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Back to the Future: Leo Strauss, Gershom Scholem and the Restorative Messianic Utopia

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Abstract: This article offers a critical analysis of the dispute between two prominent twentieth-century Jewish thinkers—Leo Strauss and Gershom Scholem—on the temporal nature of Jewish messianism, particularly the messianism of the Lurianic kabbalah. Whereas Strauss uses Scholem’s authority to criticize the idea of progress and claims that the messianic idea of Lurianism as interpreted by Scholem is purely restorative, Scholem actually argues for its dialectical nature: neither progressive nor regressive but seeking to synthesize the past and future in the utopian figure of “restoring” the original potentiality. The purpose of my analysis is twofold: to expose Strauss’s misreading of Scholem’s theory which has so far escaped the critical attention of scholars, and to contribute to the debate on religion and change by deconstructing the apparent opposition of progress and return (or utopia and restoration) in Jewish messianic tradition.

Keywords: Leo Strauss; Gershom Scholem; progress; return; Judaism; messianism; kabbalah



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1. Introduction

In November 1952 at the Hillel House, University of Chicago, Leo Strauss delivered a series of three lectures devoted to the condition of modern man, posthumously published in one piece as *Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization*.¹ It soon turned out to be one of Strauss’s best-known and most widely discussed texts, the one in which his recurring critique of progress and appeal for a “return to the classics” feels exceptionally coherent and alluring. Already in the opening words of the essay, Strauss adopts a prophetic fashion to accuse modern progressive thinkers of having “led us to the brink of an abyss” (Strauss 1997, p. 87) and call for persuasive “alternatives” to the widespread idea that “the beginning is most imperfect and perfection can be found only in the end” (Strauss 1997, pp. 87, 89). What soon comes out as the greatest conceptual ally in his search for the alternatives is Jewish messianism, which might be surprising if we recall that Strauss famously distrusted any “messianic fever,” especially in political terms.² However, the messianic idea of Judaism is consistently interpreted throughout the text not as a progressivist construct but as a radical opposition of modern anti-traditional sentiments. Strauss is of course well aware that at first glance the messianic idea in Judaism looks predominantly future oriented or even utopian, but his main argument is that this “exoteric” utopian veil covers its real “esoteric” nature: essentially restorative and solely focused on the origins. “The perfect end is the restoration of the perfect beginning,” claims Strauss (1997, p. 87), thus trying to persuade his readers that the life of the Jew might be “a life of anticipation, of hope, but the hope for redemption is restoration—*restituto in integro*” (Strauss 1997, p. 88). As if anticipating objections to such a non-obvious thesis, he is quick to back it up with a few more authoritative statements: “Even if it were true that messianism bespeaks the predominance of the concern with the future, or of living toward the future, this would not affect in any way the belief in the superiority of the past to the present. (...) The past is superior to the present. This thought is, then, perfectly compatible with the hope for the future” (Strauss 1997, p. 88). This allows Strauss to conclude that the concepts of progress and return are not antithetical by nature. It is only the modern,

linear and future-oriented theory of progress that contemptuously turns its back on the past, whereas to think of progress in Jewish terms means to associate the better with the bygone and to long for return to the forgotten origins.

What gives *Progress or Return?* a quasi-messianic vibe is both the references to the Book of Isaiah and a handful of quotes from Gershom Scholem, Strauss's long-time pen-friend and a highly respected authority in Jewish messianism.³ In the essay, this authority is mainly used to support Strauss's thesis of the "regressive" root of the messianic idea in Judaism and prove that anti-progressivist thinking is characteristic not only of the old-line Maimonidesian rationalism but also of modern kabbalah, reputedly much more utopian if not revolutionary. "As I learn from Gershom Scholem," starts Strauss, "Kabbala prior to the sixteenth century concentrated upon the beginning; it was only with Isaac Luria that Kabbala began to concentrate upon the future—upon the end." He immediately adds, however, "Yet even here, the last age became as important as the first. It did not become more important" (Strauss 1997, p. 88). To support his words, he offers a few scattered quotations from Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* where we read, among others, that "by inclination and habit, Luria was [a] decidedly conservative" (Scholem 1995, p. 256) spirit, for whom "salvation mean[t] actually nothing but restitution, reintegration of the original whole" (Scholem 1995, p. 268). Consequently, as argues Scholem echoed by Strauss, in the Lurianic kabbalah, "the path to the end of all things is also the path to the beginning" (Scholem 1995, p. 274; all quotations in Strauss 1997, p. 88). This way, Strauss presents Scholem's reading of Luria as clearly anti-progressivist if not sympathetic of the messianic enterprise of restoration and portrays Scholem as his companion in the intellectual retrieval of the origins.

The main purpose of my article is to bring into question this agreement of ideas one-sidedly declared by Strauss. I argue that *Progress or Return?* is, to use Harold Bloom's phrase, a "strong misreading" (Bloom 2003) of Scholem's theory of the Lurianic kabbalah to make it look past-oriented and quasi-Neoplatonic.⁴ Daring as it is, such an interpretation distorts the messianic idea of Lurianism as interpreted by Scholem and appropriates it for Strauss's philosophical *ad fontes*. I am going to demonstrate that in a less selective reading, Scholem's theory of the Lurianic kabbalah advocates neither progress nor return but forces a dialectical wedge into Strauss's antithesis to argue that Lurianic messianism is an unceasing interplay of the regressive and the progressive, or restoration and utopia. As such, it serves as a powerful contribution to the debates on religion and change that challenges both the linear and the cyclical nature of the messianic time in Judaism.

Admittedly, Strauss is not fully mistaken in using Scholem's kabbalistic thinking against the contemporary: beyond doubt, both these Weimar Jews, who sought refuge in the condition of émigrés, were pessimistic theorists of crisis, equally critical of their turbulent times. However, I argue, it is wrong to classify Scholem as a nostalgic *antimoderne*: unlike Strauss, he was highly suspicious of the philosophical quests for *arché*, and his appreciation of the past never crystallized into any restorative project. This discrepancy, as we will see, is best observed in their contrasting ontologies: Whereas Strauss's thinking of creation and redemption gravitated towards realism, Scholem's cosmological speculation was consistently nominalistic.

I do not mean to ponder here how legitimate Strauss's critique of progress is or whether his having formulated it in 1952 was not simply reinventing the wheel. Neither am I going to argue against his generalized and problematic thesis that "Judaism is a concern with return; it is not a concern with progress" (Strauss 1997, p. 88); others have done this much better (see Mendes-Flohr 1991; Kavka 2004). My intention is a little more humble but no less agonistic: to analyse how Strauss's selective reading of Scholem's works deforms the messianic idea of Lurianism, or at least Scholem's powerful interpretation of this idea. Obviously, Scholem's strong misreading of modern kabbalah is far from incontestable and has become an object of noteworthy criticism.⁵ However, the purpose of this article is not to defend Scholem's theory; it is to expose Strauss's problematic operation and argue that

his favourite interpretive tool of “reading between the lines” is used in *Progress or Return?* at such discretion that it ends up as “cheating” between the lines.

Surprisingly enough, this operation has so far escaped the critical attention of scholars and commentators. Even the interrelations of Strauss and Scholem, whom Sheppard (2006, p. 118) calls “friendly intellectual sparring partners,” have been an object of very few academic papers despite their long-time correspondence and numerous parallels in their biographies. If they have, the agonistic element has clearly been missing: the articles by Smith (1993); Sedeyn (2006) and Altini (2008, 2018) are comparative rather than confrontational, and Ghibellini’s (2013) insightful piece, although it exposes some serious discrepancies between Strauss’s and Scholem’s thought, completely ignores the controversy of *Progress or Return?*. The intention of my text is to fill in this considerable research gap, contribute to the Jewish intellectual history of the twentieth century and argue that under the cover of Strauss’s impeccable courtesy towards Scholem, there might be an attempt at a “hostile takeover” of his friend’s theory.

To demonstrate this, I will analyse the messianic idea of Lurianism as interpreted by Scholem far less selectively than has been done by Strauss. In the first part of the article, I reconstruct the dialectical triad of Luria’s concepts crucial for Scholem’s theory of messianism: *tsimtsum* (contraction), *shevirah* (disruption) and *tiqqun* (rectification).⁶ In the second part, “with continual reference” to the Lurianic imagery, I seek to draw several conclusions on Scholem’s idea of progress and return to challenge Strauss’s misreading of it. Obviously, by highlighting those elements of Scholem’s theory which go clearly against the restorative idiom, I might be accused of similar partiality to that for which I criticize Strauss. My aim, however, is to offer not an exhaustive picture of “Scholemian” Lurianism but a critical counterbalance to Strauss’s misreading. I thus both admit that Scholem’s speculative thought is much more complex than my article might suggest and still dare argue that in no legitimate reading is it as “restorative” as Strauss would like it to be.⁷

2. Towards the Restorative Idiom

It is not unjustified to argue that Strauss and Scholem were allied in criticising the progressive, rationalist tendencies of modern Jewish thinking. However, where they clearly parted was the positioning of this criticism. Whereas Strauss, a great admirer of the classical Maimonidesian rationalism, disapproved of all the post-Enlightenment instrumentalization of human reason, for Scholem it was not the modern paradigm of rationality that he objected to but rather its anti-mystical sentiment, best exemplified by the nineteenth-century school of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and Hermann Cohen’s neo-Kantianism. He especially despised the reductionist appropriation of messianic impulses to associate them with the universal, unstoppable progress of reason and the decay of all irrational, “superstitious” thinking. Scholem’s exploration of kabbalah might be read as a sort of historical revisionism revolting against this reductionism, the attitude which Biale (1982) aptly calls “counter-history.” Its purpose was to rehabilitate another type of rationality that emerges from the apparently irrational kabbalistic myth and argue for the dialectical nature of Jewish messianism whose only source of vitality is the unceasing clash between the rationalist and the mystical, without overrating or underrating any of them.⁸

This agonistic disposition explains Scholem’s appreciation of the suppressed kabbalistic currents but not why, despite writing some ground-breaking works on the early mystical tradition in Judaism (Scholem 1965, 1990), he clearly favoured the sixteenth-century Lurianic kabbalah over the abundant Zoharic tradition of the Middle Ages.⁹ To understand this partiality, one must recall Scholem’s major thesis that the Lurianic cosmological myth—initiated soon after the expulsion of Jews from Spain towards the end of the fifteenth century—was designed in the image and likeness of Jewish exodic experience, with the recurrent expulsions explicated as the historical consequences of the original cosmic *galuth* of God. According to this thesis, the whole Lurianic myth should be read as a great story of “exile and redemption” (Scholem 1969, p. 117), where the moments of disruption and alienation act as a necessary condition for further messianic action.¹⁰ By insisting on these

moments, argues Scholem, Lurianism breaks with the Zoharic idiom of peaceful emanationism and marks the modern turn in Jewish kabbalah whose *differentia specifica* was the traumatic, or even catastrophic, aspect of the messianic idea.

Perhaps the finest novelty of the Lurianic kabbalah is a bold relocation of nothingness, or cosmic negativity, considered by Scholem as the founding gesture of its “exodic” messianism. Before exploring this relocation, it is worth recalling that the concept of nothingness had always been problematic for Jewish monotheism: Whereas the Talmudic tradition would theorize it as essentially external to the divine plenitude, the medieval kabbalists tended to challenge the dogma of *creatio ex nihilo* and identify the nothing either with God’s first sephirotic emanation or even with His very essence. Although the Neoplatonic symbolism of the sephirot is in no way abandoned by Luria and his disciples, Scholem clearly disregards it as a negligible relic of pre-modern thinking which cannot help but regress into quasi-pantheistic idiomacy.¹¹ What he accentuates instead is the dialectical synthesis of this dispute offered by the Lurianic theosophy: in Lurianism, nothingness is neither the eternal non-being known from the mainstream rabbinic teachings nor the divine attribute as argued by the Zohar but rather the very first product of creation, the logic of which Scholem explains this way: “Creation out of nothing, from the void, could be nothing other than creation of the void, that is, of the possibility of thinking of anything that was not God” (Scholem 1976, p. 283).

Here, the key idea of the Lurianic mythical theosophy is expressed by the image of *tsimtsum*, which in Hebrew means “contraction” or “shrinking.” According to Scholem, this inconspicuous image covers “one of the most amazing and far-reaching conceptions ever put forward in the whole history of Kabbalism” (Scholem 1995, p. 260), being “the only serious attempt ever made to give substance to the idea of Creation out of Nothing” (Scholem 1995, pp. 261–62). Rather than simply manifesting Himself externally in His full glory like in the Thomistic doctrine of *processio dei ad extra*, the Lurianic God, first, “retreats into Himself” (Scholem 1976, p. 283), withdrawing to just one point of His entity. This radical self-reduction aims to generate a void (*tehiru*)—a reservoir of nothingness out of which all finite beings are going to be created. What is left in *tehiru* is only the remnant of contracted divine light, which the Lurianists call *reshimu*. This receding of God within Himself, described by Scholem as His “primordial exile, or self-banishment” (Scholem 1969, p. 111),¹² is supposed to enable the existence of independent non-divine creatures. However, as Scholem powerfully argues, it also lays the foundation for the exile of the Jewish nation, if not all humanity, from God.

Only once God has contracted Himself does He, second, manifest Himself by directing His weakened powers towards *tehiru* for the sake of creation. Yet even this affirmative emanation is closely related to negativity as the Lurianic myth of creation, unlike in the medieval kabbalah, involves a fundamental moment of disruption. In its evocative imagery, the contracted God shapes containers which are then supposed to be forms filled with the light of life. However, the vessels are made from *reshimu*, which makes them so tinged with nothingness that, confronted with the divine glare, they break up and start falling into the cosmic abyss together with scattered sparks of divinity. *Shevirat ha-kelim*, or “the breaking of the vessels,” is the original cosmological crisis, which results in a general deficiency and displacement of things in this world. In Scholem’s words: “Nothing remains in its proper place. Everything is somewhere else, (...) in exile, (...) in need of being redeemed.” (Scholem 1969, pp. 112–13).

In a world so deeply flawed, the final and crucial episode of the cosmic process must be *tiqqun*, which in Hebrew stands for “a perfection, a betterment and a correction” (Scholem 1969, p. 127) of things. Obviously, the messianic idea of *tiqqun* is not originally Lurianic and comes in many disguises in the history of Jewish mysticism. Among them, there is the emanationist idiom of the Zoharic tradition, which taught that the way back is not cut off and that every human soul might seek to return to its original state of perfection through persistent contemplative devotion and rightful action. This medieval framework, let us notice, is also followed by Strauss: By referring to the Lurianic messianism as a restorative

recipe for the crisis of progress, he misreads Scholem's theory of Lurianism in a highly Neoplatonic fashion, where the original state of things (or the philosophical first things) to be restored is the long-lost pleromatic "whole" (Strauss 1997, p. 122). Admittedly, such an interpretation of the Lurianic cosmological myth is not fully mistaken (Franks 2020), but it clearly goes against Scholem's intention to present this myth as a radical break-up with the emanationist mode of thinking.

3. Away from the Restorative Idiom

Let us then elaborate on Scholem's major thesis: by accentuating the moments of negativity and rupture inscribed in the process of creation, his theory of the Lurianic messianism departs from the Neoplatonic imagery of *unio mystica* and endows the whole messianic enterprise with some distinct utopian vibe. Because unlike the Biblical and Talmudic tradition, the Lurianic kabbalah knows no primordial, Edenic perfection that could be re-established, separation and disruption did not follow the process of creation but accompanied it from the very outset. That is why when Scholem, as quoted by Strauss, speaks of the Lurianic *tiqqun* as the "reintegration of the original whole," he does not mean the restitution of the actual beginnings but the realization of some original potentiality which failed to actualize, or of the state of things which "had been seminal and had never existed before" (Scholem 1976, p. 285). As we read in a crucial fragment of *Toward the Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism*, "the world of *tikkun* (...) involves a strictly utopian impulse. That harmony which it reconstitutes does not at all correspond to any condition of things that has ever existed even in Paradise, but at most to a plan contained in the divine idea of Creation" (Scholem 1971b, p. 13). Even in *Major Trends...*, so selectively referred to by Strauss, Scholem accentuates that the purpose of our earthly existence is "the restoration of the ideal order, which forms the original *aim* of creation" (Scholem 1995, p. 268, my emphasis)—the aim which has so far failed to be realized. Instead of undoing what has been done and restoring the original state of the divine unimpaired plenitude, the Lurianic *tiqqun* rather offers the quasi-Hegelian sublation of earthly finitude which marks the ultimate evolution of the created being. As such, it might be called another, proper beginning: "The *tikkun* is not so much a restoration of Creation as its first complete fulfillment" (Scholem 1969, p. 117). If we thus insisted, as Strauss does, on labelling the Scholemian reading of *tiqqun* as the messianism of return, it would only be legitimate to call it a paradoxical "return" to what has never been, a new type of the messianic idea where "the renewal of the world is simply more than its restoration" (Scholem 1971b, p. 14).¹³

As already suggested, this non-restorative theory of return is closely related to Scholem's nominalistic disposition. Unlike Strauss, whose ontological realism makes him favour the idiom of the original unity and undifferentiation, Scholem interprets the Lurianic myth in a highly modern fashion, with the concepts of separation, individuation and difference not only accentuated but also subtly affirmed. That is why, although classifying the Lurianic kabbalah as the "amazingly complete example of gnostic myth formation" (Scholem 1969, p. 109), with its pessimistic insistence on the process of creation as one big cosmic catastrophe, he himself prefers to apply some natalist imagery and speak of *tsimtsum* and *shevirah* in terms of "birthpangs" (Scholem 1995, pp. 247, 267), abrupt yet indispensable life-giving contractions of the divine thanks to which God "makes room for Creation" (Scholem 1970, p. 86) or even "liberates" it (Scholem 1976, p. 283) and cuts the umbilical cord linking Him to the earthly beings. In such a reading, both these anti-emanationist gestures mark the moment of metaphysical crisis which is both the risk of solitude and exile and the chance of authentic autonomy enabling creation to stand on its own feet. No wonder that they remind Scholem of Hegel's concept of alienation: "Precisely because God cannot reproduce Himself, His Creation must be based upon that estrangement—one might indeed employ the Hegelian term *Entfremdung*—in which evil is embodied within Creation so that it may be itself" (Scholem 1991, p. 84).¹⁴ And if we add to this that Scholem goes so far as to term Luria and his disciples "mystical nominalists" (Biale 1985, p. 83) who skilfully mythologize the material individuation of earthly beings, is it unjustified to

theorize *tsimtsum* and *shevirah* as the kabbalistic equivalents of the philosophical critique of universals? (See Bielik-Robson 2017.)¹⁵

Arguably, the way alienation and the related terms (separation, discontinuity, individuation) are qualified marks the greatest mismatch of Scholem's theory and Strauss's misreading of it. In *Progress or Return?*, we are reminded that the Hebrew word *teshuva*, which literally means "return," also has the emphatic meaning of "repentance," or "the return from the wrong way to the right one" (Strauss 1997, p. 87). Strauss is quick to specify that the mistaken path to be abandoned is the "sinful estrangement" from the "perfect beginning," identified by him with the garden of Eden (Strauss 1997, p. 87). The identification of estrangement with the original sin, and their annulment with penance, makes it possible for him to further criticize the idea of progress in moral terms, to accuse modern Jews of the evil break with their religious tradition and "call [them] to account" to examine their own conscience and feel remorse for this "infidelity" and "rebellion" (Strauss 1997, p. 89). Scholem's reading of the Lurianic myth stands in stark contrast to this penitential idiom. Although both *tsimtsum* and *shevirah* might be gnostically classified as the macrocosmic variants of the Edenic fall, even in this highly catastrophic reading the aspect of guilt is missing; to put it bluntly, the founding cosmic error is *nobody's* fault and, deplorable as it is, does not make finite creatures hopelessly guilt-ridden. But Scholem is far from following this gnostic path, and instead of referring to the Lurianic *creatio discontinua* as a fundamental crisis, he prefers to call it "a free act of love" (Scholem 1969, p. 111) by which God wilfully poses limits to His own infinity and paves the way for the ontological autonomy of finitude. In this (tentatively) affirmative reading, alienation is the necessary reverse of freedom, the price worth paying for the ontological autonomy of earthly beings which get separated, or even exiled, from the divine substance and yet stay connected to it by the very fact of creation.

It is not only how separation and discontinuity are qualified that differs Scholem from Strauss, it is also the relation of these terms to the idea of return. By placing the modern man on "the brink of an abyss," Strauss clearly follows Scholem in adopting a disruptive, if not catastrophic, vision of history, the history marked by a rupture with tradition and retreat from its origins, identified by Strauss with the "classic past" (Strauss 1997, p. 89). However, in light of Scholem's writings, what *Progress or Return?* prescribes as a remedy for this disruption is strikingly inconsistent with its diagnosis: as powerfully argued by Scholem, no catastrophic historiosophy is to be reconciled with the non-dialectical idea of return and the peaceful, undisturbed restitution of the beginnings that this idea advocates. If we were to formulate his methodological and epistemological credo that could be aimed against Strauss's restorative idiom, it would read, the ideal of re-establishing the unimpaired unity is phantasmatic; the origins may only be approached indirectly, by means of skilful dialectical mediation. This disapproval of immediacy is provoked not only by Scholem's dialectical disposition but also by his nominalistic mistrust of the whole. Unlike Strauss, he is convinced that the ideas of wholeness and totality are godly rather than earthly and, flawless as they are, might do harm to our vulnerable singular natures. As taught by kabbalists, he reminds that, even the greatest totality, the totality of revelation, only becomes accessible to us once its divine purity is "contaminated" and its wholeness decomposed by the imperfect, fragmentary human language. Otherwise, it would be just too powerful for humans to withstand: "There is no immediate, undialectic application of the divine word. If there were, it would be destructive" (Scholem 1971a, p. 296).¹⁶ That is why each authentic metaphysical revelation (of God's name, of the origins, of the essence of things) is as much about unveiling as it is about concealing, and what it veils is its "destructive perfection" (*des Volkommenen, das zerbricht*) (Biale 1985, p. 88). That is also why, to put it bluntly, whereas for Strauss the abyss we are facing is that of progress (modernity, secularization, instrumental reason), for Scholem it is rather that of (non-dialectical) return. As we read in one of his most speculative pieces, "the power of the sacred tradition" unmediated by separation and rupture has a deadly "apocalyptic thorn" (*den apokalyptischen Stache*) (Scholem 2002,

p. 226),¹⁷ so even if the “retrotopian” enterprise of *ad fontes* were feasible, which Scholem strenuously denies, on no account should it be undertaken—for our own good.

4. Conclusions

Let us then reiterate: the Lurianic kabbalah professes that the earthly condition of humans is determined, for better and for worse, by deficiency and disconnectedness, not by the quasi-paradisical state of metaphysical unity and perfection. As suggested by Scholem, the only tradition which matches this condition is the tradition that gets disrupted and lives on disrupted, as if repeating the cosmic trajectory of *tsimtsum* and *shevirah*.¹⁸ No wonder that this is also precisely how he theorizes the messianic idea, one of the most powerful elements of the Jewish tradition. Messianism retains vitality, argues Scholem, only if its subversive power is neither realized nor neutralized (like in the Maimonidesian rationalism gladly resurrected by Strauss),¹⁹ but keeps fluctuating between the poles of “forward” and “backward” (Scholem 1971b, pp. 3–4), or, to apply the Lurianic imagery, if every progressive gesture of messianic *tiqqun* is accompanied by its regressive counterpart of contraction. The result of this paradoxical inhale–exhale dialectic is a “life lived in deferment, in which nothing can be done definitely, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished” (Scholem 1971b, p. 35, original emphasis),²⁰ but also a life fuelled and invigorated by the unceasing clash of restoration and utopia. Admittedly, Scholem’s speculative thought is far from unambiguous and not free from both gnostic catastrophism and the sentimental longing for the (reputedly long-gone) “golden age.”²¹ Yet it eventually succeeds in resisting the temptation of anti-modern resentment to offer a subtly affirmative view of the ambivalence inscribed in the modern messianic idea.

It is precisely this ambivalence, as we could observe, that is repudiated by Strauss, whose *Progress or Return?* seems rather unequivocal in its support of the latter against the former. This is quite surprising, we might add, if we recall that Strauss’s agonistic disposition made him famously argue for the ongoing productive friction between religion and philosophy, or the exoteric and esoteric. What is more, even his anti-progressive inclination to put the past above the present was at times much more tentative. Suffice it to say that in his powerful critique of the Nazi project “to purify German thought completely from the influence of the ideas of modern civilization and to return to the pre-modern ideal” (Strauss 1999, pp. 371–72), one of his main arguments against “German nihilism” was this: “The temptation to fall back from an unimpressive present on an impressive past—and every past is as such impressive—is very great indeed. We ought not, however, cede to that temptation, if for no other reason, at least for this that the Western tradition is not so homogeneous as it may appear as long as one is engaged in polemics or in apologetics” (Strauss 1999, p. 367, original emphasis). In *Progress or Return?*, perhaps regrettably, both the sparks of agon and the appeal for some dialectical synthesis of “now” and “back in the day” yield to the philosophical nostalgia and (over)appreciation of the “classic past.”

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Notes

- ¹ To be precise, the three lectures were originally published in two parts: the lecture of 19 November (first published in Hebrew in a 1954 volume of *Iyyun*) came out as *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy* (Strauss 1979, pp. 111–18), and it was followed by the lectures of 5 and 12 November two years later (Strauss 1981, pp. 17–45, reprinted in Strauss 1989, pp. 227–70). It is only in the anthology of Strauss’s pieces on modern Jewish thought edited by Kenneth Hart Green in 1997 that all three lectures came together, and they have commonly been referred to as one work ever since. All the quotations in this article come from the 1997 edition.

- 2 The inclination to revolutionary messianic thinking, widespread among the German–Jewish thinkers of the Weimar Republic from Walter Benjamin to Ernst Bloch, can be seen as a sign of the times. For more on the intellectual climate of the epoch see (Löwy 1992).
- 3 Strauss and Scholem got acquainted in Berlin in the 1920s. Later, when Scholem had already lived in Jerusalem for two or three years, they engaged in a regular correspondence that continued almost until Strauss’s death in 1973. The correspondence is to be found in (Strauss 2001, pp. 699–772).
- 4 In Bloom’s theory, a strong misreading is a deliberate operation which aims at challenging the canonical interpretations of some texts or phenomena. There is no evidence that Strauss’s misinterpretation was deliberate and confrontational, so my argument is purely speculative. However, even if it was an unintended misunderstanding, I believe that it is still worth exploring as an instructive example of the antinomies inscribed in the messianic idea of Lurianism.
- 5 Moshe Idel, one of Scholem’s most prominent disciples, famously accused him of overemphasizing the theosophical aspect of the Lurianic kabbalah and disregarding the practical one (Idel 1988, pp. 17–34). He also criticized Scholem’s “exilic” interpretation of the Lurianic myth as overly speculative and uncorroborated by the sources (Idel 1998, pp. 179–80; Idel 2012, p. 96).
- 6 For further elaboration on the complex symbolism of the Lurianic cosmic myth, see Fine (2003); Magid (2008); and Garb (2020, pp. 48–61).
- 7 It must be noted, obviously, that a number of Scholem’s works which are referred to in this article were written and published after 1952 and could not be known to Strauss at the time of delivering his lectures. However, it will be argued that even in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941), the only one Strauss refers to, Scholem’s interpretation of the Lurianic messianism is much more ambivalent than Strauss’s selective quotations suggest.
- 8 Scholem argued for the rationalist component of the Jewish kabbalah because of the importance the kabbalists attached to language: “In Judaism the kabbalists were the ones in particular for whom there exists a specific affinity between Creation and Revelation, since both were conceived of as the language in which the divine is communicated. And it was the kabbalists who regarded rational thinking as a linguistic process” (Scholem 1976, pp. 279–80).
- 9 For Scholem, Luria and his disciples created “the most important system of the late Kabbalah,” an “amazingly complete” and “unparalleled” example of myth formation (Scholem 1969, pp. 109, 110), “the influence of which on Jewish history has certainly been no less considerable than that of Maimonides’ ‘Guide for the Perplexed’” (Scholem 1995, p. 251).
- 10 The tendentious character of this thesis was critically confronted by Idel: “The idea that the *tzimtsum* represents, on a symbolic level, a divine exile into Himself is a fascinating speculative interpretation of the Lurianic myth, and it became one of Scholem’s more dramatic contributions to modern Jewish historiography. However, despite the confident tone of these statements, Scholem himself seems to have been aware of their highly speculative nature. Indeed, in an early explanation of the emergence of this view he explicitly acknowledged that it was not corroborated by the Lurianic texts themselves” (Idel 2012, p. 96).
- 11 As argued by Scholem, through the sephirotic idiom “the theory of identity is given a pantheistic spin: the creation out of nothingness becomes only an encrypted code for the essential oneness of all things with God” (Scholem 1976, p. 268); consequently, “we cannot find here an authentic nothingness which would break the continuity of the chain” (Scholem 1970, p. 99).
- 12 It should be noted that although Luria was not the first kabbalist to employ the concept of *tsimtsum* (such important figures as Nahmanides and Moses Cordovero had done it before), he was the first who made it central to the cosmological doctrine and the one who altered its previous sense: in the Lurianic kabbalah, *tsimtsum* denotes no longer just the concealment of God but a radical change of His ontological status provoked by the depletion of sovereign power through the act of withdrawal. Even more importantly, however, the word *tsimtsum* is highly ambiguous: apart from withdrawal, it may also denote concentration. The consequences of this ambiguity are by all means crucial: Whereas withdrawal is about the renunciation of omnipotence, concentration clearly connotes self-empowerment. Scholem, in one of his most authoritative and disputable theses, was an uncompromising advocate of the former interpretation and argued that the latter “definitely conflicts with other themes in Luria’s own system” (Scholem 1969, p. 111). Criticism of this thesis is to be found in (Franks 2020) and more on the intellectual history of the concept of *tsimtsum* in (Schulte 2014).
- 13 Scholem’s interpretation of the Lurianic *tiqqun* is clearly inspired by the theory of the origin put forward by his friend Walter Benjamin. As famously argued by Benjamin, although origin is a historical category, it has nothing to do with the idea of genesis as the inception of some phenomenon at a certain moment in time. Rather, the origin is “an eddy in the stream of becoming” (Benjamin 2003, p. 45), an operative force convulsing the body of history from the inside, and “the return to the origin that is at issue here thus in no way signifies the reconstruction of something as it once was, the reintegration of something into an origin understood as a real and eternal figure of its truth” (Agamben 1999, p. 152).
- 14 More on Scholem’s use of Hegel’s concept of alienation can be found in Wolfson (2019, p. 250 onwards).
- 15 For this reason, the motif of *shevirah* has been theorized in an affirmative, non-catastrophic fashion by deconstructionists. See Handelman (1982) and Drob (2009).
- 16 In *Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism*, we further read: “The creative force concentrated in the name of God (...) is far greater than any human expression, than any creaturely word can grasp” (Scholem 1971a, pp. 293–94); that is why “the very words that we read in the Written Torah and that constitute the audible ‘word of God’ and communicate a comprehensive message, are in reality mediations through which the absolute word, incomprehensible to us, is offered” (Scholem 1971a, p. 294).

In his *Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah*, Scholem adds, “Totalities are only communicated in an occult fashion. The name of God can be pronounced but cannot be expressed, for only that which is fragmentary makes language expressible” (Biale 1985, p. 87).

- 17 The fragment comes from *Confession on the Subject of Our Language* (a 1926 letter to Franz Rosenzweig), where Scholem adopts an apocalyptic tone to criticize the Zionist project of secularizing Hebrew to use it as the official language of the State of Israel and a means of secular daily communication. Let us offer some more quotations from this very personal and very instructive piece: “If we resuscitate the language of the ancient books so that it can reveal itself anew, must then not the religious violence of this language one day break out against those who speak it? (...) Language is Name. In the names, the power of language is enclosed; in them, the abyss is sealed. After invoking the ancient names daily, we can no longer hold off their power. Called awake, they will appear since we have invoked them with great violence. (...) May the carelessness, which has led us to this apocalyptic path, not bring about our ruin” (Scholem 2002, pp. 226–27). He adds, in a fragment which can be (anachronistically) read as a response to Strauss’s “abyssal” idiom of *Progress or Return?*, that we live “above an abyss, almost all of us with the certainty of the blind. But when our sight is restored, must we not fall to the bottom of this abyss?” (Scholem 2002, p. 226).
- 18 “Authentic tradition remains hidden; only the fallen tradition falls upon an object and only when it is fallen does its greatness become visible” (Biale 1985, p. 71).
- 19 For Scholem’s critique of Maimonides’ anti-messianism, see Scholem (1971b, pp. 24–33).
- 20 For a philosophical commentary on this thesis, see Taubes (1982). As argued by Stéphane Mosès, Jewish messianism is by its nature highly paradoxical: it calls for redemption on the stage of history but at the same time demands the ideal that no historical reality is able to satisfy. As such, it is “the aspiration for the impossible,” which “can be asserted only in realizing itself, but as soon as it realizes itself, it denies itself” (Mosès 2009, p. 132).
- 21 Not infrequently, the Lurianic cosmological myth is referred to by Scholem in clearly gnostic terms, e.g., as “the point at which the horrifying experience of God’s absence in our world collides irreconcilably and catastrophically with the doctrine of a Creation that renews itself” (Scholem 1976, p. 283).

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