

## The Mystical Symbol: Some Comments on Ankori, Giegerich, Scholem, and Jung

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Micha Ankori's thought-provoking paper raises important questions regarding the convergences between Kabbalah and alchemy, as well as deeper questions concerning the nature and significance of the mystical/mythical symbol. I will comment briefly on each of these issues.

I.

Ankori underscores several important points of contact between Kabbalah and alchemy. Amongst these are (1) the value of the feminine opening to dialogue, study, feeling, and being as a complement to masculine doing and creating, (2) the focus on human creativity as a parallel to divine creation, (3) the use of sexuality as a symbol of the creative process and erotic union as a symbol for the restoration of a ruptured unity, (4) the recognition that death and destruction is a prerequisite for (re)birth and renewal and the importance of dialectic of destruction and creation (*Shevirah* and *Tikkun* in Kabbalah, *solve et coagulum* in alchemy), (5) the necessity of traversing the world of labor and suffering in order to ascend the rungs of the mystical ladder (the dialectic between the physical and the spiritual), and (6) the recognition that the source of creativity and even goodness is in what is dark and unknown, and the consequent need to pass through and assimilate the shadow (*sitra achra* in Kabbalah, *nigredo* in alchemy) in order to regenerate the self and world.

Jung was himself not unaware of the parallels between alchemy and Kabbalah and either commented upon or alluded to several of them in such works as *Mysterium Coniunctionis* and *Answer to Job* (Drob, 2003). Indeed, the kabbalistic symbols of *Adam Kadmon* (the Primordial Human), the divine wedding between *Tifereth* (the Holy One) and the *Shekhinah* (the divine feminine presence), and the holy sparks (*scintillae*) entrapped in mundane affairs were important pivots around which Jung developed his most mature interpretations of both alchemy and the Self. In addition, Ankori's description of the death and divine wedding of Simeon Bar Yohai<sup>1</sup> at the close of the *Idra Zutta* brings to mind Jung's 1944 vision,

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which occurred during a period of illness when he “hung on the edge of death” and experienced himself as “Rabbi Simon ben Jochai, whose wedding in the after-life was being celebrated” (Jung, 1961, p. 289).

Ankori’s paper, for all its hermeneutic merit, lacks a certain historical perspective. The figures he interprets so convincingly are merely identified as “alchemical” from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries without specific attribution. Further, there is little sense of the historical connection between Kabbalah and alchemy noted by Jung, who in the *Mysterium* had pointed out that “the Cabala [Jung’s spelling] was assimilated into alchemy” (Jung, 1963/1955–6, p. 24). Finally, there is more to the Scholem-Jung connection than Ankori’s comment that “their paths never crossed” would suggest. Indeed, it was the fact that their paths *did* cross that makes Scholem’s 1963 letter to Aniela Jaffe a critical document in the controversy regarding Jung’s relationship to both Judaism and National Socialism. In this letter Scholem writes that in 1947 he had “received for the first time an invitation to the Eranos meeting in Ascona, evidently at Jung’s suggestion,” and he asked the great rabbi, scholar, and concentration camp survivor Leo Baeck whether he (Scholem) having “heard and read many protests about Jung’s behavior in the Nazi period should accept it” (Jaffe, 1989, pp. 97–8).<sup>2</sup> Baeck told Scholem that Jung had visited him in Zurich after the war, where “Baeck reproached him with all the things he had heard.” Scholem continues:

Jung defended himself by an appeal to the special conditions in Germany but at the same time confessed to him: ‘Well, I slipped up’—probably referring to the Nazis and his expectation that something great might after all emerge. This remark, “I slipped up,” which Baeck repeated to me several times, remains vividly in my memory. Baeck said that in this talk they cleared up everything that had come between them and that they parted from one another reconciled again. Because of this explanation of Baeck’s I accepted the invitation to Eranos when it came a second time (Jaffe, 1989, pp. 97–8).

## II.

Ankori is interested in the role that symbols have in both Kabbalah and alchemy, and in this connection he makes the point that both Scholem and Jung held that symbols point to “truths inaccessible to the conscious mind.” However, Ankori does not adequately take into account these thinkers’ radically different perspectives on the mystical symbol. Scholem was not only skeptical regarding the psychological interpretation of the Kabbalah (as Ankori notes) but actually went so far as to reject the possibility of providing any interpretations of its mythical symbols whatsoever. Scholem (1941) early on distinguished between “allegory” and “symbol” and held that while an allegory is the articulation of “an expressible something by another expressible something...the mystical symbol is an expressible representation of something which lies beyond the sphere of expression and communication” (pp. 26–7). For Scholem, a mystical symbol “signifies nothing and communicates nothing, but makes something transparent which is beyond all expres-

sion" (p. 27). According to Scholem, the mystical symbol is a window into "a hidden and inexpressible reality." However, while symbols can sometimes be understood as expressing the collective mentality of their age,<sup>3</sup> there is no point in *interpreting* them: "Where deeper insight into the structure of the allegory uncovers fresh layers of meaning, the symbol is intuitively understood all at once or not at all" (p. 27). Unlike Scholem, Jung believed that symbols could be provided discursive interpretations, psychological and otherwise. Thus it isn't clear in what sense of the word 'truths' Ankori suggests that *both* "Jung and Scholem concluded that the symbol is a garb for deep truths inaccessible to the conscious mind, which can only be discovered through symbolic language."

The question of the nature of symbols, and the possibility or even the *necessity* of providing them with rational translations and interpretations, exploded onto the pages of this journal in Wolfgang Giegerich's (2004) "The End of Meaning and the Birth of Man." I believe that a kabbalistic perspective on the nature of mystical symbols poses a significant challenge to Giegerich's view of how symbols (fail to) function in the modern era. Giegerich cites Jung's claim in *Psychological Types* that a "symbol is only the unfinished embryonic form of a given meaning" (p. 11). While a symbol remains "unborn" it says something "that cannot be characterized in any other or better way." However, "once its meaning has been born out of it, once that expression is found which formulates the thing sought, expected or divined even better than the hitherto accepted symbol, then the symbol is *dead*, i.e., it possesses only an historical significance." Jung, however, was not consistent in this view. For example, he later stated that "no intellectual formulation comes anywhere near the richness and expressiveness of mythical imagery" (Jung, 1968/1953, p. 25). Nonetheless, for Giegerich, with the birth of meaning out of the symbol, the symbol is finally understood but it is "demythologized and desacralized," losing its mystique. While those who have a nostalgia for myth and the sacred see the death of the symbol as a loss, Giegerich sees it "ultimately as a gain, a progress," as it is "precisely the meaning's *destination* to die as symbol and thereby be born out of its initial enveloped form of mere pregnancy." According to Giegerich, Jung, especially in his later years, made the mistake of believing that one could return to the old symbolic (pre-modern, pre-consciousness) mode of existence, and Jung's work has in fact been used to justify those who attempt to hold themselves and others enthralled with a renewed mythological/symbolic aura and mystique. Interestingly, Scholem (1969), in spite of his view that the mystical symbol is *sui generis*, was doubtful about our current capacity to experience the sacred in the mystical symbols of the Kabbalah, stating, "We can no longer fully perceive, I might say, 'live,' the symbols of the Kabbalah without a considerable effort if at all" (p. 117). For Giegerich (2004) the old symbols can only function for us "spiritually" today insofar as they act as "(spiritual) drugs used to benumb consciousness or give it its highs" (p. 13).

One need not follow Giegerich to his ultimate conclusions in order to recognize the value (as per Jung and contra Scholem) of providing sacred symbols with rational, discursive interpretations, or to even acknowledge that such interpretations represent what might be called a maturing or development (but even here we are using symbols or metaphors) of human consciousness and understanding. Giegerich's position, however, appears to rest upon the (non-kabbalistic) assump-

tion, shared by Jung in the comments quoted earlier, that like the individual born out of a human embryo, there is indeed one meaning (or at most a limited set of meanings) to be born out of a symbol, and, further, that once this meaning has been born, the symbol is exhausted and dead. There are several alternatives to the notion that there is a single significance or finite set of interpretations for any given symbol. One of these, of course, is Scholem's view that the mystical symbol is (or was) understood in non-cognitive, non-discursive terms. However, two other alternatives are suggested by kabbalistic hermeneutics. The first of these is that there is an indefinite, if not infinite array of interpretations inherent in the symbol, and the second is that the symbol has no inherent interpretation behind it but is, rather, a stimulus to an indefinite, if not infinite array of interpretations that are creatively forged *ahead* of it.<sup>4</sup> While it is true that some symbols, for whatever reason, cease to stimulate interpretive possibilities, and thus "die," others continue to be a source of seemingly endless hermeneutic appeal, as Jung later recognized and which Ankori's interpretations of the alchemical and kabbalistic symbols he discusses demonstrate. Both Scholem's understanding of the symbol and the kabbalists' notion of infinite interpretability pose significant challenges to Giegerich's declaration of "the end of meaning."

I look forward to further discussions of the psychological and epistemological dimensions of the mystical symbol in the pages of this journal. We are, however, past the point of simply assuming that symbols are a window onto a truth, psychological or otherwise, without raising the question of the nature of such "truth" and taking a hard look at the window itself.

## Notes

- 1) Shimon ben Jochai: a second-century rabbi who is traditionally held to be the author of the Zohar, the most important and holiest of Kabbalistic works.
- 2) Gershom Scholem to Aniela Jaffe, May 7, 1963.
- 3) For example, Scholem (1969, p. 113) held that certain symbols of the theosophical Kabbalah reflected the alienation and exile resulting from the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. With regard to the kabbalistic symbol of the "breaking of the Vessels," for example, he writes: "Before the judgment seat of rationalist theology such an idea may not have much to say for itself. But for the human experience of the Jews it was the most seductively powerful of symbols."
- 4) According to Moshe Idel (2002), the first of these positions is compatible with a traditional kabbalistic perspective, while the second is decidedly "postmodern" (p. 103). Joseph Dan (1999), however, suggests that the second position is also compatible with the Kabbalah. He writes that "while the Midrash treats the Torah as an inexhaustible text of infinite meanings, the mystic who identifies it with the secret name of God actually treats the text as a huge blank scroll, as far as meaning is concerned, on which any meaning can be written" (p. 148).

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