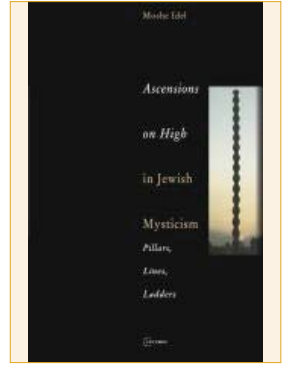


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Moshe Idel
 Ascension on High in Jewish
 Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders
 Budapest: Central European
 University Press, 2005.



Mysticism as Ascension

Moshe Idel is one of the most eminent and influential scholars in Jewish mysticism in the world. Born in Tirgu Neamt, Romania in 1947, he immigrated to Israel in 1963. Here Moshe Idel had the privilege to study under the supervision of Gershom Scholem, one of the most knowledgeable scholars in religious studies and history of religions. Stepping into his master's shoes he became one of the leading experts in Jewish mysticism. At present Moshe Idel is Max Cooper Professor of Jewish Thought at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and has also served as a visiting professor and research scholar at numerous universities and institutions in the United States and Europe. His numerous publications include *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*; *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*; *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*; *Hassidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*; *Messianic Mystics*; and *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*. Never has Moshe Idel forgotten his Romanian origins and he generously offers lectures and presentations, and scientific advice to students and faculty from the universities of Bucharest, Cluj or Romania, in general.

In 2005 Moshe Idel published a very comprehensive study of the idea of height, rising to heights and the pillar, the ladder as the instrument and the instrumentalization of the human fascination with the above at Central European University Press. *Ascension on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* appeared in a series coordinated by Pastis Incorporated and edited by Sorin Antohi and Laszlo Kontler.

Well known for his subtle explorations of the connections between the Eros and the Kabbalah, of medieval Kabbalists and the eighteenth-century Hassidic mystics' explorations of letters and the alphabet and their impact upon postmodern literary theory, especially upon the work of the Sephardic Algerian Jewish philosopher Jacques Derrida, Moshe Idel proves, once again through his 2005 book, that he never camps in one restricted area for ever. His scientific interests are amazingly diverse within the vast range of history of religions and his scholarly curiosity always finds new targets.

Ascension on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders has the rare quality of

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being a very interesting and challenging reading both for the elite, sophisticated reader and for the common reader who maybe simply curious and wonders about the human fascination with heights, ascensions, and what may be above the skies. Why are we culturally constructed as such? Although Moshe Idel does not say this overtly, the reader can easily come to the conclusion that this fascination with long, lean, and taut shapes, the magnetism of everything that is high and upright, be it a pillar, a tree or anything else with similar shape is a cultural universal. Again whether this fascination explains the privileges that the upright phallus has over the offer of femininity is not any concern of Moshe Idel but the richness of his cultural considerations does invite the reader to further meditation and analysis. Is the privilege of the pillar-like forms and experiences (the prayer is also directed to heights, it is also a kind of ascension) the basis for the patriarchal foundation of culture or is it the patriarchal foundation of culture that makes us, humans privilege this shape, this direction? Again no answer is given directly by Moshe Idel to this question but the richness and the complexity of his intellectual enterprise invites any reader to try and find his or her own answer. I would add that in a very Jewish way, he prefers to invite us to ask questions rather than impose upon us the answer that he surely has.

Moshe Idel explores with scholarly competence and relying on an extremely minute bibliography the fascination with ascension in various cultural contexts. He pays particular attention to the Neoplatonist and the Neoplatonic perspectives, he offers us a hermeneutic “descent” into the intricacies of ascent through the ten sephirot, he analyzes the complex Zoharic conception of the pillar as the ninth manifestation of power, the divine phallus and the representation of the concept of righteousness. Neither does he omit the Hassidic mystics and their experience with the above as well as the medieval and the Renaissance philosophy represented by several Arab thinkers and Pico della Mirandola.

From a Romanian perspective it is interesting to note that Mircea Eliade and his disciple Ioan P. Culianu appear frequently in the bibliography of this study and they even form the object of a sub-chapter. Moshe Idel insists on a possible connection between Mircea Eliade’s attraction to right wing ideologies, his equally gradual moving off from this position after World War II and his perspective on Jewish mysticism and the role of the elite and the masses in the creation and the popularization of various forms of mysticism. Namely, the farther Eliade gets from his prejudice, the more he recognizes Jewish mysticism as a sophisticated “product” of a sophisticated elite.

The pillar or the ladder (another means to ascend heavens) are never considered by Moshe Idel as architectural elements although their presence or symbolism in various religious buildings in several cultures may form the object of another equally fascinating study. With Moshe Idel the importance of the pillar and the ladder lies in their connecting different levels of reality. With various thinkers and depending upon the cultural context, they become cosmological entities stretching from earth to heaven, or they turn into theological entities, part of the divine world. The pillar that Moshe Idel is particularly interested in is the pillar of prayer, the mystic, the righteous whose body itself may become a connector between the worlds during a mystic experience.

It is beyond any doubt that Moshe Idel’s excursion into the depths and the heights of religious ascension, be it by help of the prayer, the homiletic experience, or the mystic meditation, is one of those very special books where the bibliography, although rich, does not hamper the reading but stimulates it. *Ascension on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* is a book for other scholars, but also a book for anybody who has the curiosity of a scholar.