ("a very narrow bridge," to paraphrase Reb Nahman's famous saying), upon which

Avraham and Yehuda can meet one another halfway. This possibility is visually articulated through the characters' appearance in clown makeup, which makes them look similar by masking their physical differences. Yet the placement of their performance in the context of a street show still establishes an air of trickery, and as a result forecloses on the presence of a durable bond.

In the final stage, magic ceases to be explicable as trick, and the film affords its viewers a transcendent vision. In the penultimate sequence, Avraham and Yehuda are seen engaging in an intimate conversation on the side of the road. At the conversation's conclusion, Avraham asks Yehuda to pick a card from his deck. Yehuda picks the queen of hearts and places it back in the deck. Avraham then looks through the deck but does not extract the right card. Yehuda asks him where he placed the queen of hearts—is it under his pillow, as it was when they were younger? Avraham simply responds that the magic "didn't work," revealing it as a bad trick. Yet after he dies, in the last moments of the film, the card reappears in the most unlikely of places—in Maria's cigarette box, which she opens while on a date with a client, and between the pages of Yehuda's prayer book (*siddur*), as he reads the Kaddish over his father's grave.

This is no trick but a truly mysterious event, unexplainable by any normative criterion. It speaks not merely to an unlikely happenstance, but to a seemingly impossible unity that transcends boundaries of time and place, culture and gender, even the living and the dead. This is a vision that finds more stable footing in Yehuda's Chabad teachings than in Avraham's secular orientation, manifesting itself as an example of "equalization" (*hashva'ah*): the ecstatic act of pursuing "the equality of the divinity [through] the equalization of opposites and the finding of a median between entities contrary to each other in their external manifestation."[61] Yet the film subscribes more to the nature than the letter of mysticism; it does not commit a transcendent vision to the rigid dictates of theological dogma, yet provides it with the much more fluid definition of mystified magic. In between secularity and religiosity, the cigarette box and the prayerbook, the card as magical form points beyond these dialectics and toward a hidden undercurrent of *coincidentia oppositorum* (the coincidence, or unity, of opposites), which is rarely sensed but supposedly envelops us all.

This undercurrent resonates with the "magic of cinema"—the medium-specific coincidence of presence and absence, which is marked by "perceptual wealth, but at the same time stamped with unreality to an unusual degree, and from the very outset." This coincidence allows the spectators to coincide with the screen, as experience overcomes the distance between viewer and viewed. Indeed, as Christian Metz succinctly claims, since it "drums up all perception, but to switch it immediately over into its own absence, which is nonetheless the only signifier present," the cinema, "more than the other arts . . . involves

us in the imaginary."[62] Such involvement encapsulates, and in effect buttresses, all attempts made by Nattiv and Tadmor to shape their film as a transnational text. By referencing the quasimystical experience of cinema magic, the filmmakers ask the audience to tap into their experiential capacity to transcend all categorical distinctions, including those of national identity. Primed in this way, viewers become more receptive to the vision of social unification present on various levels of the film's narrative; and as a result, *Magic Men* reveals itself as unencumbered by national determinants, and therefore as readable by and relevant to a global audience.

MAGIC MEN THROUGH A TRANS/NATIONAL LENS

Over the past two decades, as Yaron Peleg has noted, the State of Israel has undergone an "ironic metamorphosis" by "becoming increasingly more religious in many important ways."[63] The irony in question has to do with the fact that, historically speaking, the national ethos of Israel was grounded in an avowedly secularized definition of Jewishness. Within traditional Zionist Israeli terms, Judaism as a religious lifestyle and theological dogma belonged to the diasporic past, which should be negated in favor of Zionism's nationalist "civil religion."[64] Those Israeli Jews who clung to the old ways—the so-called "religious sector" (*hamigzar hadati*)—were largely marginalized to urban "ghettos," with the hope that they would assimilate into normative Israeliness in due course. Removed from one another conceptually as well as geographically, the secular majority and observant minority coexisted in a tense status quo. The latter looked at secularity with caution and even apprehension, afraid to have its faith and observance be erased; the former, as Gideon Katz explains, felt "caught in a struggle against a nebulous and demanding Judaic experience, which wishes to pounce from the shadows and destroy it."[65] While such divisiveness did not vanish in time, it has nevertheless been counterbalanced of late by complementary gestures, where the categories of secular-religious become more intertwined. Thus, as the religious sector gradually expands its presence within Israel's cultural and political landscape, it also absorbs influences that do not square with the letter of Judaic law. For the secular Israeli, on the other hand, greater friction with and legitimization of Judaism within this landscape have created "an opportunity to encounter tradition without being uprooted from his [or her] identity" and consequently engendered "new meaning, neither ghettoized nor messianic, which belongs to Israeli culture as much as to Judaism."[66]

Concurrent with this shift has been a Judaic turn within the landscape of Israeli audiovisual media. Before the 2000s, the Israeli screen gave scant

attention to the vicissitudes of Judaism as a way of life and belief system. More recently, however, first cinema and then television have begun engaging this topic in earnest. In what amounts to a profound shift in Israeli film and TV history, a myriad of previously unexplored concerns have gradually been deemed fit for interrogation: for example, political messianism and settler society; modesty laws and androcentric oppression of devout women; homosexuality and homophobia within Orthodox communities; "born-again" and "lapsed" observant Israeli Jews; the social function of religious rites; and theological questions regarding the existence and nature of God.[67] The diversification of on-screen representation has also been accompanied and precipitated by a greater diversity of practitioners, who occupy different identity positions along the secular-observant axis. Of these, several media creators at various definitions of religious observance—such as Rama Burshtein, Eliran Malka, Meni Yaish, Joseph Cedar, Eliezer "Laizy" Shapiro, and Hava Divon—have gained widespread recognition, thereby upsetting the Israeli film-and-television industry's persistent secular character.

The significance of these two historical phenomena, if read through a national lens, would stress their supposed correlation: or in Peleg's phrasing, would show how "the moral stance of films and television programs toward Jewish religion and Jewish religious practices in Israel would [help us] understand what has changed in the way Israeli society views religion and religious practices over the years, determine how these changes came about, and identify the values assigned to these changes."[68] Employing such a "national" interpretive paradigm, I have argued elsewhere that these changes—bringing the secular and religious into mutual recognition, even as the concept of secular-religious *kulturkampf* is still recognized as ubiquitous—provoke a profound sense of cultural ambivalence, which is negotiated in various ways within Judaic-themed Israeli cinema.[69] Even when Judaism is critiqued—and it often is—these films do not advocate its denial but reflect the necessity and difficulty of coming to terms with its contemporary rise in Israel's public sphere. While the challenge of negotiation may appear insurmountable at times, and ambivalence dispiriting, on occasion Israeli filmmaking articulates avenues of escape, however tenuous they may be.

One such avenue, pursued by *Magic Men* as well as the other Judaic-themed Israeli films noted above, has to do with an appeal to Jewish mysticism, in light of contemporary currents of the so-called New Age. Judaic-inflected New Age (or "Jew Age") spirituality has gained a strong foothold in Israel over the last few decades, as part of a robust search for alternatives to common Israeli secular and observant codes. This search has produced a variety of cultural expressions, such as: channeling, which can take an Israeli Jewish accent through

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references to such iconic figures as "Moses, the Prophet Deborah, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Nachman, etc.";[70] Jewish Renewal, which seeks to "renew Judaism, both intellectually and practically,"[71] by integrating Jewish symbols and rituals into New Age frameworks; pagan and shamanist practices, especially those drawing on the spiritual undertones of the Jewish calendar and of sacred Jewish sites; women's circles, which often empower womanhood through veneration of such key feminine entities in Judaic cosmology as Lilith and the *shechina* (the female side of the divine); Judaic healing and coaching systems, which are taught by gurus and in schools like "Elima: The College for Alternative Medicine in the Jewish Spirit" and "Kavana! Jewish Coaching for Results";[72] and various body/soul-oriented techniques that "are 'converted' to Judaism, in an attempt to identify them as being of Jewish origin or to offer a Jewish version of them."[73] Through their New Age reading of Judaic tradition, these and other practices often aim toward achieving the mystical promise of a total unifying experience; and in so doing, they offer a way to transcend the limits of language and identity, and the ambivalence they ultimately produce, in the space of Israeli religious-secular relations. It may come as no surprise, then, that Israeli films dealing directly with this space would pick up on the Jew Age aspiration toward mystical unity—either by referring narratively to mystical tradition, evoking a mystical vision, or both. *Magic Men* exhibits both techniques, binding intertextual references to Hasidic and neo-Hasidic beliefs on the one hand, and a mystifying, miraculous apotheosis on the other. Through this combination, foundations are laid for atheistic Avraham and ultra-Orthodox Yehuda to move past social division and cultural ambivalence. And by virtue of cinema's quasimystical ability to evoke the experience of transcendence, a diverse Israeli audience may find itself equally united with the projected figures on screen.

While this type of nationally centered interpretation establishes a strong causal logic, it can also, through self-imposed limits, obstruct from view a transnational reading of equal—if not greater—importance.[74] Indeed, through its explicit transnational features, *Magic Men* helps us see the necessity of such a reading. The film's appeal to the mystical, in this framework, responds to the New Age as a global (rather than national) phenomenon; and accordingly, its sights are set not on transcending one nation's internal divides/ambivalences but those of humanity at large. What comes into focus, in turn, is an "emerging social vision" sociologist Philip Wexler has traced to a variety of mystical practices across different contemporary sociocultural settings. In contrast to conventional social structures, this vision of a grand "mystical society" models itself through the "evolving life pattern of a boundless and flexible self, which is no longer limited to the coordinates of time and space, and which goes on an internal journey of interconnection past the boundaries of the lone

individual."[75] As a result of this journey, "the partition between inside and outside is worn down, and the processes of the self are gradually intertwined with social meanings and dynamics." No longer is dialogue "about the trading of words between social subjects, but about the transmission of a meaningful experience between self and environment."[76] Consequently, a system of social codification is replaced by a form of "social energy," of tapping into a supposed fluid and integrative level of Being where "relations are no longer founded on the social currencies of belief and expectation, or even of consciousness, but on the wealth of materials related to vitality, physical breath and fluids, . . . [relations that] are not substitutions but transformations . . . of matter to energy, as we would say if using a different terminology."[77] According to Wexler, such social behavior is presently taking concrete form, which makes it seem "not entirely 'imaginary'";[78] and while it may be premature to determine their trajectory, he nevertheless locates in these humble beginnings a welcomed "microcosmic model for a revolutionary social change."[79]

Magic Men plays a small part in these beginnings, dissolving its vision into those of others similarly affected by New Age spirituality. Its contribution does not assume that a mystical society would be realized, and indeed foregrounds the setbacks involved in the process of realization (the death of Avraham and Maria's return to prostitution). Yet, like several other Judaic-themed Israeli films, it also keeps alive its mystical social horizon as a feasible potential, "which has a certain Archimedean value, if not utopian."[80] The full extent of *Magic Men*'s utopianism may be overlooked if one fails to consider its avowed embrace of trans/national "double occupancy"; indeed, this embrace is where the utopianism of a mystical society takes root. For as Elsaesser explains, double occupancy should be understood as inherently utopian, "insofar as under certain conditions, [it] can open up ways of sharing the same space while not infringing on the other's claims, allowing for exchanges which enrich our lives, and making self-interest benefit the common good, rather than oppose it."[81] *Magic Men*'s "transnational imaginary" takes these promises and further radicalizes them; unsatisfied with bridging national categories and negotiating the ambivalences that bridges create, it seeks out to render these categories and ambivalences obsolete—to create a world where all is oneness and nothing is excluded, not even God.[82]

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this chapter was presented as part of a seminar on comparative cinema at the Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), Utrecht University, March 2017. Several of the ideas presented here also appear

in my book *Hidden Light: Judaism and Mystical Experience in Israeli Cinema*, though this study frames them through a national lens. My thanks to seminar members and manuscript readers for their valuable feedback on this preliminary work.

2. Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 60.

3. Hjort and Mackenzie, eds., Introduction to *Cinema and Nation*, 3.

4. Hjort and Mackenzie, 4.

5. Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*, 1.

6. Shohat, 5, 10, 252.

7. Shohat, 252.

8. Shohat, 252.

9. Shohat, 250, 251.

10. Shohat, 4.

11. Shohat, 252, 254.

12. Ezra and Rowden, "What Is Transnational Cinema?," 1.

13. Ezra and Rowden, 2, 3.

14. Ezra and Rowden, 2.

15. Higbee and Lim, "Concepts," 10.

16. Ben-David, "General Zionists," 21 (in this and other quotations from Hebrew sources, the translation is mine). See also Chyutin and Mazor, "Israeli Cinema Studies," 193.

17. Friedman, "Guises of Transnationalism," 17.

18. Friedman, 29.

19. For the most comprehensive account of Israeli cinema's transnationalism to date, see Harris and Chyutin, eds., *Casting a Giant Shadow*, specifically the anthology's introduction, "Israeli Cinema beyond the National," which produces a transnational history of Israeli cinema. Harris and Chyutin's anthology, it should be noted, is indebted to a few formative early studies that took a more transnational approach to the history of Israeli film, such as: Bursztyn, *Face as a Battlefield*; Gertz, *Motion Fiction*; Schweitzer, *The New Sensibility*.

20. Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 109.

21. Elsaesser, 71.

22. Hagin, "Our Traumas," 209.

23. Hagin, 210.

24. Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 509.

25. Hagin and Yosef, "Festival Exoticism," 165–166. On this, see also Patterson and Chyutin, "Teaching Trauma."

26. Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 496.

27. On this, see for example, Utin, "The Exchange"; Alexander, "Blood, Sweat and Tears"; Munk, "Hagar Ben-Asher's *The Slut*."

28. Hagin, "Our Traumas," 211.

29. See, for example, Harris, "New Frontiers"; Hagin, "Our Traumas"; Gershenson, "Zombies and Zionism."

30. Gershenson and Hudson, "Nightmares of a Nation," 51. Importantly, certain horror films achieve crossover appeal between art film festivals and more popular outlets, such as the Israeli films of Navot Papushado and Aharon Keshales—*Kalevet* (*Rabies*, 2010), presented at the Chicago International Film Festival, and *Mi Mefahed Mehaze'ev Hara* (*Big Bad Wolves*, 2013), presented at the Tribeca Film Festival—which preceded their work on Hollywood film projects (e.g., Papushado's more recent feature, *Gunpowder Milkshake* [2021], released by Netflix in the US).

31. Gershenson and Hudson, "Nightmares of a Nation," 63.

32. Gershenson and Hudson, 45.

33. Gershenson, "Zombies and Zionism," 168.

34. See, for example, Peleg, "Perpetuating Victimhood."

35. Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 510.

36. Hagin and Yosef, "Fantasies of Other Desires," 293–294.

37. Hagin and Yosef, "Festival Exoticism," 169. On self-othering in Israeli and Palestinian cinemas, see also Friedman, "Guises of Transnationalism," especially p. 27.

38. Dushi, "Seeking the Local," 215.

39. Dushi, 216.

40. Dushi, 220, 216.

41. Dushi, 214, 215.

42. Dushi, 214. Yael Munk, in *Israeli Cinema*, makes similar claims about the formation of hybrid identities in the "liminal" Israeli films of the 1990s.

43. Chyutin, *Hidden Light*.

44. *Magic Men* was shown at more than a dozen film festivals in Europe and the US. It is worth noting that Tadmor's and Nattiv's other "Israeli" films, made together and separately, have also addressed transnational themes and sought global distribution. See, for example, *Zarim* (*Strangers*, Tadmor and Nattiv, 2007), which was selected for the Sundance Film Festival, and follows the whirlwind romance of an Israeli kibbutznik and a Palestinian expat in Berlin during the World Cup; or *Sipur Gadol* (*A Matter of Size*, Tadmor and Sharon Maymon, 2009), winner of the Audience Award at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, which deals with the apprenticeship of a group of overweight Israelis in Japanese sumo wrestling. Also noteworthy is Nattiv's transnational career path, which led him to Los Angeles in 2015 and to success as a Hollywood filmmaker with his Academy Award–winning short, *Skin*, from 2018. This latter work, as well as the feature film developed from it under the same title (also 2018), are both set in the US and feature a non-Israeli, English-speaking cast; their thematic focus on American race relations, in turn, reflects Nattiv's preoccupation with Israeli racial issues in his earlier work (cf. *Strangers*), thereby creating an oblique transnational connection between both phases of the filmmaker's oeuvre.

45. Wilson and Dissanayake, "Tracking the Global/Local," 1.

46. Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Encounters and Interspaces," 335.

47. Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 352.

48. Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 336.

49. Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 336–337.

50. Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 347–348.

51. Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 342.

52. Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 344.

53. Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 342.

54. As Karin Tamar Schafferman explains, "one could point out two main components of which Arab Israeli identity is comprised. The first is the civic component, involuntarily stemming from their status as Israeli citizens. The second component is the national one, stemming from their association with the Palestinian national movement and the Arab community" ("Arabic Identity"). The debate on whether to use the term Arab Israeli or Palestinian with regards to this community is often motivated by political concerns surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Khoury's own biographical story manifests how complex and intertwined these designations are: he was born in pre-statehood Palestine, to an Arab Christian family residing in Jerusalem; at the outset of the war for statehood, the family fled to Lebanon, assuming Palestinian refugee status, but managed to return before the borders

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had been closed, and thus receive Israeli citizenship; later, Khoury and his kin would resettle in Northern Israel, displaced from their original residence in Eastern Jerusalem, then occupied by Jordan (until the 1967 Six-Day War).

55. Khoury's casting may even result in including Islam within this interdenominational unity, if one considers the common association of "Arab" with "Muslim." The potency of this association notwithstanding, it should be noted that Khoury is not Muslim, but Christian.

56. Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 210.

57. Ross, *Beloved-Despised*, 266.

58. Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 196–197.

59. Wiskind-Elper, 198.

60. Ross, *Beloved-Despised*, 500–501.

61. Elior, *Paradoxical Ascent*, 69.

62. Metz, *Imaginary Signifier*, 45.

63. Peleg, *Directed by God*, 1.

64. Don-Yehiya and Liebman, "Symbol System."

65. Gideon Katz, "Veiled Judaism," 199.

66. Katz, 210.

67. For scholarly discussions of the "Judaic turn" in Israeli film and television, see: Peleg, *Directed by God*; Dushi, "Seeking the Local"; Chyutin, *Hidden Light*; Chyutin, "King's Daughter"; and Chyutin, "Judaic Cinecorporeality."

68. Peleg, *Directed by God*, 17.

69. Chyutin, *Hidden Light*.

70. Ruah-Midbar, "Channeler," 515.

71. Weissler, "Performing Kabbalah," 84.

72. Ruah-Midbar, "Channeler," 519–520.

73. Ruah-Midbar, "Current Jewish Spiritualities," 107.

74. Peleg, for one, is very explicit about imposing these limits in his national reading of Judaic-themed Israeli cinema. His argument "does not consider religious imagery in other national cinemas and . . . does not probe the remarkable ability of the cinematic medium to capture and comment on religious or spiritual experience in general." Instead, it aims "to examine a specific issue—religious representation—in a specific visual corpus—Israeli film and television—over a specific period of time—1960s to 2010s—in order to gauge the changes in it as a reflection of similar changes in Israeli culture itself" (*Directed by God*, 13).

75. Wexler, *Mystical Society*, 43.

76. Wexler, 175.

77. Wexler, 48.

78. Wexler, 149.

79. Wexler, 73.

80. Wexler, 153.

81. Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 116.

82. The presence of *unio mystica* in Israeli Jew Age spiritualities is arguably derived more from the emphasis given to unitary experience within the global New Age than from a similar emphasis within Kabbalist tradition. Research shows that this experience of being swallowed by or assimilated into God was not necessarily courted by Kabbalists as a prerequisite for mystical fulfillment, but is nevertheless present in certain images, accounts, and techniques of Kabbalah and Hasidism. For more on this, see Idel, *Kabbalah*, 77–91; Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 41–79.

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