

The Concept of Infinity (*Eyn-sof*) and the Rise of Theosophical Kabbalah

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THIS ESSAY DISCUSSES the rise of theosophical Kabbalah in light of the development of the notion of infinity. Arguing that the origin of the theosophic notion of infinity goes back to *Sefer yetzirah*, I will analyze its applications in early sources and in *Sefer yetzirah*'s medieval philosophical commentaries up to its theosophical commentaries in Kabbalah. In these theosophical texts we encounter a concept of God as infinite dimension, where emanation is primarily understood as an infinite essence in expansion. This essay sets out to demonstrate how this theosophical infinite God has emerged from the multidirectional expansion of the *sefirot* in *Sefer yetzirah*. The very movement from the *sefirot* to God himself and from the cosmological to the theosophical was made possible by two major shifts. The first depends on the understanding of the *sefirot* as divine, thus as infinite; and the second, in the shift from the multidirectional expansion to a unidirectional and vertical one. This argument leads, therefore, to a new understanding of *Eyn-sof* and its role in theosophic Kabbalah. It will reflect, as well, upon the relation between Kabbalah and philosophy. After some short methodological remarks, I will examine the concept of *Eyn-sof* in early Jewish sources and notably in *Sefer yetzirah*. Then, in order to understand the novelty of theosophical Kabbalah, I will analyze the philosophical interpretations of *Eyn-sof* in the philosophical commentaries of *Sefer yetzirah*. I turn finally to the importance of the theosophical notion of *Eyn-sof* as formulated by the first generation of kabbalists in Provence and Gerona.

In his seminal discussion of *Eyn-sof*, Gershom Scholem traces theosophic innovation as a transition from one grammatical form to another—

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from the adverbial form to the noun: the rise of theosophical Kabbalah, he argues, is connected to a linguistic shift in the usage of *Eyn-sof*—from its use in adverbial phrases such as ‘*ad-eyn-sof*’ (until infinity, that is, “without end”), to its appearance as a noun, the Infinite (*ba-Eyn-sof*).¹ The nominal form marks the integration of the philosophical transcendental description of God into Kabbalah and bears the mark of negative (apophatic) theology.² This means that *Eyn-sof* comes to represent the concealed God whereas the *sefirot* are God manifested. This shift is paradigmatic and not strictly historical or linear and is, as Scholem notes, difficult to pinpoint historically.³ Thus, the “linguistic” shift is not determinative, and it cannot be used to pinpoint the emergence of theosophic Kabbalah. We need to reconsider our understanding of the theosophical structure, at least at the beginning of theosophic Kabbalah.⁴ Moreover,

1. For Scholem’s analysis of the concept of *Eyn-sof*, see Gershom Scholem, *The Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. A. Arkush (Princeton, N.J., 1987), 261–89, 431–43; Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1995), 207–9, 214–17; Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York, 1974), 87–105; Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York, 1991), 38–42, 158–59; Scholem, *Beginning of Kabbalah (1150–1250)* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1948), 104–22; Scholem, *The Kabbalah in Provence* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1963), 137–83.

2. On the importance of negative theology in Scholem’s thought: Scholem, *Major Trends*, 7; Scholem, “Zehn Unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala,” *Geist und Werk: Aus der Werkstatt unserer Autoren: Zum 75. Geburtstag von Dr. Daniel Brody* (Zurich, 1958), 212–13; David Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah,” in *Gershom Scholem*, ed. H. Bloom (New York, 1987), 110–13; Harold Bloom, “Scholem: Unhistorical or Jewish Gnosticism,” in *ibid.*, 207–10, 220; Steven Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, N.J., 1999), 87–90. On the tension between the impersonal God of the philosophers and the God of the Bible, and the kabbalist solution to this tension, see Gershom Scholem, “Das Ringen zwischen dem Biblischen Gott und dem Gott Plotins der alten Kabbala,” *Über einige Grundbegriffe* (Frankfurt, 1996), 9–52. For the more specific identification between *Eyn-sof* and negative theology: Scholem, *Origins*, 433; Scholem, *The Kabbalah in Provence*, 158–61; Isaiah Tishby, ed., *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3 vols., trans. F. Lachower and I. Tishby (Oxford, 1989), 1:233–35.

3. Scholem, *Kabbalah in Provence*, 155–56. Scholem himself was well aware of more positive theosophical conceptions (for example: *Major Trends*, 214; 217–18), though it always seems to involve only the sefirotic realm.

4. For indications of later developments of the notion of *Eyn-sof* as a noun, see the remarks of Scholem and Idel: Scholem, *The Kabbalah in Provence*, 156; Moshe Idel, “Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany, N.Y., 1992), 338–44; Scholem, “On the Theologization of Kabbalah in Modern Scholarship,” in *Religious Apologetics Philosophical Argumentation*, ed. Y. Schwartz and V. Krech (Tübingen, 2004), 148–58.

further research in this field has emphasized the diversity of concepts presented by theosophic Kabbalah. Moshe Idel has shown that viewing *Eyn-sof* as a concept that belongs to negative theology understates other uses of the concept, such as anthropomorphic descriptions of *Eyn-sof*.⁵ Elliot Wolfson, in a major article, has shown clear expressions of positive (kataphatic) theology diminish the hegemony of negative theology.⁶

In light of these studies, a more comprehensive model of *Eyn-sof* as the ontological kernel of theosophic Kabbalah is still needed. This model should give a sense of the positive theology so intrinsic to theosophic Kabbalah. Therefore, I wish to propose an alternative comprehension of *Eyn-sof*. The ambivalence noted by Scholem and others between the uses of *Eyn-sof* as an adverb and as a proper noun reflects not merely a transitional phase in the development of theosophic Kabbalah but is a characteristic feature of the notion of *Eyn-sof* itself. In fact, the ambivalent expressions *ad Eyn-sof* (until infinity) and *le-Eyn-sof* (to infinity) are extremely common both in the earliest period of theosophic Kabbalah and in major thirteenth-century kabbalistic texts, including zoharic literature. Thus, I propose to view the adverbial forms as a major and fundamental form of theosophic Kabbalah rather than as an archaic form, and only a stage toward a more comprehensive and structured concept of God. Such a reading will change our understanding of the theosophic ontology and its dynamic.

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Let us turn first to the historical development of *Eyn-sof* in Jewish sources in the time frame that preceded theosophic Kabbalah. In fact, contrary to his predecessors, Scholem did not view *Eyn-sof* solely as concept imported from philosophy.⁷ Indeed, infinity is a notion present in the Bible in

5. Moshe Idel, "Kabbalistic material from R. David ben Yehuda he-Hassid's School" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 2 (1983): 170–93; "The Image of Man above the *Sefirot*- R. David ben Yehuda he-Hassid's Theosophy of Ten Supernal *Tsahtsahtot* and its Reverberations," *Kabbalah* 20 (2009): 181–212. For a critical approach of Scholem, see Moshe Idel, "On the Doctrine of the Divinity in the Early Kabbalah," *Shefa Tal* (Beer Sheva, 2004), 131–48; Idel, "On Binary 'Beginnings' in Kabbalah Scholarship," *Jewish History* 18 (2004): 197–226; Charles Mopsik and Eric Smilévitch, "Observations sur l'œuvre de Scholem," *Pardes* 1 (1985): 7–28; see also Mopsik's introduction of his translation: Moshe Idel, "Une figure d'homme au-dessus des sefirot," *Pardes* 8 (1988): 129–30.

6. Elliot R. Wolfson, "Negative Theology and Positive Assertion in the early Kabbalah," *Daat* 32 (1994): 6–22.

7. Scholem, *Origins*, 265–68; Scholem, *The Kabbalah in Provence*, 148–51. The hypotheses of Gnostic influence had been reconsidered lately by Moshe Idel, pointing out to an interesting Coptic Gnostic text, which may represent an earlier Jewish tradition: Idel, "On the Doctrine of the Divinity in the Early Kabbalah,"

phrases such as *eyn ḥeker* (unsearchable) and *eyn miapar* (beyond measure), which are used to describe God's greatness.⁸ Later, we encounter similar expressions in rabbinical literature, such as *let sof* (without end) or *let minyan* (without count).⁹ As such, the notion of infinity and related concepts already bear two inseparable marks: an optimal magnitude and an inevitable inaccessibility.

The notion of infinity appears in the early mystical literature as well.¹⁰ In a passage from the Slavic version of Enoch, we read: "For you see the measure of my body¹¹ . . . but I have seen the measure of the body of the Lord, with no measure, similar to nothing and without boundary."¹² This

137, 144–45. On the resemblance of *aperentos* and *Eyn-sof*, see Charlotte Baynes, *A Coptic Gnostic Treatise Contained in the Codex Brucianus: A Translation from the Coptic* (Cambridge, 1933), 3, 10, 40. This stance was later expanded by Shalom Rosenberg who pointed to further examples culled from rabbinical literature and medieval Jewish philosophy. Shalom Rosenberg, "The Concept of 'Infinite' in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and its Relation to the Philosophical Tradition" (Hebrew; M.A. thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1969), 169–77; Rosenberg, "From Anaximander to Levinas: Toward a History of the Concept 'Infinite,'" in *Paradigms in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. R. Jopse (Madison, N.J., 1997), 71. The examples found in rabbinical literature are in the same lines as the uses made of infinity in the Bible.

8. See, for example, "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable" (Ps 145.3); "Great is our Lord, and abundant in power, his understanding is beyond measure" (Ps 147.5); "As the heavens for height, and the earth for depth, so the heart of kings is unsearchable (Prov 25.3); "Who does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number" (Job 9.10).

9. Genesis Rabbah 2.5; mYeb 15.4; mPes 1.1; tNid 7.3; *Baraita de-nidab* 7.3.

10. On the notion of *Eyn-sof* in the Hekhalot literature, see Scholem, *Origins*, 54, n. 9; Scholem, *The Kabbalah in Provence*, 150; Joseph Dan, "The Concept of Knowledge in the Shi'ur Komah," in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. S. Stein and R. Loewe (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1979), 67–74.

11. Kahana's Hebrew version translates here: "Shi'ur Komati." Abraham Kahana, ed., *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (1936–37; Hebrew; repr. Jerusalem, 1978), 1:123. Itamar Gruenwald has suggested that this could be the earliest reference to *Shi'ur komah* as applying to God. This of course rests on the assumption that the old Slavonic version translates the Hebrew *Shi'ur Komah*. Itamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden, 1980), 213. This being said, there is no evidence of an influence of the Hekhalot literature on 2 Enoch, and Gruenwald's suggestion and Kahana's translation have been criticized by Martin Cohen (see next note). Beside the philological difficulties and the difficult question of influences, what interests us here is the correlation between consideration of God's height (*komah*) with consideration of his infinity.

12. Martin Samuel Cohen, *The Shi'ur Komah, Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham, Md., 1983), 79–80.

particular combination of extreme anthropomorphism and yet unfathomability of his form is a distinctive trait of *Shi'ur komab* and specifically reverberates in the clash between finite measurement and gigantic/infinite dimension.¹³

The understanding of measurement as leading to unreachable dimensions in the Hekhalot literature is a motif carried also by the *Sefer yetzirab*.¹⁴ Here it is not the dimension (*shi'ur*) of God that is unfathomable but rather the infinite possibility of combination. Indeed, such a conception will be explored later on in the medieval commentaries, mainly in the philosophical ones.

In *Sefer yetzirab* we find another concept of infinity, connected this time with the notion of the *sefirot*.¹⁵ While the notion of infinity can be found elsewhere, as we have seen, the notion of the *sefirot* is unique to *Sefer yetzirab*. Still, while the origin of the term *sefirot* in *Sefer yetzirab* has long been emphasized, the deep dependence of *Eyn-sof* on this classical text has been comparatively neglected. *Sefer yetzirab* is not merely another text to deploy *Eyn-sof* adverbially but is also the text to which the two key concepts of the theosophic Kabbalah, *sefirot* and *Eyn-sof*, can be traced for the first time. The particular connection between *Eyn-sof* and the *sefirot*, which is unique to *Sefer yetzirab*, will function as a textual trigger for the theosophic meaning that will accrue in the Middle Ages to both *Eyn-sof* and the *sefirot*.

To begin with, since *Eyn-sof* in *Sefer yetzirab* is a characteristic attributed to the *sefirot*, and considering the equivocal status of the *sefirot* in *Sefer*

13. For such a summary as well as a new analysis of the subject of *Shi'ur komab*, see Daniel Abrams, "The Dimensions of the Creator—Contradiction or Paradox? Corruptions and Accretions to the Manuscript Witnesses," *Kabbalah* 5 (2000): 35–53.

14. See Peter A. Hayman, *Sefer Yesira, Edition Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen, 2004), 134 (The Long Recension). For a similar passage in *Shi'ur komab*: "the circumference of his head is 2,000,033 and a third [parasangs], which is that which the mouth cannot utter and that which the ear cannot hear; its name is 'Atar Huriyah Ve'atasyah," Cohen, *Shi'ur Komab*, 180–81, lines 74–76 (and notes there). For other tannaitic references to a number that is so large that it cannot be uttered or heard, see bRosh 27a; bShav 20b; SifreNum 102.

15. On the concept of the *sefirot* in Kabbalah, see Scholem, *Origins*, 26–27. On the concept of the *sefirot* in *Sefer Yetzirab*, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo, with Special Emphasis on the Doctrine of Sefirot in his *Sefer Hakhmoni*," *Jewish History* 6 (1992): 286–87; Yehuda Liebes, *The Ars Poetica of the Sefer Yetzirab* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2001), 12–15, 23–31; Ronit Meroz, "Between *Sefer Yetzirab* and Wisdom Literature: Three Binitarian Approaches in *Sefer Yetzirab*," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6.18 (2007): 101–42.

yetzirah, *Eyn-sof* is apparently not equivalent to God himself.¹⁶ Thus we read:

Ten *sefirot* of Nothingness;¹⁷ their measure is ten for they have no end:¹⁸ dimension of beginning and dimension of end, dimension of good and dimension of evil, dimension of above and dimension of below, dimension of east and dimension of west, dimension of north and dimension of south. And the unique Lord, a trustworthy divine king, rules over them all from his holy abode for ever and ever. (chapter 5)

Ten *sefirot* of Nothingness. Their end is fixed in their beginning¹⁹ as a flame is bound to the burning coal. For the Lord is unique²⁰ and he has none second to him; and before one, what can you count? (chapter 6)²¹

16. The status of the *sefirot* in *Sefer yetzirah* is not quite clear. Actually, we don't know if they are part of the divine or only the principles active in the process of creation, although it is more likely that as principles and primordial numbers they are seen as differentiating from the divine. Liebes, *The Ars Poetica of the Sefer Yetzirah*, 12–15.

17. בלימה, Hayman translates here “The ten sefirot are the basis.” This notion has to be paralleled to mishnah 8 of the short version. On the different meanings of that term, see Liebes, *The Ars Poetica of the Sefer Yetzirah*, 55, 164.

18. Hebrew: עשר ספירות בלימה מרתן עשר שאין להם סוף. The long version and Saadya Gaon's version has: “And their measure is ten for they have no limit (אין להם סוף)” instead of “Ten sefirot of Nothingness (בלימה)”; see versions A and C: Hayman, *Sefer Yesira*, 74. “Their measure is ten for they have no limit” appears in mishnahs 4, 6, and 7 (see above quoted mishnahs 6 and 7) of the critical edition (Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 141–42; Hayman, *Sefer Yesira*, 69–71, 74–5). In the short edition of mishnah 4 and 8 the same sentence does not occur, whereas it occurs only in 5. It is important to quote also another expression of the same locution: “הכליתן אין להם סוף” (their finality has no end) in mishnah 6 of the short version (Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* 143, mishnah 8; Hayman, *Sefer Yesira*, 77–79).

19. The other versions add here: “and their beginning is in their end,” Hayman, *Sefer Yesira*, 77–79. In this image lies an alternative notion of infinity, a cyclic one, which is going to be developed as numerical infinite mainly in the philosophical commentaries.

20. See the addition in the other versions: “Know and ponder, and form (a mental image) that the Lord is unique and the Creator is one . . . ,” Hayman, *Sefer Yesira*, 77–79.

21. I followed the translation of Peter Hayman, with some changes: Hayman, *Sefer Yesira*, 76. I'm quoting from the short version, since this version was more common among the kabbalists; for a critical edition, see Itamar Gruenwald, “A Preliminary Critical Edition of *Sefer Yezira*,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971): 143 (mishnah 7).

We encounter here two main definitions: the *sefirot* of nothingness and the ten *sefirot* without end (*eyn labem sof*). Considering the enigmatic language of the text, these definitions are obviously not meant to be contradictory but rather have to be understood, from the point of view of *Sefer yetzirah*, as two similar descriptions of the *sefirot*. Nevertheless, this “nothingness” is different from the concept of infinite expansion, and these two concepts should be viewed as two primary vectors in the cosmological system of *Sefer yetzirah*. Indeed, one can see in the *sefirot* an infinite power of expansion, while the other underlines the power of annihilation, restraint, slowing down, and coming to a halt (which is another signification of *belimah*, from the root *b-l-m*).²² From this perspective, there is an inherent tension between God and the *sefirot*, in which the notion of *Eyn-sof* plays an important role. This tension is between God as center of the cosmos and his expansions into the different directions, called *sefirot*.²³ In that regard, *Eyn-sof* is a notion that depicts the power of the infinite expansion of the *sefirot*.²⁴ Therefore, on the one hand, we have the *sefirot* as extensions and as such infinite, and on the other, God at the center of

22. The dynamic that expresses the relation between God and the *sefirot* is, as Yehuda Liebes describes, the cornerstone of the process of creation in *Sefer yetzirah*. On the dynamic of expansion and annihilation, see Liebes, *The Ars Poetica of the Sefer Yetzirah*, 35–46, 167–89, 190–203; on the different significations of *b-l-m*: *ibid.* 55, 164. For a critic of Liebes’s book, see the review by Elliot R. Wolfson, “Text, Context, and Pretext: Review Essay of Yehuda Liebes’ *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetzirah*,” *Studia Philonica Annual Studies in Hellenistic Judaism* 16 (2004): 218–28.

23. It is noteworthy that the notion of infinite expansions is also at the center of a Judeo-Christian text, called Pseudo-Clementine, written at the beginning of the second century, which could have influenced or would have been influenced by *Sefer yetzirah*. This astonishing similarity between Pseudo-Clementine and *Sefer yetzirah* has been outlined by Shlomo Pines, in his essay “Points of Similarity between the Exposition of the Doctrine of the Sephirot in the Sepher Yetzirah and a Text of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies: The Implications of this Resemblance,” *Studies in the History of Jewish Thought* 5 (Jerusalem, 1997): 63–142. On the tension between the perfect and limited One and the infinite spatial expansions in early sources, see Pines, “Points of Similarity,” 73–87; Pines, “God, the Glory and the Angels in a Theological System of the Second Century BC” (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987): 1–6, 13. Respectively, it is also interesting to note later application of the infinite expansions conception, as found in Hasdai Crescas, where the influence of Kabbalah is seen in its conception of Infinity: Carlos Fraenkel, “God’s Existence and Attributes,” in *Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. S. Nadler and T. Rudavsky (Cambridge, 2009), 1:594–95; Zeev Harvey, “L’univers infini de Hasday Crescas,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (1998): 551–57.

24. On the concept of the *sefirot* as spatial expansion, see Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetzirah*, 13, n. 8.

creation, which reaffirms again and again the power of his unity versus the diversity implied by the ten *sefirot*, by the process of creation, and by the world itself.²⁵

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The first commentaries on *Sefer yetzirah* available to us are philosophical interpretations written from the tenth to twelfth centuries. In these commentaries, the paradigmatic opposition between the One standing at the center and the infinite extremities of the *Sefer yetzirah* finds its expression in an interesting numerical conception: the infinity of the *sefirot* is understood as the infinite numeric power. In this numerical concept, One is not a number but rather the immutable principle that is embodied in every number and which makes it possible to move from one number to another. The numerical extension departs from one, moving up to nine or ten. From there on, it returns to one and becomes ten (or eleven), which is the smallest unit of unity in diversity. From there, it continues to twenty and to a hundred and so on. In such a scheme, ten is seen as the arithmetic basis for the infinite capacity of repeated counting. Since there are no numbers bigger than ten without returning to one, it is therefore the smallest unit of unity in the multiplicity; it is the principle of unity acting in the multiplicity. The first expansion is therefore from one to nine (or ten), and then returning to one to form the unity of the next numerical expansion and repeating this ad infinitum.²⁶

25. We can see here an antagonism between the One and the multiple represented by the infinite power of the *sefirot*.

26. This notion, based on the repetition of a fragment of ten or nine, can be found in most of the philosophical commentaries on *Sefer yetzirah* (with the exception of Shabbetai Donnolo). For references to this numerical concept: *The Commentary of Sefer Yetzirah by Yehuda Barceloni* (Hebrew; Berlin, 1885), 140, 144, 164; *Sefer Yetzirah with Commentary of Saadya Gaon*, ed. Y. Kapaḥ (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1972), 90; *Sefer Yetzirah with Dunas ben Tamim Commentary*, ed. M. Grasberg (Hebrew; London, 1802), 24–25. Cf. Paul Fenton, “New Fragments of the Hebrew Version of Dunas ben Tamim Commentary’s on the Sefer Yetsirah,” *Aley Sefer* 15 (1988–89): 55; George Vajda, *Le commentaire sur le livre de la Création de Dunas ben Tamim de Kairouan (Xe siècle)*, ed. P. Fenton (Paris, 2002), 52–56; Vajda, “Elhanan ben Yakar’s Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah,” *Kovez al yaḏ* 16 (1966): 147–97; Elhanan ben Yakar, “The Book of Secret of Secrets,” in *Texts in the Concept of the Divine of Haside Ashkenaz*, ed. J. Dan (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1977), 9–10; Abraham ibn Ezra, *Commentary on the Torah (Ex 3.15)*. See as well on this numerical theory: Maurice Olitzki, “Die Zahlensymbolik des Abraham ibn Esra,” *Jubelchrift zum 70 Geburtstag des Israél Hildesheimer* (Berlin, 1890), 99–104; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia, Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy and Theurgy*, (Los Angeles, 2000), 83, n. 264; Raphael R. Jospe, “Early Philosophical Commentaries on the Sefer Yezirah,” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 149 (1990): 369–415.

This numerical infinite based on repetition gives an interpretation of the infinite expansion of the *sefirot* in *Sefer yetzirah* as opposing the One at the center, although the notion of repetition in a way reduces the notion of infinity to a potential numerical expansion. The position of *Sefer yetzirah* in contrasting the One with the multiple is even more acute in Saadya Gaon's commentary. The concept that sees infinity alongside the category of plurality is emphasized in his commentary, with the notion of infinite said to be human rather than divine:

. . . As for his establishing a correspondence (muwāzāt) between these Ten and Ten Things that have no end (nihāya), he intended [to show] thereby that, whereas from the human [point of view] there is no end to what may be put together from the numbers by themselves, they are finite (tatanāhā) from the Creator's [point of view]. Thus, we do not know the end (nihāya) of the First and Last of Time, whereas He knows; we [cannot] reach the end of the six directions, Height and Lowness, East and West, North and South, whereas He knows this. Nor can we define with regard to everything the ultimate in Beneficence and Badness, whereas He does define them. Accordingly, these ten things have no end [from the point of view] of the created beings, but have an end [from the point of view] of their Creator.²⁷

The One, as in the Neoplatonic tradition, is said to be unchangeable, absolute simplicity. Thus, the reason why *Eyn-sof* is not a notion that would easily represent God's essence is understandable. Indeed, the relation between the One and the infinite has been problematic throughout the history of Western philosophy.²⁸ To attribute to the One the characteristics of the Infinite makes sense since it only increases its perfection,²⁹

27. *Sefer Yetzirah with Commentary of Saadya Gaon*, 54–5. I follow here the translation of this passage in Pines, "Points of Similarity," 117.

28. In Greek philosophy, *apeiron* was first related to the power of the matter, its amorphousness and power of taking any form. This versatility was understood as an imperfection and as such as unsuitable to the notion of One. Leo Sweeney, *Divine Infinity in Greek and Medieval Thought* (New York, 1992); Haggai Ben-Shammai, "Saadya's Goal in His Commentary on Sefer Yezira," in *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture: Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, ed. R. Link-Salinger and J. Hackett (Washington D.C, 1988), 7.

29. Another example of the One as the main notion to which infinity has been subordinate can be found in the introduction of the commentary of Yehuda Barceloni on *Sefer yetzirah*: "Blessed be God, God of Israel, One and unified in all his ways . . . One, unique who has no other . . . One that is not in number and not in likeness nor image, One without beginning nor end . . . and he has no end nor finality, nor limit, the first without beginning and the last without end, blessed be

although something in the notion of infinity seems to oppose the very notion of the One. We find an echo of this conflict in Saadya's concept of infinity. Therefore, his model of infinity evades the problem created by the possibility of infinite expansion. To that extent, the infinite expansion is interpreted as a cyclic infinite, which is contradictory to the idea of infinite expansion. The ten *sefirot* that have no end are understood according to the second concept of the *sefirot*: ten *sefirot belimah*,³⁰ and subordinated to their numeric restraint (that is, their finitude).³¹ In a way, the concept of infinite replication of the same segment offers an answer to the problematic definition of *Eyn-sof* in *Sefer yetzirah*. The infinite is no longer a wild expansion with all the dangers that this presents but rather infinite possibilities of combination. The fact that the numerical concept of infinity is a concept of an infinite number of possibilities of combination shows that it is based on a concept of limitation rather than of limitlessness. We find ourselves far from the other concept of infinite expansions as found in the *Sefer yetzirah* and later adopted by theosophical commentators. Therefore, we need to see that the prevalent model in Saadya's concept is a finite one, as is his model of God's perfection.³² Interestingly enough, the other alternative regarding the infinity of the *sefirot* in the *Sefer yetzirah* as expressing an infinite expansion reverberates in Barceloni's commentary, where it is presented as an "another explanation".³³

he, and blessed be his name for eternity," *Commentary of Sefer Yetzirah by Yebuda Barceloni*, 1.

30. The conflict between the two concepts of the *sefirot* (limited and unlimited) echoes in a passage of Dunash ibn Tamim's commentary, in which he clearly opposes Saadya's interpretation of *belimah* as restriction: "How right is Sefer Yetzirah when he comments that the ten sefirot of Nothingness (*belimah*) . . . but he who interprets '*belimah*' as restraint is wrong. Abraham our father blessed be his memory was right when he said that nothing is understandable but only to the unique master, God, faithful king who governs his world from his sainted palace, for eternity," Vajda, *Le commentaire sur le livre de la Création*, 222. For the different sense given by Saadya Gaon, see next note.

31. Another proof of the prevalence of the One-limited on the Plurality-unlimited in Saadya Gaon's philosophy is his translation of two different notions from *Sefer yetzirah*: עומק (deep) and קץ (end), using the same Judeo-Arabic word (נהאיה). See the remarks of Joseph Kapar: *Sefer Yetzirah with Commentary of Saadya Gaon*, 51, n. 65; Pines, "Points of Similarity," 116; Tony Levy, *Figures de l'infini: Les mathématiques au miroir des cultures* (Paris, 1987), 173–77, 183.

32. To this extent it is quite ironic that the so-called paraphrase of Saadya's "Book of Beliefs and Opinions," which was so influential in the Middle Ages, promulgated a notion of infinite expansion. I think that this stance contradicts Saadya's commentary on *Sefer yetzirah* and thus should be regarded as a late addition. See, on this question, Scholem, *Origins*, 266.

33. If this other concept, as it is usually the case, is not shared by the author, we might see here a proof of his allegiance to Saadya's concept.

Ten *sefirot belimah* their measure is ten and they are endless, etc. Some commentaries say that God had created ten single things paralleling these ten *sefirot*, and these ten single things, their measure is ten without end. The explanation for “their measure” is measurement; meaning the measurement of those ten things is endless and these are the depth of beginning and the depth of end; and the meaning of “Depth” is that no one can delve into and understand what it is.³⁴

The concept of infinite expansion will take a clear theosophic turn in R. Shabbatai Donnolo’s commentary. In an important article, Elliot Wolfson has shown that Donnolo’s concept of the *sefirot* is to be understood as theosophic, since he sees the *sefirot* as part of the divine.³⁵ It must be noticed that the divine status of the *sefirot* derives from their infinite status, and thus we read in his commentary:

This is the import of what is written, “They have no end.” This instructs us that there is no sage in the world who can know, comprehend and penetrate the knowledge of God, to discover the end and to reach the limit of these ten profound [impenetrable] *sefirot*. If a sage pursues them and seeks in his mind all the days of the world to comprehend them, it will not amount to anything. For a person cannot delve with his mind to pursue in order to know these ten things which are infinitely and endlessly deep.³⁶

Donnolo explains the concept of infinite expansion of the *sefirot* by reinforcing their definition as infinite depths. Nevertheless, a shift occurs in the understanding of the depths, and from a spatial dimension it now becomes an epistemological dimension. The infinity here is understood

34. *The Commentary of Sefer Yetzirah by Yebuda Barceloni*, 148. The clear mention of two sets of *sefirot* is understood as one set being apparently finite, and referring to another set which is infinite, i.e., beyond understanding. On the two sets of *sefirot* in early Kabbalah, see Moshe Idel, “The Sefirot above the Sefirot” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 51 (1982): 239–80.

35. Here Wolfson has shown that the commentary of Donnolo has to be counted as one of the earliest if not the earliest testimony of the theosophic concept of the *sefirot* which will, some two hundred years later, stand at the core of the theosophic Kabbalah. He wrote: “It can be shown, moreover, that for Donnolo this *demut*, or the upper aspect of the glory, is the boundless and limitless light that contains, embraces, or encompasses the ten sefirot,” “The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo,” 294.

36. Shabbetai Donnolo, *Sefer Hakhmoni*, ed. D. Castelli (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1994), 35–36. I have followed Wolfson’s translation: “The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo,” 299.

as the impenetrability of the depth and, as such, takes the form of an epistemological limitation. It is important to note that this crucial aspect of the notion of infinity was also found in the commentary quoted by Yehuda Barceloni: “the meaning of ‘Depth’ is that no one can delve into and understand what it is.” Both explanations connect the *sefirot* without end and the ten depths (*amakin*) in *Sefer yetzirah*. The almost invisible line that separates the two meanings of infinity (epistemological and ontological) is inherent to the ambivalent character of the notion of infinity. This is not the case with Saadya Gaon, who drew a clear line between the limits of human knowledge (the epistemological infinite) and the truly perfect though finite God. Whereas for Saadya the infinity of the *sefirot* is only the sign of an epistemological limit, in Donnolo’s commentary and in the quote by Barceloni, the limits of human knowledge are the sign of the infinite status of the *sefirot*. Moreover, for Donnolo, the essential unknowability of the *sefirot* is a sign of their divine nature.

Two generations later, another hint at a theosophical concept of the *sefirot* can be seen in the work of Shlomo ibn Gabirol (d. ca. 1058).³⁷ It has been suggested that he may be echoing a concept bearing a far more substantial approach to the *sefirot*, one that was criticized by Saadya a century earlier.³⁸ Gabirol indeed alludes that by means of the *sefirot* it is possible to contemplate God:

[God] has craved the trustee’s advice; a band of ten *sefirot* he planned to reveal. He wrote facing them ten in *Eyn-sof*; and five in five in accor-

37. Different scholars have pointed out the importance of ibn Gabirol a possible source for the Neoplatonic influences on Kabbalah: Gershom Scholem, “Following the Trace of ibn Gabirol” (Hebrew), *Studies in Kabbalah* 1 (1998): 39–64; Shlomo Pines, “‘Ve-karah el ha-ayn ve-nikva’: Research on Shlomo ibn Gabirol’s Keter Malkhout” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 50 (1981): 339–47; Yehuda Liebes, “Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol’s Use of the Sefer Yetzirah and a Commentary on ‘I Love Thee’” (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987): 73–123; Liebes, “The Platonic Source for the Philosophical Riddle and for the Way It Is Used in ibn Gabirol’s Poem ‘I Love You,’” <http://pluto.huji.ac.il/~liebes/zohar/research.html>; Idel, “On the Doctrine of the Divinity in the Early Kabbalah,” 141–4; Idel, “On Binary ‘Beginnings’ in Kabbalah Scholarship,” 322, n. 22; Jacques Shlanger “Sur le rôle du tout dans la création selon ibn Gabirol,” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 126 (1964): 125–35. For an analysis of the position that opts for a “kabbalistic” reading of ibn Gabirol and its critics, see Liebes, “Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol’s Use of the Sefer Yetzirah,” 79–80.

38. On more mythical and mystical commentaries opposed by the philosophical approach of Saadya Gaon, see Ben-Shammai, “Saadya’s Goal in his Commentary on Sefer Yezira,” 1–9 (esp. 6–8).

dance. (He who) understands their secret will be frightened and scared; from them he will study that the creator is one.³⁹

In fact, we might have here one of the earliest occurrence of *Eyn-sof* not as an adjective but as a noun, one that precedes theosophic Kabbalah. This understanding of Gabirol's concept of the *sefirot* is still open to scholarly debate.⁴⁰ From our point of inquiry, what matters is that whatever Gabirol's position was, it is sufficient that such a reading was available to kabbalists. Furthermore, if indeed ibn Gabirol's concept of the *sefirot* is to be understood as theosophical, it will be due to a genuine understanding of *sefirot* as infinite.⁴¹

It should be stressed that the numerical infinite gives an alternative to the possibility of an infinite divine concept, but once the infinite expansion of the *sefirot* has been reconfirmed, the identification between *sefirot* and *Eyn-sof* has reinforced the divine status of the *sefirot*. This points to a shift from a description of *Eyn-sof* as an infinite space in *Sefer yetzirah* to an infinite divine space. This shift—clearly stressed in Donnolo's commentary and in the commentary quoted by Barceloni and perhaps also by ibn Gabirol—would become the focus of the study of the theosophic Kabbalah at the end of the twelfth century.⁴²

39. *Shire kodesh le Rabbi Shlomo ibn Gabirol*, ed. D. Yarden (Jerusalem, 1981), 1:9. See on this passage Idel, "The Sefirot above the Sefirot," 278; Pines, "Points of Similarity," 122–26; Raphael R. Jospe, "Early Philosophical Commentaries on the Sefer Yezirah," *Revue des Études Juives* 149 (1990): 390–92.

40. Yehuda Liebes does not accept the reading of Pines and Idel of Gabirol's concept of the *sefirot* and argues in favor of a concept closer to that of Saadya Gaon. For that argument (*sefirot* as primordial numbers), see *Fons Vitae*, 2, 21; on this passage, see Liebes, "Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol's Use of the Sefer Yetzirah," 78–79. For other consideration on the notion of infinity in *Fons Vitae*, see chap. 1. 5. I tend to agree with Idel and Pines that *be-Eyn-sof* (בְּעֵינֵי סוֹף) is more likely to express a substantive aspect of *Eyn-sof*. However, what I have intended to outline in this research is that the distinction first made by Scholem between adverb and noun is not so accurate anymore: it fails to explain the beginnings of theosophic Kabbalah, not only because a substantial concept of *Eyn-sof* can be found in earlier sources and also in the adverbial form but because the distinction between adverb and nominative forms is not representative of the formation of theosophic Kabbalah. Moreover, it fails to reflect the principal shift that occurred to the notion of expansional infinity of the *sefirot*.

41. Thus, it seems to me far more important that where *Eyn-sof* and the *sefirot* are possibly connected, a reading of the *sefirot* as divine on one hand and of an ontological infinite on the other is made possible.

42. I have put aside in this essay the important Haside Ashkenaz mystical trend, in which important theosophic concepts can be found, and have decided to focus on the sefirotic Kabbalah, which held a different sefirotic tradition. On

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Whereas the shift from an infinite space to an infinite divine space was only alluded to in the sources analyzed above, the interconnection between the epistemological and ontological infinite will lie at the basis of the new theosophic system. I turn now to the earliest theosophical commentaries and will present examples of the development of two inseparable notions: *Eyn-sof* and the *sefirot*, which serve as the basis of a new theosophical language.

The book of the Bahir, usually viewed as a prototext of theosophic Kabbalah, written in the late twelfth century in Southern France by an anonymous author, expresses an important aspect that will become central and paradigmatic to the theosophical way of thinking. Reflecting on the *Sefer yetzirah*, we find there a reference to the infinite expansion of spatial dimensions.⁴³ In another passage we read:

The Aleph looks like the brain, when you mention the Aleph, you open your mouth. The same is true of thought, when you extend your thoughts to the Infinite and the Boundless. From Aleph emanate all letters.⁴⁴

Indeed, the same expression of extension of thought until *Eyn-sof*⁴⁵ can be found in the commentary of *Sefer yetzirah* written by R. Isaac the Blind

the theosophical concept of Haside Ashkenaz, see Scholem, *Origins*, 184–87; Joseph Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1968), 119–29; Idel, *Kabbalah*, 193–96.

43. “The Blessed Holy One has a Single Tree, and it has twelve diagonal boundaries . . . They continually spread forever and ever; They are the ‘arms of the world’,” *The Babir, An Ancient Kabbalistic Text Attributed to Rabbi Nebuniah ben Ha-Kana*, trans. A. Kaplan (New York, 1979), 34, §95. For the critical edition, see Daniel Abrams, *The Book Babir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts* (Hebrew; Los Angeles, 1994), 155–57, §63. It is important to point out that the term is “forever and ever” (עד עדי עד) and not “without end” (אין סוף). It is apparently a paraphrase of the infinite expansion of the ten depths of *Sefer yetzirah*.

44. Kaplan, *The Babir*, 25, §70; Abrams, *The Book Babir*, 145, §48. See another related passage: “Is it then the seventh? . . . And what is it? It is thought that does not have any end or boundary. This place likewise does not have any end or boundary,” Kaplan, *The Babir*, 56, §154; Abrams, *The Book Babir*, 187, §103. For a presentation of the different commentaries known in the second half of the thirteenth century, see Moshe Idel, “*Sefer Yetzirah*: Twelve Commentaries on *Sefer Yetzirah* and the Extant Remnants of R. Isaac of Bedresh’s Commentary” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 79 (2012): 471–556.

45. The parallels between the *Book Babir* and Isaac the Blind might be accounted for by later Provençal interpolations in the *Bahir*. For an updated discussion on the origin and editions of the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, see Ronit Meroz, “A

(Isaac Sagi Nahor), a major figure in the transmission of esoteric lore. At the very beginning of his commentary, we read as follows:

In thirty-two: The letter *bet* is an allusion to *Hokhmah* (wisdom) and *Haakbel* (the intelligence) and it alludes to all that the apprehension of the thought apprehends unto *Eyn sof*, and all the more what is included within itself . . . Every word that begins with a *bet* indicates both itself and what is within. So too, *bet* in thirty-two, in which he engraved, meaning: that which thought does not apprehend.⁴⁶

First, it is interesting to note the unique interconnection of epistemological inquiry and cosmological expansion in the way both texts address the notion of infinity. *Eyn-sof* appears first here to set the limits of the inquiry of thought but could as well be understood as the infinite dimension of the thought. Understanding exactly the status of the “thought” is rather difficult considering the enigmatic style of R. Isaac the Blind. The ambiguity between two different ways to understand thought, as being either human or divine, is part of the process of psychologization of the divine, which is so characteristic of the theosophic structure. At this very point, one can sense the fusion between the epistemological approach and the cosmological one inspired by the words of *Sefer yetzirah* and *Sefer ha-bahir*. It is important to take note of two major transformations: the first a move from cosmological expansion toward psychological expansion, whereas the second is a shift from human limitation to the divine realm.

As in the previous sources, in Isaac’s commentary, *Eyn-sof* can be understood in its adverbial form; nevertheless, since the idiom doesn’t apply only to the *sefirot*, it can be understood as a proper noun as well, and therefore both significations are available: “to infinity” and “to the infinite.” However, before we can even point out a kabbalistic invention that is named *Eyn-sof*, we should consider a preliminary step, namely, the shift from divine cosmological dimensions to the theosophic dimension. The fact that the latter has been characterized by its infinity is reflected

Journey of Initiation in the Babylonian Layer of Sefer ha-Bahir,” *Studia Hebraica* 7 (2007): 17–33.

46. Marc B. Sendor, “The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind’s Commentary on Sefer Yezirah, Translation and Annotation” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1994), 2:1–2. For a detailed analysis of the mystical conceptions of the earliest kabbalists, and mainly the school of R. Isaac, see Haviva Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind: A Comparative Study in the Writings of the Earliest Kabbalist* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2001), esp. 73–102.

as well in the way R. Isaac interprets the numerical concept of infinity in terms of expansion:

The things have dimensions and measure, but the thought has no measure, so they proceed ten by ten. Therefore, from the subtle come the inscribed, for ten come from ten, subtle ones from the innerness of the subtle ones.⁴⁷

Limitation is here not only characteristic of human realm but extends to some *sefirot* as well. The tension between limited things and unlimited thought has been resolved by means of a suggested infinite possibility of upward ascension: ten by ten. The twist given to the numerical conception is emblematic of theosophic structure. While comparing the numerical infinite found in the philosophical commentaries, two fundamental changes should be noticed. First, ten is the unity here and not One. Secondly, this very numerical principle (ten by ten) comes to describe the infinite numerical power, a vertical ascension expanding infinitely toward the Infinite.

Without entering the complex question as to the nature of the *sefirot* and the *havayot* (essences), it is my purpose to stress the different expression given to the relationship between the finite and the infinite. Two different concepts of the *sefirot* are intertwined. According to one, their dimensions are finite, while according to the other, they are infinite, since their roots never end and they are beyond all apprehension.⁴⁸ “Ten by ten”⁴⁹ refers to gradation of different levels, and the very idea of gradation implies continuation, even though we are talking about opposites: finite and infinite. The Neoplatonic⁵⁰ structure of gradation that has been

47. Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind*, 36–37.

48. “For those dimensions which have been mentioned are all in ‘Ein Sof. In our language there are only the headings of the dimensions,” Sender, “The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 2:46.

49. “ten by ten” refers to a double structure of the *sefirot*, one inner to the other, and to a theory stressing that *Eyn-sof* encompasses ten hidden *sefirot*. Idel, “The Sefirot above the Sefirot” (more specifically about Isaac the Blind, 240–41).

50. The chain of degrees that is suggested here in the adoption of the vertical elevation is strongly Neoplatonic. The multiplicity of essences in *Eyn-sof* contradicts the philosophical principle of simplicity and of unity. On the Neoplatonic influences on R. Isaac the Blind, see Sender, “The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 2:37, n. 95; 1:117–29. On the similarity between the infinite essences (הוויית שאין להן סוף) of R. Isaac the Blind and the first cause of Eriugena, see Idel, “The Sefirot above the Sefirot,” 267–68; Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, “L’influence de Jean Scot sur la doctrine du Kabbaliste Azriel de Gérone,” in *Jean Scot Erigène et l’histoire de la philosophie* (Paris, 1977), 453–63.

adopted here, which lies at the very core of the shift from multidirectional infinite expansion to a unilateral direction, is also a way to connect different levels to each other.⁵¹ Thus, the different degrees are also ascensional degrees for those who seek to connect to *Eyn-sof*. It is impossible for the worshiper to reach *Eyn-sof* directly, unless his prayers are mediated.⁵² While dimensions in their finite expression are ways to comprehend, the infinite chain of their interconnection is there to outline another kind of connection to *Eyn-sof*, by way of suckling rather than that of knowledge.⁵³ The special status of the dimensions is honed by R. Isaac while making a distinction between dimensions and limits:

Their limit (*takblitan*) is not like their dimension (*midatan*). A dimension is something received by separate things, for the prophets saw dimensions according to their apprehension, and by virtue of receiving their power, they expanded their consciousness more than other human beings, for they gained by this a breadth of soul to extend to particulars within 'Ein Sof. But their limit is the limit of their investigation. For every dimension has a limit and every finite thing has an end,

51. "Their measure is ten. Everything is a dimension and what is above it is its filling, for dimension is a power which is emanated from the dimension of the measurer, the essentiality of dimension and the emanation of essence in 'Eyn-sof," Sender, "The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah," 43–45. It is of some interest to mention that the distinction between the measurer (מִדְדֵד) and its measure (מִדָּה) recalls some commentaries on the *Shi'ur komah* distinguishing between the two words (שִׁעוּר and קוֹמָה) and seeing in "קִרְ הַמִּדָּה" the action of God. See on this question Yehuda Liebes, "Chapters in the Dictionary of the Book of the Zohar" (Hebrew; Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1976), 146.

52. "All the awesome dimensions are given to comprehend, for every dimension is from a dimension that is above it, and they are given to Israel to comprehend, from the dimension that appears in the heart, to comprehend unto 'Eyn-sof. For, there is no way to pray other than by the finite things a person receives and elevates in thought unto 'Eyn-sof," Sender, "The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah," 74–75.

53. "The pathways are sources of the byways: for pathway is the 'source of a byway' (Ezek 21.26). The pathway is a generality and a principle, for the byways disperse and separate and spread out from there. The pathways of the wonders are like veins within the stock of a tree, and hochmah is the root. They are inner and subtle essences, which no creature can contemplate except that which suckles from it, a mode of contemplation by way of suckling, not by way of knowing," Sender, "The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah," 10–13. On the two ways of contemplation, see Idel, "The Sefirot above the Sefirot," 241. On suckling as the only way to connect to the *Ayn*, see Daniel Matt, "Ayn: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness, Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. R. Forman (New York, 1990), 135–36, nn. 74, 75.

like that which is written “for all finite things I have seen an end” but “Your commandment” even though its beginning has a limit, continually expands “exceedingly” (Ps. 119:96) unto 'Ein Sof. While everything that perishes has a limit, “your commandment” cannot be apprehended by man to the utmost degree of apprehension, for a man grasps nothing but the headings of the dimensions.⁵⁴

Despite the fact that in *Sefer yetzirah* both terms “limit” and “dimension” express the infinity of the *sefirot*, R. Isaac stresses the difference—distinguishing ordinary knowledge and the knowledge of the prophets. The prophet can connect to *Eyn-sof* through the dimensions that have been revealed to him: the way of prophecy is the way of widening the path, toward infinity. These dimensions may be limited at their start but are unlimited in their expansion toward their origin (*Eyn-sof*). Interestingly enough, there is an overlap between the wideness of the prophetic path and the ascension on high.⁵⁵ In other words, the connection between finite and infinite is made possible by means of upward ascension, toward *Eyn-sof*. Not only does the path bring one closer to *Eyn-sof* but it also widens the consciousness of the prophet/worshiper.

This new theosophic space, created by the shift of the infinite expansions of *Sefer yetzirah* toward an expansion to *Eyn-sof*, finds its expression indeed in a new kabbalistic terminology that binds together the notion of *Eyn-sof* with that of emanation. The very beginning of the theosophic concept of infinity is first of all the conversion of infinite cosmological dimensions into a system of emanations, and thus into an infinite expansion. This is well illustrated with the idiom “infinite effluence” (*meshekb Eyn-sof*) that is found in the writings of R. Isaac the Blind and his nephew R. Asher ben David,⁵⁶ and from here on becomes a common denomina-

54. Sendor, “The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 61–62.

55. This notion of a broad path fits another description given by R. Isaac of the path (נהיב) as being the head of the road (רדר): Sendor, “The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 11–22, and n. 29. As Sendor notes, the difference on this matter between R. Isaac’s commentary and Nachmanides’ commentary is noteworthy and had been noticed by R. Isaac of Acre as well. Gershom Scholem, “Isaac of Achre’s Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah” (Hebrew), *Kiryat Sefer* 31 (1956): 383. Nachmanides understood the head of the road, שביב, in an opposite way, to be narrower and hidden from perception (Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah*, 1, 88).

56. Here are some major uses of this expression by R. Asher ben David: “the effluence expanded from Eyn-sof,” Daniel Abrams, *R. Asher ben David, His Complete Works and Studies in his Kabbalistic Thought* (Hebrew; Los Angeles, 1996), 102; “the effluence drawn into them from Eyn-sof,” *ibid.*, 103; “the expansion of

tion for emanation.⁵⁷ R. Asher ben David is an important link in the transmission of Provençal Kabbalah to Spain and played a key role in the changes undergone by the esoteric tradition as it moved from esoteric to exoteric lore.

In the writings of R. Asher ben David, the ambiguity in the use of the term *Eyn-sof* is still a common feature, as in the case of R. Isaac the Blind. The ambiguity that lies in the preposition “ad” (to/until) is reflected here in *Eyn-sof*’s relation to emanation.⁵⁸ Therefore, it is important to stress that *Eyn-sof*, especially together with the description of infinite effluence, means the origin of the emanation but also the infinite essence of that expanse.⁵⁹ Thus, emanation expresses an ontological continuity from the

the spirit in them coming from Eyn-sof,” *ibid.*, 65; “the effluence of the benediction coming from Eyn-sof,” *ibid.*, 105; “the will that expands from Eyn-sof continually without interruption since it is the line in the middle,” *ibid.*, 64; and on the continuity of the infinite efflux that never stops, *ibid.*, 111. In these examples and some others the notion of efflux is related to the middle way or the middle line: “*Vav* is a sign of the thirteen attributes *Vav* here and *Vav* there and *Aleph* in the middle, this is the line in the middle and the house of the word to come, and it supports everything, since the efflux that expands in it (is) from Eyn-sof and that is why He and His name are one,” *ibid.*, 104.

57. This term (משך, המשכה, משיכה) can be translated differently: ‘thread,’ ‘extension,’ ‘attraction,’ or ‘continuum.’ It appears even previously to this in Shlomo ibn Gabirol’s poem “A Crown for a King” (8, l. 83): “He drew the effluence of Being from Naught, as a ray of light breaks forth from the eye” (למשך משך היש), in Scholem, *Origins*, 313, n. 232; Liebes, “Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol’s Use of the Sefer Yetzirah and a Commentary on ‘I Love Thee,’” 87–89.

58. In some descriptions, the effluence although emanating from *Eyn-sof*, stands for a name for *Keter*, the first *sefirah*: “Aleph is the first Sefirah (*keter*) that established everything as One (אחד) in his primordial will and since it is the source of the benediction and the effluence that expands (המשך הנמשך) from it, as the spring that irrigate all the garden,” Abrams, *R. Asher ben David*, 104; “and this *sefirah*, that is called God’s living spirit, corresponds to the effluence that expands (המשך הנמשך) in it from the source Aleph, [this] teaches us about the unity that is comprised in the One and that is unified in it, about all the forces that are in it in all the paths and in all the inscriptions that are in it, and through that same effluence that comes from Aleph without cessation. This *sefirah* is called One and is the beginning of the existence and the One that brings [into existence] is called the principle of all principles the cause of all causes. For that, it is said ‘Bless and blessed is his name’ since all that comes after him is called (after) the name (that is) above him and this until the end of the *sefirot* and that is enough for any scholar to understand,” *ibid.*, 106.

59. The nature of the *sefirot*—i.e., their infinite origin and/or essence—is directly connected to another question: whether the *sefirot* are the essence or vessels (of God). This question has been discussed by scholars. For Gershom Scho-

source (from now on called *Eyn-sof*) to the world. This characteristic defines the very heart of the theosophic ontology, which differs in many ways from the Neoplatonic philosophy and from classical theology. The concept of God as an infinite essence, together with the concept of different stages of emanation, and the concept of the *sefirot* as inner to the Godhead, demands an integrative model: a model that would match the peculiar theosophic dynamic that deals with unity and multiplicity together.⁶⁰ This challenge can be sensed in the words of the introduction by R. Asher ben David, while explaining the purpose of his book:

I, Asher ben David ben Abraham ben David . . . wish to seek after the thirteen dimensions (*miḏot*) to understand and comprehend and know about the hearsay that is heard that they are called dimensions and whether they are limited and separated or whether they are united and unified in the cause of the causes and if so in what manner are they being called dimensions and how are they related to his grand name to be named so. Thus it makes sense that since they are called his dimensions, then they are dimensions without dimensions,⁶¹ without end nor limit (= aim, *be-Eyn-sof ve-tekkilah*) and without separation, Sublime and Elevate. And they are called dimensions not regarding themselves but rather regarding what reaches us in the dimension that we need through them as I have explained.⁶²

lem and Efraim Gottlieb, Isaac the Blind held a concept of *sefirot* as essence while his students held a concept of vessels: Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 101–2; Scholem, *Kabbalah in Provence*, 83–84; Efraim Gottlieb, *Researches in Kabbalistic Literature* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1976), 115–30. Recent scholarship tends to find in R. Isaac the Blind and R. Asher a concept of the *sefirot* both as essence and as vessels: Idel, *Kabbalah*, 137–41; Sendor, “The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 1:303–7. Abrams, *R. Asher ben David*, 25–27.

60. According to Dauber, R. Asher ben David’s conception is similar to the philosophical conception of simple divine unity, thus distinguishing him from R. Azriel on that question.

61. For a similar formulation: “They are not separated or limited dimensions from the side of their beginning; since they are dimensions without dimensions, without end and beginning. They are not called dimensions from their side but rather from our side,” Abrams, *R. Asher ben David*, 66. On the infinite *sefirot* from the aspect of their beginning, see also Abrams, *R. Asher ben David*, 107. For an even more straightforward position: “How is it possible to give them limited dimensions while they are connected to the principle of principles to the cause of the causes. Really, every limited has an extremity and an end and every form has a body and every limited and everything that is connected will be separated,” Abrams, *R. Asher ben David*, 109.

62. Abrams, *R. Asher ben David*, 118.

R. Asher ben David addresses the kabbalistic lore as an advocate trying to answer probing theological questions.⁶³ The question that he is trying to answer inquires into the concept of the plurality of God's dimensions, bearing in mind the challenge that it poses to the concept of God's unity. He describes therefore a twofold reality. When representing God's actions, the dimensions (*midot*) of God are named after him; but in regard to their actions, they are named after the action itself.⁶⁴ Although the vocabulary and the way of thinking seem to follow philosophical rhetoric, the fact that these dimensions reflect God's essence does not permit them to be understood as simple attributes following the philosophical terminology.

The infinite axis that structures the theosophic realm bridges the gap between the upper world and the lower one and is thus dually orientated: up and down. The *sefirot*, the *havayot*, are said to be infinite in regard to their source and finite toward their application and action in the world.

The theological answer given will serve as a major model in theosophic Kabbalah and can be viewed as a process of unification. Different images will be given to this special feature of the sefirotic system. The *sefirot* are like a bunch of grapes, which are all connected together, or like the different parts of the tree⁶⁵ or like the branches of the menorah, all of which are connected at the base.⁶⁶ To be unified is synonymous with infinity, and to be separated is synonymous with being finite.

it is not possible to have in him a measured and limited dimension since he is one and he is unified in all of them and he acts in all of them as in one, or he acts in one of them and encompass in it all of them . . . because every dimension and dimension is encompassed in the other

63. Jonathan Dauber, "Pure Thought in R. Abraham bar Hiyya and Early Kabbalah," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 60 (2009): 185–201; Dauber, "Competitive Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah," in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism*, ed. J. T. Robinson (Leiden, 2009), 57–88.

64. "His force, as it has been seen by the patriarchs, conforming to their actions and the extension in them (actions) of the spirit that comes from Eyn-sof, have been named by His names and they are the dimensions and plantations of God Bless be He. His influence is Glory in them and He acts through them as He wishes. For that reason, we unified Him in the verse: Listen Israel is One," Abrams, *R. Asher ben David*, 65.

65. The image of the tree is a common one used to express the unity of different entities; see, for example, Abrams, *R. Asher ben David*, 52; Scholem, *Kabbalah in Provence*, 9; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (Albany, N.Y., 1995), 63–88.

66. On the image of grapes and menorah: Abrams, *R. Asher ben David*, 102.

and he acts in all of them, as we wrote. And there is no separation between them and no division among them in their actions—everything is as I have explained.⁶⁷

From here on, both—finite and infinite—represent the two extremities: the upper and the lower one, but they also express two different states: connected or separated to *Eyn-sof*. Since *Eyn-sof* is in every dimension, they cannot be limited. The mere fact that the *sefirot* belong to *Eyn-sof* is expressed in the idea of infinite expansion that is in fact a model of unification. There is one force that expands in each one, connects and unifies them all. With this in mind, it is important to sense that the theosophic model of unification is very different from the model of *coincidentia oppositorum*,⁶⁸ in which unification signifies the total annihilation of all differences.⁶⁹ Indeed, the theosophic model demonstrated here shows a more tempered notion of unification that assembles different instances together: the totality that is represented here could be compared to a puzzle in which all the parts fit together. From this perspective, it is better understood why the ontological incompatibility of the finite and the infinite does not seem to be irreducible. *Eyn-sof* is the key to this new theosophical concept of unity. In fact, another major shift needs to be pointed out. In most of the theosophic systems, *Eyn-sof* is not a characteristic attendant to the One, as is usually the case in philosophical systems, but rather the very concept on which the theosophical notion of unity and of unification rest. This enables the consideration of a dynamic unification that permits plurality in the divine world.

67. Abrams, *R. Asher ben David*, 119.

68. On this concept in R. Azriel of Gerona's thought: Scholem, *Origins*, 312, 439–40; on the *coincidentia oppositorum* as mystical concept in Judaism, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia, Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy and Theurgy* (Los Angeles, 2000), 10; Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (New York, 2006), 204–6, 264–65; Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness* (Oxford, 2007), xvi–xvii; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York, 2005), 96–105. On the importance of this concept in the research of Gershom Scholem, Henry Corbin, and other scholars of the twentieth century, see Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 67–82.

69. Different meanings can be attributed to *coincidentia oppositorum*, one of which is the paradoxical convergence of the opposites that does not necessarily point to their annihilation. However, the model of unification that I have encountered in my research portrays unification as a whole that is the sum of its parts. Here I point to unity or unification where each entity conserves its characteristics; in our case the finite stays finite and the infinite stays infinite but nevertheless they stay in relation.

Let us continue with some major developments offered by R. Azriel of Gerona, who discusses different aspects of the relationship between finite and infinite. The writings of R. Azriel play an important role in the conceptualization of the theosophic structure and are of special interest to the theosophic concept of *Eyn-sof*. Here too we find a system in which the boundary between the limited and unlimited is blurred, when in fact the vertical realm elevates by connecting finite things one to another and to *Eyn-sof*:⁷⁰

In this *mišbnah*, it is recalled that everything is from *Eyn-sof*, although the things have measures and dimensions and they are ten, the dimension that they have does not have an end (*eyn la sof*), since the impressioned is from the sensed and the sensed is from the intelligible, from the elevated hidden, and the hidden has no end (*eyn lo sof*), thus, in the same manner the impressioned, the sensed, and the intelligible have no end, and this is why those dimensioned were made—to contemplate through them in *Eyn-sof*.⁷¹

While R. Asher ben David describes God's dimensions as "dimensions without dimensions, without end and beginning (*be eyn-sof ve-tekbilab*) and without separation,"⁷² R. Azriel will take a similar path and discuss the

70. Another proof of the imperative necessity of connection between infinite and finite can be found in a different text of Azriel ("The Ways of Faith and the Ways of Heresy"), where he deems as heretics whoever think that because God is without limits he cannot be grasped by those who are limited: Gershom Scholem, "New Fragments from Azriel of Gerona Writings" (Hebrew), in *Memory Book to Goulak and Shmuel Klein* (Jerusalem, 1942). For a detailed analysis of the role of *Eyn sof* in Azriel's conception of faith, see Mordehy Fechter, "Principles of Faith and Heresy in the Thought of R. Azriel," *Kabbalah* 4 (1999): 315–14.

71. *The Writings of Rabenu Moshe ben Nachman*, ed. B. Chavel (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1963–1970), 2:454–55. On the elevation of the *kavanah* to *Eyn-sof* and on the theurgic action of drawing down the infinite effluence, see another early text, "Chapters on the Kavanah by the Ancient Kabbalists," supposedly written by Azriel or by someone of his entourage: Scholem, *Origins*, 417–19. For other expressions of the "effluence" originating from *Eyn-sof*, see Martel Gavrin, *The Commentary on Prayer by Azriel of Gerona* (Hebrew; M.A. thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1984), 29, 31, 32; R. Azriel of Gerona, *The Commentary on the Agadot*, ed. I. Tishby (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1945), 25, 101; Moshe Idel, "The History of the Concept "Zimzoum" in Kabbalah and in the Research" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 10 (1992): 102.

72. For a similar approach to the *sefirot*, see also R. Ezra of Gerona's letter to Abraham, where he discusses limiting and counting as human disposition whereas the *sefirot* are nonetheless infinite: Scholem, "New Document for the

ambivalent nature of the *sefirot*. R. Azriel's analysis goes as follows: First, *Eyn-sof* is said to be absolute perfection. From here on, if one says that God is without limit and therefore cannot take part in anything that is limited, this would actually imply that God could not have created the world. But saying that the limit emanates from him would also demonstrate his weakness, which too is impossible.⁷³ R. Azriel is eager to persuade that the true faith, which bridges the gap and resolves the problem, is in *Eyn-sof* and the *sefirot* combined. Any attempt to understand them apart would be heresy. Thus, the status of *sefirot* as a medium and mediator is the core of this concept.⁷⁴ Finally, R. Azriel's position is best encapsulated in a special formulation that encompasses the complex nature of the theosophic dynamism: "*Eyn-sof* is perfection without imperfection, and that his power in the limitation is unlimited and that the limitation emanating from him which delimits all existent beings is the *sefirot*, having the power to act in perfection and imperfection."⁷⁵ His power is infinite and his power to act within the limit is unlimited. The *sefirot* stand in between the infinite and the limited world and belong to both realms. *Eyn-sof* crosses the limit and acts within the limit without any limit. The insistence on the close connection between *Eyn-sof* and the *sefirot* shows that the *sefirot* are not to be understood as mere attributes of God, as in the model of classical philosophical theology. The description of emanation as extension of *Eyn-sof* points to a concept of *Eyn-sof* as essence. Rather than an abstract notion, it allows a concept of an extendable power. In Azriel's thought, the emanation is the limit emanating from *Eyn-sof*; it is the infinite essence that expands in the limited. In this example, as in many others, the concept of *sefirot* as the essence of God forms the basis of the theosophic system and is the particular signature of its ontological concept.

* * *

Throughout this essay I have shown how the theosophic notion of *Eyn-sof* has emerged out of commentaries of the *Sefer yetzirah* within an understanding of the infinite expansion of the *sefirot* as constitutive of the divine inner space. In a way, early Jewish mystical texts, despite their obvious differences, shared a common interest in the dimensions of God and his

History of the Beginning of Kabbalah," in *Bialik Book*, ed. J. Wahrman (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1934), 160.

73. *Early Kabbalah*, ed. J. Dan and R. Kiener (New York, 1986), 90–92.

74. On the status of the *sefirot* as mediators between finite and infinite, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 198–201, 288–99.

75. *Early Kabbalah*, 92.

measurement: incommensurability of the *Sh'ür komah* or the infinite dimensions of the *ʿefrot* in *Sefer yetzirah*. Nevertheless, infinity as representing God in his essence has been the prerogative of Kabbalah. Whereas philosophical commentaries — with the exception of Donnolo — tended to neutralize the problematic notion of infinite expansion of the *ʿefrot*, by way of a mathematical notion of infinite repetition of the same segment. In sharp contrast, the theosophical commentaries confirm and finalize the notion of infinite expansion: *Eyn-ʿof*, but now it became the origin of divine emanation and the emanation itself. Thus, while philosophers such as Saadya Gaon viewed infinity as a sign of imperfection, the kabbalists view it as a sign of God's absolute omnipotence. Saadya's philosophical position reflects the general position toward infinity in Neoplatonic and Aristotelian trends while *Eyn-ʿof* as a term representing God is an innovation of theosophic Kabbalah. *Eyn-ʿof* belongs not to the philosophical tradition of a single, unified, and entirely distinct Oneness but rather to a cosmological-theogonic tradition rooted in *Sefer yetzirah*.

Therefore, even where we tend to find Neoplatonic influence on the theosophical system, especially where the notion of emanation is involved, we need to bear in mind that the theosophical notion of *Eyn-ʿof* originated within this system in rupture with philosophical precedents. Nevertheless, though this assertion diminishes the influence of (Jewish) Neoplatonic philosophy, it is not entirely dismissive. However, it does emphasize the cosmological roots of *Eyn-ʿof* and the unique theosophical concept of a metaspace: the divine realm. Rather than a theological compromise — a twofold concept of an apophatic *Eyn-ʿof* on the one hand and a kataphatic system of *ʿefrot* on the other — the theosophical structure is a theological innovation. God as Infinite represents a distinct alternative to the philosophical concept of the One, of a simple and separated ontology; *Eyn-ʿof* offers a concept of unity that permits a dynamic, integrative multiplicity.

The mark of the spatio-cosmological origin of *Eyn-ʿof* is seen in the concept of *Eyn-ʿof* as a direction and *telos*. The widespread expressions *ad Eyn-ʿof* and *le-Eyn-ʿof* provide an alternative to the established understanding of God as a disconnected transcendental principle. When *Eyn-ʿof* is characterized as a direction, it becomes a focus of *kavanah* (intention), a theosophic and theurgic address. The concept of *Eyn-ʿof* thus simultaneously connotes the infinite expansion itself and the source of this expansion. This twofold signification is manifested in the history of the development of the concept of *Eyn-ʿof*, as theosophic Kabbalah transforms the infinite expansion of the *ʿefrot* found in *Sefer yetzirah* into an infinite axis. The ambivalence latent in these phrases is characteristic of

the theosophical structure in which *Eyn-sof* appears, both as the end of an infinite axis and as the infinite axis itself. Interestingly enough, it is not by accident that in both *Sefer ha-bahir* and Isaac the Blind's commentary on *Sefer yetzirah*, pointed to an elevation that is divine, yet deeply connected to human investigation; for the theosophic dimension derives also from an epistemological inquiry. This theosophical-epistemological dimension, the verticality of *Eyn-sof*, is altogether divine and human, a ladder for God's thought and man's. This infinite axis invites continuity with, rather than detachment from, the source.

It is axiomatic that *Eyn-sof*, by its very nature, cannot be tied to a specific location or direction; it is for this reason that *Eyn-sof* has been represented as unattainable. This theosophic system is consistent with its theurgic application: the infinite axis between worshiper and *Eyn-sof*, as the focus of prayer, creates a vertical model of ascent, through which the connection with *Eyn-sof* is made possible. From that lofty height, *Eyn-sof* operates beyond any field of vision. But as a governing principle at the edge of the infinite axis, it is in constant interaction with every point in the system. We are thus faced with a notion of *Eyn-sof* in which the infinite expansion can immediately be contracted and accessed.

Eyn-sof is thus more a spatio-cosmological than theological concept; it belongs to theosophic-theurgic rather than metaphysical discourse. There is a significant difference between *Eyn-sof* as the end of an expansive axis and *Eyn-sof* as an inaccessible metaphysical principle. We may indeed speak of a transcendental concept of infinity within the theosophical framework. As an orientation rather than as an unattainable transcendence, *Eyn-sof* opens up a bridge rather than a chasm. From this point on, the mystic's ability to cross this distance and connect with infinity depends only on his specific theosophical, theurgic, or exegetical technique.