Dancing on High: Cosmic Circumambulation and Apophatic Ascent, from Sanctuary to Synagogue[1]

By: ATON HOLZER

At the beginning of the discussion of the raucous festivities held during *ḥol ha-mo'ed Sukkot* weeknights in the Temple courtyard, the *simḥat beit ha-sho'evah*—which culminates at dawn in the drawing of water for the festival's water libation[2]—the Jerusalem Talmud introduces an unexpected element into the festivities:

> Rebbi Joshua ben Levi said, why is it called drawing festivity? For from there one was drawing the Holy Spirit, following *you shall draw water in rejoicing from the fountains of salvation*. … Rebbi Jonah said, Jonah ben Amittai belonged to the pilgrims, came to the water-drawing festivity and the Holy Spirit rested on him, to teach you that the Holy Spirit only rests on a happy heart. What is the reason? *It was when the musical instrument played, God's spirit was on him*. Rebbi Benjamin bar Levi said, it is not written here "it was when he played on the musical instrument," but *it was when the musical instrument played, God's spirit was on him*. (*ySukkah* 5:1)[3]

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2 The descriptions of the libation and festivities are discontinuous in the Mishnah text, but it seems likely that they were linked. See Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, "The Sukkot Temple Festival: Rabbinic Traditions," *A History of Sukkot in the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods* (Brown Judaic Studies, 2020) 103–162, p. 142.

3 Translation by Sefaria, archived at https://www.sefaria.org.il/Jerusalem_Talmud_Sukkah.5.1.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en and accessed on November 27, 2022.

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The Biblical text (Leviticus 23:40) describes celebration in the Temple throughout the Sukkot-holiday: "And you shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days." Exodus 34:22 refers to the Sukkot-holiday as *tekufat ha-shanah*, the "circuit" of the year, per Rashi; celebration of a festival with circuits of dance is explicitly mentioned later in the Bible (Judges 21:19–22), and some scholars[4] identify this unnamed "festival of the Lord" as none other than the default "*he-Ḥag*" throughout the Bible, the festival of Sukkot. The boisterous *simḥat beit ha-sho'evah* celebrations described in both Talmuds recall David's "leaping and dancing" (II Samuel 6:16) before the Ark in its procession, and both Maimonides (*Hilkhot Lulav* 8:16) as well as modern scholars[5] connect this to the Sukkot holiday. However, the connection to Divine inspiration in the context of the Sukkot-dances—and the particular form that the dances took, as described in detail in *mSukkah*—are elusive in pre-Rabbinic sources. One wonders if there existed a broader cultural context in which the structure and function of dance were intuitively obvious.

Hints of Egypt

The beginnings of a clue may lie in the subsequent passage in the *Jerusalem Talmud*, a citation from *Tosefta, Sukkah* 4:6, which similarly interrupts its own discussion of the *simḥat beit ha-sho'evah* to recall the glory of the Great Synagogue of Alexandria:

> Rabbi Yehudah said: Whoever has not seen the basilica-synagogue of Alexandria has never seen the great glory of Israel. It is something like a large colonnade, with porches (*stoa*) within porches, and accommodating sometimes double the number of those that followed Moses from Egypt. There were seventy-one golden chairs there, corresponding to the seventy-one elders, and each of the chairs was worth twenty-five myriad talents of gold. In the center was a wooden dais, and the sexton stood upon it with a scarf (as a flag) in his hand. At the close of each benediction he waved the scarf, and all the people answered "Amen." The people were not seated together, but the

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4 See e.g. Moses Hirsch Segal, "The Song of Songs," *Vetus Testamentum* 12:1 (1962), 470–490.

5 Benjamin D. Sommer, "A Commentary on Psalm 24," in Jeffrey Stackert, Barbara Nevling Porter, and David P. Wright, eds., *Gazing on the Deep: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Jewish Studies in Honor of Tzvi Abusch* (CDL Press, 2010), 495–515.

> goldsmiths were by themselves, the blacksmiths by themselves, the embroiderers by themselves, so that when a poor man came in he joined his fellow tradesmen, and in this way was enabled to obtain a means of livelihood.[6]

By the time of the Mishnah and Tosefta, the earliest records of the Oral Law, there existed two important centers of Jewish study and scholarship: Bavel—Parthian, then Sassanian, Persia—to the east, and Roman Palestine, Eretz Yisrael, to the west—*ma'aravah* for the Babylonian Talmud. But these works wistfully recall an earlier time in which an even larger and more influential center existed even further west, crowned by a several-hundred-thousand-strong community located in Alexandria, the heart of Hellenistic culture and civilization in late antiquity. This Greek-speaking population, which studied the Torah in Greek translation, supplied the Temple with many of its pilgrims during festivals, as well as some high priests, half-shekel taxes, and the Bronze Nicanor gates which adorned the main courtyard entrance to the east, among many other substantial contributions.[7] Its known output included the Septuagint, the lion's share of the Apocrypha, Jewish-themed plays such as that of Ezekiel the Tragedian, Jewish-themed epic poetry represented by what survives from Philo the poet, as well as philosophical works and allegorical Bible commentary reconciling Scripture with classical philosophy—which reach their apogee in the writings of Philo Judaeus.

The astounding success of this community in integration in economic, political, and social spheres both under Hellenistic and Roman rule, catalyzed the earliest documented manifestations of antisemitism, which came to a head in pogroms, first in 38 CE, again with the outbreak of the Great War in Judea in 66 CE, and finally, in the second-century uprising that lead to bloodshed so terrible that it is described alongside the calamities attendant to the destruction of the Second Temple in *Lamentations Rabbah* (1:16),[8] and lamented by the Talmud (*ySukkah* 5:1): "…at that moment the horn of Israel was trimmed and will not be restituted until the Son of David will come."

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[6] Translation by Sefaria, archived at https://www.sefaria.org/Tosefta_Sukkah.4.4?lang=bi and accessed on November 14, 2022.

[7] See extensive treatment in Jonathan R. Trotter, *The Jerusalem Temple in the Practice and Thought of Diaspora Jews During the Second Temple Period* (Brill, 2019).

[8] For a literary analysis of this work, Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Alexandria in the Literary Memory of the Rabbis: The Failure of Cultural Translation and the Textual Powers of Women," *Israel in Egypt: The Land of Egypt as Concept and Reality for Jews in Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period* (Brill, 2020), 367–396.

The community was effectively (albeit perhaps not entirely[9]) stamped out in the aftermath of its participation in that "Kitos war," the uprisings against Rome in 115–117 CE that were brutally put down by Trajan's general Lusius Quietus. The destruction of the Temple in 70 CE severed the bond between the Greek-speaking Jewry of the West and their Rabbinic Aramaic-speaking coreligionists of the East;[10] the destruction of Alexandrian Jewry likely ensured that the former would never stand on its own, and its works are known to us only by dint of their preservation by the early Church, which largely cannibalized the remainder of the Jewish West.[11]

What survives of the philosophy and exegesis of the Alexandrian Jewish community is mainly the work of one of its most outstanding protagonists, "eminent on all accounts,"[12] Philo Judaeus. His work laid the foundations of Scholasticism,[13] which dominated the subsequent millennium of Western philosophy, as well as Western mysticism—and ultimately Kabbalah—key concepts of which emerged from the neoplatonism of Plotinus, some of whose key concepts were first articulated by, and likely gleaned directly from, Philo.[14,15]

Platonist thinkers and thinking were ubiquitous throughout the Roman empire in the first century of the Common Era, teaching and spawning syncretistic movements and figures such as the Hermetism, Gnosticism and the theurgic compilers of the Chaldean Oracles. Their ideas, drawn from Plato's dialogues, colored the intellectual landscape of the entire Roman Empire, and their cultural impact was pervasive. The lion's share of their works and teachings was lost; it is most fortunate that Church fathers preserved much of Philo's.

Of all of Plato's treatises, that with the greatest degree of influence upon Philo—and the Middle Platonic movement to which he belonged—

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9 William Horbury, "Jewish Egypt in the Light of the Risings under Trajan," *Israel in Egypt: The Land of Egypt as Concept and Reality for Jews in Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period* (Brill, 2020), 345–366.

10 Arye Edrei and Doron Mendels, "A Split Jewish Diaspora: Its Dramatic Consequences," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 16 (2006) 91–137.

11 Arye Edrei and Doron Mendels, "A Split Jewish Diaspora: Its Dramatic Consequences II," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 17 (2008) 163–187.

12 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, xviii.8, § 1.

13 Harry Austryn Wolfson, "Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" (Harvard University Press, 1947).

14 Adam Afterman, "From Philo to Plotinus: The Emergence of Mystical Union," *The Journal of Religion* 93.2 (2013): 177–196.

15 Gregory E. Sterling, "Did Ancient Philosophers Read Philo?" *Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity: Studies in Honor of Johan C. Thom* (Brill, 2022): 37–62.

is the *Timaeus*, which sketches out Platonic cosmogony, cosmology, and theology.[16] From prehistory, across many cultures—Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, and Indian—it was noted that the position of the major constellations change in the night sky relative to sunrise, creating a sort of "dance" when viewed from the earth, with the east to west rotation complete over the course of a solar year; in the Bible, Judges 5:20 references "the stars in their courses." Less was known about what to make of the planets, which seemed to move at times in a retrograde pattern, but always with a narrow band of stars consisting of the constellations of the zodiac.

In Plato's *Timaeus*, the title character refined the picture of the heavens and described two patterns of "cosmic dance" within the beautiful cosmos fashioned by the Demiurge, visible in the night sky: the Circle of the Same, consisting of the stars, always in stable coordination with each other, and the Circle of the Different, the ecliptic, led by the sun, in which the four known planets and moon rotated around the ecliptic, each in a uniform matter that someday would be worked out by astronomers. For the *Timaeus*, the stars possess intelligence of the most refined type, tracing out their paths in perfect harmony, and are chariots for souls. In his *Phaedrus*, Plato elaborates on the chariot analogy—souls become encased in a mortal body when they are thrown off course of their revolutions, and the goal of life is to realign with the universe by means of education toward becoming a rational being, allowing the soul to reenter orbit once again.

Middle Platonists came to understand Plato as describing the cosmos as a product of a triadic set of Divine principles: roughly, but with wide variations, (1) a world-soul, itself a product of (2) the mind or universal intellect, itself a product of (3) the monistic One, good God. Plotinus and his neoplatonist successors integrated and refined the schema into a system of concentric emanations. In a "great chain of being" that emerges from the Platonic dialogues, non-material beings like angels, celestial bodies, and disembodied human souls exist ontologically, axiologically, and spatially above live human beings incarnated in a material body.

For Philo, the hierarchy is a bit different. Above and apart from the intelligible world, there is the eternal, changeless God; then—following the Stoics—there is the *logos*, the sum total of God's thoughts; then the *logoi spermatikoi*, the "rational seeds," the perfect Platonic forms that produce the sense-perceptible cosmos, which in turn give rise to phenomena and material things. The soul is capable of ascending at least part of the way back to its source through intellectual contemplation:

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[16] Douwe David Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Brill, 2016).

> On that single intellect of the universe, as on an archetype, the intellect in each individual human being was modelled. In a sense it is a god of the person who carries it and bears it around as a divine image. For it would seem that the same position that the Great Director holds in the entire cosmos is held by the human intellect in the human being. It is itself invisible, yet it sees all things. Its own nature is unclear, yet it comprehends the natures of other things. By means of the arts and sciences it opens up a vast network of paths, all of them highways, and passes through land and sea, investigating what is present in both realms. Next it is lifted on high and, after exploring the air and the phenomena that occur in it, it is borne further upwards towards the ether and the revolutions of heaven. Then, after being carried around in the dances of the planets and fixed stars in accordance with the laws of perfect music, and following the guidance of its love of wisdom, it peers beyond the whole of sense-perceptible reality and desires to attain the intelligible realm. And when the intellect has observed in that realm the models and forms of the sense-perceptive reality things which it had seen here, objects of overwhelming beauty, it then, possessed by a sober drunkenness, becomes enthused like the Corybants. Filled with another longing and a higher form of desire, which has propelled it to the utmost vault of the intelligibles, it thinks it is heading towards the Great King himself. But as it strains to see, pure and unmixed beams of concentrated light pour forth like a torrent, so that the eye of the mind, overwhelmed by the brightness, suffers from vertigo.[17]

The first stages of the ascent of the soul beyond the sense-perceptible realm involves "dancing with the stars." Elsewhere, in *De Vita Mosis*, 2.288, Philo clarifies that only Moses reached the highest level of ascent of the soul; Philo himself, in his earlier years, in which he dedicated his time to philosophy and contemplation, was always "borne aloft into the heights by inspiration in my soul and danced with the sun, moon, the whole heaven, and universe."[18]

The experience of mystical union is later described in first-person by Plotinus: "Many times it has happened: Lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-encentered; beholding a marvelous beauty; then, more than ever, assured of community with the

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[17] *On the Creation of the World* (*De Opificio Mundi*) 69–71, translation from David Runia, *On the Creation of the Cosmos: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Brill, 2001), 64.

[18] *De specialibus legibus* 3.1; translation by Gregory E. Sterling, in "Dancing with the Stars: The Ascent of the Mind in Philo of Alexandria," *Apocalyptic Literature and Mysticism in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (De Gruyter, 2018), 155–166.

loftiest order; enacting the noblest life, acquiring identity with the divine; stationing within It by having attained that activity; poised above whatsoever within the Intellectual is less than the Supreme" (*Enneads* 4:8:1). As for Philo—and possibly even Plato himself, if his *Seventh Letter* is authentic—ascent is facilitated by philosophic contemplation, but the ultimate experience of the Ineffable is not; all attempts at systematization, or even description, fail. Ultimate enlightenment is indescribable, a result of Divine initiative.

While Plotinus and his grand-student Iamblichus of Chalcis speak of mystical union for its own sake, the Chaldean Oracles, Mithras liturgy and other Platonizing works describe the process of ascension toward the Divine to obtain an oracle, often one which would inform the devotee how to improve his lot by magic or miracles.

Second Temple Jewry were keenly aware of the loss of prophets from their midst,[19] and moral leadership fell to other sorts of experts and functionaries. While Sadducees and other sectarian groups turned to the priesthood for this task, Pharisees, and ultimately all of Eastern Jewry, would come to look to the proto-Rabbinic teachers as their paragons of virtue. Among the Greek-speaking Alexandrian community, there was apparently a third model, of latter-day prophetic aspirants—along the Platonic model sketched out by Philo.

In his fourth treatise concerning virtues, *De Vita Contemplativa*, Philo assigns the category of religious elite in his society to a monastic group known as the Therapeutae, who lived in a communal enclave on a low hill by Lake Mariout, near Alexandria. This group is known to us solely through this work of Philo. These men and women abandoned their property and lived strictly ascetic, celibate and teetotaling lives devoted to "obtaining a sight of the living God," i.e., prophecy; in practice, immersing themselves in solitary scriptural study and philosophic contemplation.

The group assembled each Sabbath for communal studies in a sober spirit and frugal, plain, meals. In addition, a "greatest feast" was celebrated after the culmination of seven Sabbaths. After the meal came the climax of their festivities:

> **"[The Night-long Celebration, with Dance and Song in Procession]**
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> XI. (83) And after the feast they celebrate the sacred festival during the whole night; and this nocturnal festival is celebrated in the following manner: they all stand up together, and in the middle of the

[19] Benjamin D. Sommer, "Did Prophecy Cease? Evaluating a Reevaluation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115:1 (1996), 31–47.

entertainment two choruses are formed at first, the one of men and the other of women, and for each chorus there is a leader and chief selected, who is the most honorable and most excellent of the band. (84) Then they sing hymns which have been composed in honor of God in many metres and tunes, at one time all singing together, and at another moving their hands and dancing in corresponding harmony, and uttering in an inspired manner songs of thanksgiving, and at another time regular odes, and performing all necessary strophes and antistrophes.

(85) Then, when each chorus of the men and each chorus of the women has feasted separately by itself, like persons in the bacchanalian revels, drinking the pure wine of the love of God, they join together, and the two become one chorus, an imitation of that one which, in old time, was established by the Red Sea….

(87) When the Israelites saw and experienced this great miracle, which was an event beyond all description, beyond all imagination, and beyond all hope, both men and women together, under the influence of divine inspiration, becoming all one chorus, sang hymns of thanksgiving to God the Savior, Moses the prophet leading the men, and Miriam the prophetess leading the women.

(88) Now the chorus of Therapeutae and Therapeutrides [i.e., male and female] being formed, as far as possible on this model, makes a most harmonious concert, and a truly musical symphony, the shrill voices of the women mingling with the deep-toned voices of the men. The ideas were beautiful, the expressions beautiful, and the chorus-singers were beautiful; and the end of ideas, and expressions, and chorus-singers, was piety; (89) therefore, being intoxicated all night till the morning with this beautiful intoxication, without feeling their heads heavy or closing their eyes for sleep, but being even more awake than when they came to the feast, as to their eyes and their whole bodies, and standing there till morning, when they saw the sun rising they raised their hands to heaven, imploring tranquility and truth, and acuteness of understanding.

And after their prayers they each retired to their own separate abodes, with the intention of again practicing the usual philosophy to which they had been wont to devote themselves.

[Conclusion]

> (90) This then is what I have to say of those who are called Therapeutae, who have devoted themselves to the contemplation of nature, and who have lived in it and in the soul alone, being citizens of heaven and of the world, and very acceptable to the Father and Creator of the universe because of their virtue, which has procured them his love as their most appropriate reward, which far surpasses all the gifts of fortune, and conducts them to the very summit and perfection of happiness."[20]

Elsewhere, Philo explains the symbolism of the phonal-antiphonal dances: they reflect the dances of the cosmos.

> For the sight being sent upwards by light and beholding the nature of the stars and their harmonious movement, and the well-ordered revolutions of the fixed stars, and of the planets, some always revolving in the same manner and coming to the same places, and others having double periods in an anomalous and somewhat contrary manner, beholding also, the harmonious dances of all these bodies arranged according to the laws of perfect music, causes an ineffable joy and delight to the soul. (*On the Creation of the World*, 54)[21]

The idea of the cosmic dance and "dancing on high" —taking part in the exquisitely crafted chorus of the stars—with a multitude of variations—went on to become a central image and metaphor for later middle Platonists, Neoplatonists, Stoics, pagans, Gnostics and Christians,[22] and remained pervasive up until the upending of the dancing cosmos paradigm in the Copernican Revolution.

Philo describes the culmination of the dances of the Therapeutae in a striking manner: "When they saw the sun rising they raised their hands to heaven, imploring tranquility and truth, and acuteness of understanding." The rays of the sun come to play an outsized role for middle and neoplatonists as the instrument of *anagôgê*, the ascent of the soul to the Divine, by which it achieves immortality. First-century Platonizing works whose ideas were current contemporaneous with Philo—the Mithras liturgy,

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[20] Translation by C.D. Yonge, with adjustments by Robert Kraft, archived at http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rak/courses/999/therap.htm and accessed November 14, 2022.

[21] C.D. Yonge translation, archived at https://tiresias.haifa.ac.il/?subj=eyeyey:Philo_of_Alexandria@On_The_Creation_of_The_World@54-61 and accessed on November 14, 2022.

[22] James L. Miller, *Measures of Wisdom: The Cosmic Dance in Classical and Christian* Antiquity (University of Toronto Press, 1986).

which appears in the Greek magical papyri (PGM IV.475–834), and the Chaldean Oracles—both have ascent of the soul facilitated by greeting or "breathing in" the rays of the sun, which propel it beyond the elemental realm of the material to the ethereal realm of the stars, and pass the soul to Aion—which the sun represents in lower realms—to take in further, to the empyrean, noetic realm.[23] The heliocentric, syncretistic, neoplatonic metaphysics of Julian the Apostate—the "last gasp" and final reorganization of traditional religion—spotlights this theme, and the sun—King Helios—serves as both symbol and embodiment of the one God in all three realms of his emanation.[24]

For Philo, and Plotinus and Proclus centuries on, physical light is not properly Divine (as it is for the Chaldean Oracles), but it is more than just a metaphor for the Divine—it is a sensible copy of the intelligible Divine "light"[25] and is thus a fitting conduit for the soul toward mystical experience of, or union with, God.

From Mariout to Mikdash

As difficult as it is to imagine that the leader of the Jewish embassy to Caligula would not have been known to the proto-Rabbinic sages of the time, we have no evidence that Philo was known to Ḥazal. However, the first-century Mediterranean was awash in Platonic thought, the "science" of the day, and it seems inconceivable for there to have been no interchange between Platonic and Jewish thought and practice.

Can late antique Rabbinic sources accurately depict first-century realities and intellectual currents? Recent studies suggest that the Mishnah indeed preserves rituals that seem to reflect cultural assumptions that prevailed primarily or only in the Second Temple period, such as Enochic Jewish angelology,[26] Assyrian and Hittite plague-aversion strategies,[27] and

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23 Radcliffe G. Edmonds III, "Did the Mithraists Inhale?—A Technique for Theurgic Ascent in the Mithras Liturgy, the Chaldaean Oracles, and some Mithraic Frescoes," *Ancient World* 32:1 (2001), 10.

24 Nattania, Anthony Wayne, *The Emperor Julian (AD 331–363): His Life and His Neoplatonic Philosophy*, PhD Diss., Old Dominion University, 1996.

25 See summary of Clemens Baeumker in Isidoros Charalampos Katsos, *The Metaphysics of Light in the Hexaemeral Literature: From Philo of Alexandria to Ambrose of Milan*. PhD Diss., University of Cambridge, 2019.

26 Ishay Rosen-Zvi, "Between Biblical and Apocalyptic: The Making of the Scapegoat Ritual in *Mishnah Yoma*" (Hebrew), *Sidra* 34 (2021), 1–31, p. 23.

27 Noga Ayali-Darshan, "The Origin and Meaning of the Crimson Thread in the Mishnaic Scapegoat Ritual in Light of an Ancient Syro-Anatolian Custom," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 44.4–5 (2013), 530–552.

Roman adventus ceremonies;[28] in addition, neoplatonic thought was alive and well throughout the Mediterranean during the time of the Mishnah and Talmud. Also, we have external evidence for the Mishnah's descriptions—Tacitus (56–120), writing during or soon after the Second Temple period, reports that some confused the Temple Sukkot-rites with Dionysian ones. It would thus be unsurprising to find an authentic Mishnaic record of first-century dances that partake of the forms that structured Platonic dance, and even evidence that traces of their philosophical subtext continued to be understood in the time of the Talmud.

> It was stated, Rav Yehudah and Rav Eina: One teaches Drawing [*sho'evah*] and one teaches significant [*ḥashuvah*]. Mar Zutra said: The one who taught *sho'evah* is not mistaken, and the one who taught *ḥashuvah* is not mistaken. The one who taught *sho'evah* is not mistaken, as it is written: "And you shall draw [*ushavtem*] water with joy (Isaiah 12:3). And the one who taught *ḥashuvah* is not mistaken, as Rav Naḥman said: It is a significant *mitzvah* from the cosmogony [lit., six days of Creation]. (*bSukkah* 50b)

In his publication of Qumran fragment 4Q502,[29] the late rabbi and Dead Sea Scroll scholar Joseph Baumgarten described a number of affinities that elements in the scroll shared with both the dances of the Therapeutae and the *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah*. The kinship between the latter two is fleshed out by Jeffrey Rubenstein,[30] who notes the presence in both of hymns, songs, and praises; antiphonal harmony; choric dancing; separation of the sexes; ecstatic celebration; and encounter with the rising sun. He theorizes that the all-night celebration of the Therapeutae developed as an imitation of the temple festivities, and may perhaps have roots in an Essene ceremony documented in the aforementioned Qumran text.

It is also possible to construct a reverse hypothesis, as far as the flow of influence: despite having made the pilgrimage at least once, Philo seems unaware of the *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah*, and does not mention it in his description of the Sukkot festival in *De Legibus Specialibus* 33; given his enthusiasm for the dance of the Therapeutae, it seems a glaring oversight. Perhaps he visited for Passover or Shavu'ot, and did not witness it. Alternatively, one could propose that the form of the *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* that we know from Rabbinic sources crystallized in the decades after his

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[28] Hillel Mali, *Mi-Miqdash Le-Midrash, Descriptions of the Temple in the Mishnah: History, Redaction and Meaning* (Heb), Ph.D. Thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 2018, 26–74.

[29] Joseph M. Baumgarten, "4Q502, Marriage or Golden Age Ritual?" *The Journal of Jewish Studies* 34:2 (1983), 125–135.

[30] Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The History of Sukkot in the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods* (Scholars Press, 1995), 148–152.

visit, in the very same crucible of Middle Platonic thought that informed Philo's views and those of many of his Alexandrian coreligionists.

Many of the Temple festival participants, such as the well-educated Jews of the Greco-Roman diaspora, would have been moved by some interpretation of the cosmic dance of the Timaeus. In any case, by the time of the later Middle Platonist Plutarch (*Table Talks, Quaestiones convivales IV 6:2*), probably written soon after the Temple's destruction, the festivities of Sukkot were indeed mistaken for bacchanalian revels—but ostensibly of the sort that Philo praises, dances of "sober bacchants," like those of the Alexandrian ascetics.

When examined from the Philonic-Platonic lens, a structure for the Sukkot dance rituals comes into clearer focus.

The fourth chapter of *mSukkah* introduces the observances with a numerical summary which calls to mind Philo's neo-Pythagorean fondness for numbers, particularly six and seven:

> *Lulav* and willow branch, six or seven; the *Hallel* and the rejoicing, eight; *sukkah* and the water libation, seven. The flute, five or six.[31]

The Mishnah goes on to describe two "dances:" the *'aravah*-circumambulation around the altar in the Priestly area of the courtyard by day (4:5–6), and the *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* in the women's courtyard by night (5:1–4).

The *'aravah*-circumambulation is performed for a total of either twelve or thirteen times, thirteen only if the seventh day falls on the Sabbath; the number thus roughly parallels the rotations of the constellations over the course of the solar year. The constellations are the constituents of the Timaeus' Circle of the Same.

The *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* is celebrated for only five or six nights. The constituents of the Timaeus' Circle of the Different are the five planets known in antiquity, along with the moon, and the Sun—which of course is not visible in the night sky. This dance is represented by the flute, a musical instrument; Pythagoras' music of the spheres is a product of the orbital revolutions of the Sun, Moon, and planets, and so is relevant only to the Circle of the Different. The dances of the planetary bodies within the Circle of the Different are not regular but retrograde—wildly variable, involving juggling and acrobatics. As with Philo's Therapeutae, the Circle of the Same is masculine, the Circle of the Different feminine—but in the Temple, it is not the *gender* of the dancers but their *locus*; the night-time dance is done also by men, but in the women's courtyard.

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[31] Translations of Mishnah are from Sefaria, with minor modifications.

Another middle Platonist, writing in the generation after Philo, contributes an additional perspective on the dances. For Plutarch of Chaeronea, the aspects of the worldsoul that give rise to the Circles of the Same and Different find expression in the individual human soul as rational and irrational parts, respectively; "The one mode of protection, as it would seem, is to realize and remember always that our soul has its two sides: on the one side are truthfulness, love for what is honorable, and power to reason, and on the other side irrationality, love of falsehood, and the emotional element" *(Quomodo Adulator ab Amico Internoscatur 61)*. The irrational, passionate part of the soul is the source of evil, but virtuous souls manage to bring both parts into agreement.[32] The cosmic dance in the Temple likewise involves both parts—the sober, rational, regular circumambulation of the altar by day, and the irrational, eccentric performances at night. The Mishnah's symbol for the night dances is the *halil*, the flute—an instrument so associated with revelry, drunkenness, and excess in ancient Athens that its players and makers were expelled from the city.[33]

It is specifically at these night dances that the Sages were concerned for the irrational part of the soul—what they term the *yetzer ha-ra*—to the extent that a structural adjustment is made to the Temple, and there is a lengthy Talmudic digression on the topic of the evil inclination interjected here (*bSukkah* 52a–b). On the other hand, the dances spotlight a concern with virtue and achievement of balance within the soul, as seen in Tosefta (4:2): "Saints and pious men were dancing before them with torches, and saying words of praise. What were they saying? Happy is he who has not sinned, and whoever has sinned shall be forgiven. Some of them were saying, Happy am I whose youth has not shamed my old age, this was said by the pious men. And others of them were saying, Happy am I whose old age can atone for my youth, this was said by the penitents."[34]

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[32] Jan Opsomer, "Plutarch on the Division of the Soul," in R. Barney, T. Brennan, and C. Brittain (eds.), *Plato and the Divided Self* (Cambridge University Press, 2012): 311–330.

[33] Plato, *Republic*, 399d; *Symposium*, 176e. See analysis in Matthew Clemente, "Desire and the City: The Freedom and Tyranny of Being Human," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 22:1 (2021), 62–70.

[34] Translation by Sefaria.

After the Doings of the Land of Egypt, Wherein You Dwelt, Shall You Not Do: Dancing Differently

Rainmaking dances were (and to some extent, still are!)[35] a feature of Mediterranean religions during the autumn *Sukkot* season, particularly of the main agrarian cults of ancient Greece—those of Demeter and Persephone, and that of Dionysus. Circumambulations were carried out in the temples of Demeter, and frenzied, maenadic dances to the wine-god Dionysus were held both in and out of his shrines. Demeter rites in Arcadia even involved beating the ground with rods, ostensibly to arouse its fertility.[36] However, similar rites in the Temple were removed from association with idolatry in three important ways.

For one thing, by the first century, Greco-Roman paganism had undergone a metamorphosis. Platonist metaphysics had scientized, and thereby taken the sting out of what previously had been deemed '*avodah zarah*. By allegorizing the Greek pantheon as cosmic forces subordinate to and derivative of one Supreme God, and rationalizing many of the rites associated with them, the idolatrous sense of Greek ritual was vitiated. This methodology was applied by Platonist thinkers to many cults appropriated by the Roman empire. In the first century, Plutarch allegorized the Osiris myth, central to traditional Egyptian religion. In the second century, Numenius of Apamea went so far as to allegorize the Eleusian mysteries, the initiations to the cult of Demeter and Persephone that were considered the most sacred and secret of ancient Greek rites. In the third century, Porphyry of Tyre interpreted the Mithras cult—a widespread Roman mystery religion centered on an ancient pre-Zoroastrian Persian divinity—as an allegory for Platonic teachings regarding the ascent and descent of souls, although perhaps not entirely convincingly.[37]

For another, Philo and Hellenistic Jewish writers before him, Pseudo-Eupolemus, Artapanus and Aristobulus, posited a different direction of influence. They identified Moses as the true inventor of philosophy,[38] and Philo argued that this aspect of Moses' oeuvre was obscured by his need to address the entire people, and subsequently lost, to be recovered later

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35 Evy Johanne Håland, "Rituals of Magical Rain-Making in Modern and Ancient Greece: A Comparative Approach," *Cosmos: The Journal of the Traditional Cosmology Society* 17:2 (2005), 197–251.

36 Pausanias (8:15:3); see Lillian B. Lawler, "Beating Motifs in the Greek Dance," *The Classical Outlook* 21.6 (1944): 59–61.

37 Luciano Albanese, "Porphyry, the Cave of the Nymphs, and the Mysteries of Mithras," *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 58:1–4 (2018), 681–691.

38 René Bloch, Ancient Jewish Diaspora: Essays on Hellenism (Brill, 2022), 29.

by "the most holy Plato" (*Quod omnis probus 13*). Philo and his predecessors were thus comfortable with Platonic practices, and even to incorporate Greek philosophical teachings—and particularly Platonic ideas—into Torah interpretation, as their origins were ostensibly Jewish, in any event.[39]

Finally, boundaries were drawn. The Mishnah outlines a key difference between the *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* and the feast of the Therapeutae: where the all-night choroi of men and women in the dark would greet the rays of the sun in ecstasy, the Temple celebrants would turn their back on it. "[When] they reached the gate which exits to the east, they turned from east to west, and said: Our ancestors who were in this place 'with their backs toward the Sanctuary of the Lord, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east' (Ezekiel 8:16), and we, our eyes are to God. Rabbi Yehudah says they would repeat and say: We are to God, and our eyes are to God" (5:4).

In the Temple, the celebration was carried out against the memory of First Temple idolatrous excesses condemned by Ezekiel 8. The Mishnah's use of this text may owe to the fact that each practice identified by Ezekiel corresponded to a means of mystical ascent and oracular evocation in the Greco-Roman milieu.

a. The depiction of an idol (*semel*) at the northern gate of the courtyard (Ezekiel 8:5) brings to mind the process of *telestikê*, fashioning statues out of *symbola*—objects that connect the human and divine worlds. The statue serves as a "receiver" to which a divinity can be drawn down to dispense oracles.[40]
b. The portrayal of incense rituals for graven image worship in the darkness (8:12) recalls solicitation of dream visions via incubation rituals, as well as underground Mithraea engraved with symbols of the cosmos for initiation rites; the Mishnah takes pains to note that despite the nighttime cover of darkness, "there was not a

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[39] Nonetheless, the core of Philo's ideas was Jewish doctrine, and the second president of Yeshiva University, Samuel Belkin, devoted his life's work to successfully uncovering precursors to both the aggadic and halakhic traditions of the land of Israel within Philo's oeuvre. See Samuel Belkin, *The Midrash of Philo*, ed. Elazar Hurvitz (Yeshiva University Press, 1989), 15–21. In the case of a conflict between Hellenistic philosophy and proto-Rabbinic tradition—such as in the matter of the significance of repentance, which is virtually absent in the former and central in the latter—Philo ultimately privileges the latter. See David Winston, "Philo's Doctrine of Repentance," in John Peter Kenney, ed., *The school of Moses: studies in Philo and Hellenistic religion. In memory of Horst R. Moehring.* (*Studia Philonica monographs* 1, 1995), 29–40.

[40] Sarah Iles Johnston, "Magic and Theurgy," David Frankfurter, ed., *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Brill, 2019), 694–719, esp. pp. 713–716.

courtyard in Jerusalem that was not illuminated from the light of the Place of the Drawing" (*mSukkah* 5:3). *bSukkah* 53a further attests: "It is taught, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananyah said: When we would rejoice in the Celebration of the Place of the Drawing, we did not see sleep in our eyes the entire Festival."

c. The view of women lamenting as part of the fertility cult of Tammuz (Ezekiel 8:14), the Sumerian Dumuzid, a dying and rebirthing homolog of Persephone/Adonis/Dionysus and Osiris (and in some accounts, Mithras), restored from death by his lover—in a ritual cycle which included orgies—brings to mind the role for eros in mystical ascent. In Plato's Symposium, the prophetess Diotima explains to Socrates that philosophical ascent to the realm of forms is best achieved by beginning with love for a particular body. In the Temple, "they would introduce a significant repair" for separation of the sexes (*mSukkah* 5:2).
d. For the last infraction, sun-worship, the verse (8:16) is cited explicitly in the Mishnah. The sun would be greeted by their backs, its seven rays ignored entirely—Mithras had no place in the *Mikdash*.

Philo himself may betray some sense of the tension with similarities to Greco-Roman ritual praxis; he takes pains to contrast the symposium of the Therapeutae with that of the Greeks, and also digresses to link the form of the dances of the Therapeutae to the dances of the Israelites at the Song of the Sea. In this manner, even if there are similarities to Eleusinian, Bacchic, and Mithraic dancing rites, no matter—their *choroi* must be regarded as fully, authentically Jewish. The Temple dances employed a different strategy for differentiation: important differences in the practices themselves underscored that even if the form of the celebration conformed to philosophical dance—science—of its day, any similarities with other cults were purely superficial and coincidental.

Why the Temple? Dancing with the Cosmos, or Anagôgê in the Synagogue

Why would the Temple be a logical locus for cosmic dance? Philo articulates a theme that becomes central in Renaissance Jewish and Christian thought:[41] the Temple symbolizes the cosmos. In one of several salient passages, he writes:

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[41] Matt Goldish, "Some Trends in Temple Studies from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment," *The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah* (Brill, 2011), 303–328.

> (66) We ought to look upon the universal world as the highest and truest temple of God, having for its most holy place that most sacred part of the essence of all existing things, namely, the heaven; and for ornaments, the stars; and for priests, the subordinate ministers of his power, namely, the angels, incorporeal souls, not beings compounded of irrational and rational natures, such as our bodies are, but such as have the irrational parts wholly cut out, being absolutely and wholly intellectual, pure reasonings, resembling the unit. (67) But the other temple is made with hands; for it was desirable not to cut short the impulses of men who were eager to bring in contributions for the objects of piety, and desirous either to show their gratitude by sacrifices for such good fortune as had befallen them, or else to implore pardon and forgiveness for whatever errors they might have committed. He moreover foresaw that there could not be any great number of temples built either in many different places, or in the same place, thinking it fitting that as God is one, his temple also should be one. (*De Specialibus Legibus* 66–67)

The idea that Philo sets forth is not new; it is implicit in many Biblical, and later, Midrashic passages. It is also made explicit in Second Temple literature from the land of Israel, in particular, the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* in Qumran, which present an angelic liturgy in the macrocosmic Temple that is to be imitated, and thereby joined, in the earthly one.[42] The theme of joining the angels in praise survives to this day in the *Kedushah* prayer,[43] which, in its position in the blessings of the *Shema*, is situated within a description of the functions of the astral and planetary bodies. The non-angelic components of the ethereal realm—the stars and planets—are respectively joined by the circumambulating pilgrims in the *'aravah*-circuits and the *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'eva* as they orbit the *axis mundi* in the Temple microcosmos.

To dance with the stars implies, for Philo and his middle- and late-Platonist intellectual descendants, the ascent of the soul toward its luminous, hypercosmic source. But how can the soul ascend if the sun's rays are absent, or if, even when present, they must be ignored? Here, another enigmatic Mishnah (5:2–3) proves instructive:

> At the conclusion of the first Festival they descended to the women's courtyard, where they would introduce a significant repair. There were golden candelabra there. And four basins of gold at the top.

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[42] James Davila, "The Macrocosmic Temple, Scriptural Exegesis, and the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 9:1 (2002), 1–19.

[43] Joseph L. Angel, "The Second Temple of Jerusalem: Center of the Jewish Universe," *Jewish Religious Architecture* (Brill, 2019), 51–71.

> And four ladders for each and every [candelabra], and four children from the priesthood trainees, and in their hands pitchers of 120 *log* that they would pour into each and every basin. From the worn trousers of the priests and their belts they would loosen and tear strips, and with them they would light. And there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that was not illuminated from the light of the Place of the Drawing.

ySukkah (5:2) indicates that these were no ordinary light fixtures, but miraculous beacons, Pharos-like wonders of the ancient world.

> "Golden candelabra were there." Bar Qappara said, their height was 100 cubits. But did we not state, anything reaching 100 cubits needs a basis of 33? A ladder on one side and 33, and a ladder on the other side and 33; but was it not stated, the entire courtyard was only 187 long by 135 wide? It was found stated: Their place was by a wonder.

Lynchnomanteia, or lamp-divination, appears in the Greek magical papyri as a means of *phôtagôgia*, bringing in divine light for encounter with a deity.[44] However, the power of the *beit ha-sho'evah* lamps suggest something more—the sun-like illumination of the soul to facilitate *anagôgê*, ascent. In place of the seven rays of Helios, ascent in the temple precinct takes place by gaze into the light of blindingly powerful lamps, four in number—the light of the Tetragrammaton (cf. Isaiah 2:5).

The Bible does not provide any evidence that prophecy proceeded in the manner envisioned by Platonic thinkers; on the contrary, the selection of prophets from among shepherds, farmers, and sycamore tenders, and the abrupt descent of the Divine spirit on untrained individuals such as King Saul seems to be clear evidence that Biblical prophecy is not best conceived as the culmination of a contemplative process.[45] In contrast, like Philo, most of the medieval Jewish philosophers—deeply influenced by Plotinus and Aristotle—viewed prophecy as an experience that may manifest upon the culmination of philosophical and moral perfection.[46] The picture in Ḥazal, the classical Rabbinic sources, is somewhat mixed. The Babylonian Talmud views the phenomenon of prophecy in perhaps a more Biblical manner, and views it with a somewhat jaundiced eye,[47] for

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44 Johnston, "Magic and Theurgy," 709–711.

45 Michael Fishbane, "Biblical Prophecy as a Religious Phenomenon," *Jewish Spirituality I* (1986), 62–81.

46 Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2003), 587–640.

47 Louis H. Feldman, "Prophets and Prophecy in Josephus," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 41:2 (1990), 386–422.

example, casting the prophet as inferior to the sage and asserting that, in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction, prophecy was given to imbeciles and children (*bBava Batra* 12a–b).

The sages of Byzantine Palestine, immersed in a Christianizing Greco-Roman milieu, and generally somewhat less averse to non-Rabbinic paradigms of virtue,[48] appear to hew to a more Platonic view. *Kohelet Rabbah* (1:8) records the view of Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥman: "All the good, the blessings, and the comforts that the prophets saw in this world, they did not see them effortlessly, but rather, it was because they contemplated, and performed mitzvot and righteousness." Likewise, the Jerusalem Talmud here recognizes the *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* dance of the cosmos as a vehicle of metaphysical ascent, and identifies Jonah—who begs *osif le-habit*, to *gazing* once again "toward your Holy Temple" (2:5)—as one who achieved mystical ascent by gazing in the Temple precincts, ostensibly lifted by the rays of light of the *beit ha-sho'evah*.

Do we have any account of oracles received upon achievement of cosmic ascent and mystical union? Perhaps so. *bSukkah* 53a presents a version of Tosefta in which Hillel the Elder—elsewhere identified as a worthy candidate for prophecy, had it been available in his time (*tSotah* 13:4, *ySotah* 9:13) —makes two pronouncements apparently in the name of God:

> It is taught: They said about Hillel the Elder that when he was rejoicing at the Celebration of the Place of the Drawing he said this: If I am here, all is here; and if I am not here, who is here? He would say this: To the place that I love, there my feet take me, If you come to My house, I will come to your house; if you do not come to My house, I will not come to your house, as it is stated: "In every place that I cause My name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you" (Exodus 20:21).

It would seem that the two statements refer to (1) the temples as microcosmos—all (*ha-kol*) is here, but only if God is present; and (2) the importance of the Sukkot-pilgrimage as an initiatory rite; mystical union is not possible for those who have not partaken of the cosmic dances in the Temple courtyards.[49]

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[48] Richard Kalmin, "Rabbinic Portrayals of Biblical and Post-Biblical Heroes," Shaye J. D. Cohen, ed., *The Synoptic Problem in Rabbinic Literature* (Brown Judaic Studies, 2020), pp. 119–142.

[49] The idea of cosmic ascent by means of light may lie at the root of another ritual practice. The late antique (likely) Eretzisraeli post-Talmudic tractate *Soferim* (20:4, Higger edition, p. 343) contains a liturgical text to be recited when kindling

Drawing Down Divinity—and Rain: Neoplatonic Theurgy in the Talismanic Temple

One other concept which seems to have reached maturity in the fertile landscape of first-century middle Platonic thought is that of the talisman. The great Stoic philosopher Posidonius of Apamea had formulated the idea of "cosmic sympathy"—that activity in one part of the universe, e.g., the created realm can affect another, e.g., the divine one—and this concept was accepted by Platonists, finding definitive expression in the works of Plotinus and Iamblichus. The concept finds physical embodiment in talismans, objects that operate on the universe and thereby effectuate this principle. In the first century, the neo-Pythagorean philosopher and wonder-worker Apollonius of Tyana became known for his use of talismans

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the Ḥanukkah light which includes the declaration that "these candles are sacred," and therefore proscribed from mundane use, "only to be looked upon." This becomes an oft-cited source for the pan-Ḥassidic custom to engage in candle-gazing, with legends of early Ḥassidic masters performing this Jewish version of yogic *trataka* for up to six or seven hours after kindling (See sources cited in Eliezer Kestenbaum, ed., *Pardes Eliezer—Ḥanukkah 1* (Brooklyn, 2004), 221–225). Some early Ḥassidic greats and one pre-Ḥassidic rough contemporary were reported to have experienced various sorts of clairvoyance from such meditation (ibid., 264–265). An early Ḥassidic source, R. Ḥayyim Halberstam of Sanz, has a lengthy disquisition on the subject (*Divrei Ḥayyim* p. 39a), in which he reaches a familiar conclusion: that the practice is directed toward mystical unity of the worshipper with the esoteric Divine "surrounding light."

The practice of kindling Ḥanukkah lamps is absent from the books of Maccabees, and its origins are a mystery; Josephus (Antiquities 12:7:6–7) is mystified as to how the holiday became associated with light. While the Babylonian Talmud and the scholion of the Scroll of Fasts link the holiday to kindling of the menorah in the Temple's sanctum, R. Barukh ha-Levi Epstein noted that another late antique source, the *'al ha-nissim* insertion in the *'amidah* liturgy, remarks that the Hasmoneans "kindled lights in the sacred *courtyards*"—the outside space of the Temple—and concluded that it refers to lights such as those of the *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah*. This coheres with the account in II Maccabees which has Ḥanukkah cast as a belated observance of the "feast of Booths and of the fire" (1:18). It is difficult to imagine that the Ḥassidic practice is ancient and continuous with an anterior practice of gazing toward the *beit ha-sho'evah* lamps. However, it may not be a stretch to propose that the origins of the former lie in Platonic ideas similar to those that inspired the latter, which arrived to Eastern European Jewry by the diffusion of Lurianic Kabbalah, or specifically to the Ḥassidic movement, through remnants of Sufi thought in formerly Ottoman Podolia (see Paul B. Fenton, "Judaism and Sufism," *History of Islamic Philosophy* (Routledge, 2020), 755–768).

for public services such as prevention of tsunamis, and many other applications in his afterlife as Balinus in Islamicate magical works.[50] For Iamblichus, ritual and magical acts performed within the neopythagorean-Platonic framework are "lived philosophy," a higher form of philosophy than mere contemplation.

The conception of the Temple as a giant talisman—not merely a microcosmos, but an object in and upon which acts had significance as "sympathetic magic," capable of influencing nature and higher orders of reality—emerges unambiguously in Jewish (and non-Jewish) sources in the Renaissance,[51] but there is evidence that Jews of antiquity held these views, as well. In his *Biblical Antiquities*, the early first-century author of Pseudo-Philo to Leviticus 23:40 writes,

> Also the feast of tabernacles bring you to me: you shall take for me the pleasant fruit of the tree, and boughs of palm-tree and willows and cedars, and branches of myrrh: and I will remember the whole earth in rain, and the measure of the seasons shall be established, and I will order the stars and command the clouds, and the winds shall sound and the lightnings run abroad, and there shall be a storm of thunder, and this shall be for a perpetual sign. (13:7)

The bringing of the lulav-bundle to the Temple—where it is brought into orbit in a hosanna-circuit—is depicted here as a theurgic instrument which brings about precipitation. The calling forth of rain via theurgy and sympathetic magic is a theme among Platonic and Platonizing figures, with Julian the Theurgist—the ostensible author of the Chaldean Oracles—bringing down rain to parched, encircled Roman soldiers during the Marcomannic wars,[52] and late neoplatonist Proclus bringing down rain to drought-afflicted Athens by ascent in virtue to the point of greater freedom—along with power over rain,[53] mediated by a iynx, a spinning device.

The superstructure of the dances in the Temple appears consistent with its talismanic resonance. First, a nighttime dance culminates in the

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50 Manuel Álvarez Martí-Aguilar. "Talismans against Tsunamis: Apollonius of Tyana and the Stelai of the Herakleion in Gades (VA 5.5)," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 57:4 (2017), 968–993.

51 Goldish, "Some Trends," ibid.

52 Péter Kovács, *Marcus Aurelius' Rain Miracle and the Marcomannic Wars* (Brill, 2009).

53 Christoph Helmig and Antonio LC Vargas, "Ascent of the Soul and Grades of Freedom. Neoplatonic Theurgy between Ritual and Philosophy," Pieter D' Hoine, Gerd van Riel & Carlos G. Steel (eds.), *Fate, Providence and Moral Responsibility in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought: Studies in Honour of Carlos Steel* (Leuven University Press, 2014), 253–266.

drawing of water to be poured on the altar, filled with earth (*Mekhilta de-Rabi Yishma'el, Yitro* 11) and the locus of primordial soil (*Genesis Rabbah* 14:8); next, the daytime dance culminates in the dressing of that same altar with willow-trees. The procedure enacts the rain cycle and the foliation of the ground. Within the nighttime dances we find elements not entirely dissimilar from theurgic rituals. Akin to spinning iynges, Rabban Shim'on ben Gamliel would juggle eight torches (*tSukkah* 4:3), symbolic perhaps of the ogdoad, the seven planetary spheres and that of the fixed stars; his death- and disability-defying acrobatics (cf. *bSukkah* 53a) call to mind Proclean descriptions of acts to symbolically "kill" the body to facilitate the soul's release toward ascent.[54] By dint of their virtue and theurgic activities, the Rabbis and other revelers ascended On High, encountered the Divine, and brought down rain and fertility for the ensuing agricultural year.

A Dance Deferred

Its Platonic century was to be the Temple's last. With the great talisman gone, mystical ascent was no longer the prerogative of the masses; it became abstract and abstruse, the endeavor of a select few, whose soul-chariots could no longer ascend to the heavens but were instead left to plumb the depths within—the *yordei merkavah*—and their output was consigned to the category of Jewish esoterica. While a pale reflection of the hosanna-cycles was preserved in the synagogue service, *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* seems to have been completely forgotten in terms of commemorative liturgy. In the ensuing century, the tug of war between East and West came to be decided in favor of the former. The center of gravity of Rabbinic scholarship gradually shifted to Zoroastrian lands where Babylonian Jewry—ensconced comfortably since before the presocratics—had entirely missed the Platonizing winds that buffeted the Mediterranean basin. With the destruction of Alexandrian Jewry and Byzantine constriction of scholarship in the Holy Land, a Judaism emerged which eschewed philosophical discourse,[55] which forgot Philo, "and all his brethren, and all that generation." Albeit only for a short time—until the second Abbasid caliph in Baghdad commissioned the translation of Greek classics into Arabic, and began a process of Platonically-tinged Aristotelization that culminated in medieval Jewish philosophy and Kabbalistic mysticisms.

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[54] Johnston, "Magic and Theurgy," 718.

[55] See discussion in Eliezer Segal, ""The Few Contained the Many': Rabbinic Perspectives on the Miraculous and the Impossible," *JJS* 54 (2003): 273–82.

Did Any Trace of *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* Remain?

In 1964, Avraham Ya'ari published a landmark monograph on the origins of the *Simḥat Torah* holiday. He lays out his key premise in the opening paragraph of the book:

> The festival of *Simḥat Torah* that we celebrate in our day in the Land of Israel on the eighth day of the Sukkot festival, *Shemini 'Aẓeret* (22 *Tishrei*), and in all the diasporas on the ninth day, out of doubt that it is the eighth (23 *Tishrei*), is a festival that was born in Babylonia, and in the Land of Israel they did not celebrate it at all until the end of the Geonic period. The essence of the holiday is due to the fact that on that day they finished reading the five books of the Law, and after all, only in Babylonia did they finish the Torah once a year. But in the Land of Israel, they finished the Torah once every three years, and some of them once every three and a half years, and they could not celebrate the festival of completion on one set day of the year.[56]

This insight becomes an interpretive key to the massive body of evidence that Ya'ari collects regarding the development of the day's unique rituals and customs. For example, he writes, "and if you ask me, 'don't we find in prayerbooks and *maḥẓorim* and in *piyyut*-collections in manuscript and in print several *piyyutim* for *Simḥat Torah* that were definitely written by Eretzisraeli *paytanim*?', I will answer you that these *piyyutim* were only composed as *kerovot*-liturgy for the [ultimate] Torah portion of '*ve-zot ha-berakhah,"* that is read in the Land of Israel on one of the [ordinary, non-festival] Sabbaths. And from when Babylonian Jews instituted the practice to read the portion of '*ve-zot ha-berakhah*' on the ninth day of the Sukkot holiday, the second festival day of *Shemini 'Aẓeret*, they made use of those Eretzisraeli *piyyutim* for this day…"[57]

Ya'ari's compendium remains the definitive work on the subject. However, in the world of *piyyut*, a quiet revolution began with liturgy scholar Ezra Fleischer's 1983 publication of a Genizah manuscript (T-S NS 135.10) of *piyyutim* for the Shabbat before the ninth of Av composed by the great sixth-century Eretzisraeli *paytan* R. Eleazar ha-Kalir.[58] Among the poems is one which describes how each of the holidays was ruined by the Temple's destruction; astoundingly, one of them, which immediately

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[56] Abraham Ya'ari, *History of the Simḥat Torah Festival* (Heb.), (Mossad HaRav Kook, 1964), 15.

[57] Ibid., 17.

[58] Ezra Fleischer, "A List of Early Holidays in a Piyyut by Qiliri," (Heb.) *Tarbiẓ* 52:1–3 (1983), 223–272.

follows the paragraph on *Shemini ʿAṣeret*, is *yom simḥat Torah u-verakhah*, whose merriment has been replaced with lamentation.

The publication generated a multiplicity of theories. David Rosenthal adduced evidence that the yearly Torah-reading cycle was followed somewhere in late antique Palestine, perhaps the practice of a synagogue of Babylonian Jews which followed that rite.[59] Shlomo Naeh[60] suggested that the three-and-a-half year Eretzisraeli cycle is actually half of a septennial cycle which culminates at the time of *hakhel*—the gathering of the entire nation after the Sukkot following the sabbatical year. The referent in the Kaliric poem is to the septennial celebration of *Simḥat Torah* on the day after *Shemini ʿAṣeret*, in commemoration of the day of *hakhel*-assembly. Fleischer[61] rejects this theory as incompatible with the sources, and argues the evidence actually supports the view that the original system in the Land of Israel was the *yearly* cycle, and that the three-year cycle was a later innovation, one for which the Mishnah advocates, but which was never fully accepted.[62]

The corollary of this view is that indeed, *Simḥat Torah*, celebrated on or soon after *Shemini ʿAṣeret*, has its origins in the Holy Land, and caps a practice of Torah reading that is anterior to the Mishnah, one with origins that may date back even to the time of the Second Temple.[63]

Dancing is attested in the earliest evidence of the celebration in Bavel, in Geonic responsa from the ninth century.[64] However, there is no reference to seven circumambulations—*hakafot*—with the Torah scrolls in Geonic Babylonia or medieval Europe; these are first seen in *shaʿar hakavvanot* of R. Ḥayyim Vital (*Ḥag ha-Sukkot, derush* 2), who reports, from

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59 David Rosenthal. "The Torah Reading in the Annual Cycle in the Land of Israel," *Tarbiẓ* 53:1 (1983), 144–148.

60 Shlomo Naeh. "The Torah Reading Cycle in Early Palestine: A Re-Examination," *Tarbiẓ* 67:2 (1998) 167–87.

61 Ezra Fleischer, "Remarks Concerning the Triennial Cycle of the Torah Reading in Eretz Israel," *Tarbiẓ* 73:1 (2003), 83–124. See Naeh's response, "On the Septennial Cycle of the Torah Reading in Early Palestine," *Tarbiẓ* 74:1 (2004), 43–75.

62 Ezra Fleischer, "Inquiries Concerning the Triennial Reading of the Torah in Ancient Eretz-Israel," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 62 (1991) 43–61.

63 See sources for early practices of Torah reading in Clemens Leonhard, "The Origins of Torah Reading as a Ritual and Its Social Context," in Lutz Doering and Andrew R. Krause, eds., *Synagogues in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage, 2020), 277–294. In contrast to Fleischer, Leonhard suggests that the Torah-reading *cycles* emerged only after the Mishnah.

64 Yaʿari, *History*, 24.

Safed: "the day of *Simḥat Torah*, that which they were accustomed to remove the scrolls from the ark and also to circumambulate the lectern with them, in the morning, in the afternoon, and at night following yom tov, it is a true custom…" He further reports that R. Isaac Luria (Ari) was careful to dance with the Torahs and "to dance and sing before it with all his might," with seven complete *hakafot* on the night after the festival as he had done on the day of the festival—and he would go from synagogue to synagogue and repeat the seven circumambulations as he went along his way "and found another synagogue that had prolonged their *hakafot*, and would return to circumambulate with them." Against Ya'ari,[65] the *hakafot* on and after *Simḥat Torah* in multiple synagogues in Safed appear not to be a Lurianic innovation, but rather a pre-existing custom in which the Ari enthusiastically participated.

The 1731 collection of mainly Eretzisraeli Kabbalistic (and some Sabbatean) material published by R. Israel Yaakov Algazi, *Ḥemdat Yamim*, urges the contemporary introduction of celebration of *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* in synagogues (part 3, 6:2–5). He continues: "And those who exempt themselves from commemorating the *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* with *Simḥat Torah*, have accomplished nothing, for the commemoration need be total, and not partial, similar to the circumambulations of altar every day, and [one] does not suffice with the seven circumambulations of the day of *Hoshanna Rabbah*, and so is this matter… he should know and understand the greatness of the degree of exaltation of these days, and [one] should not forfeit even a moment of them from cleaving unto the Lord our God." As Ya'ari points out,[66] *Ḥemdat Yamim* reveals that there were those among the circles of Kabbalists in the Land of Israel who saw *Simḥat Torah* as a commemoration, or even instantiation, of *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah*. The author does not disagree with this interpretation, but argues that it is insufficient; *Simḥat Torah* is indeed the climax of *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* but the prior days' celebrations must also be observed.

Could this Eretzisraeli version of *Simḥat Torah*—raucous circumambulations reminiscent of the cosmic dances, with the awareness that the festivities replace the *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* displaced from the Second Temple—have a long pedigree, harking back to the days when Platonists still roamed the Levant? Indeed, Moshe Idel notes[67] that R. Isaac Luria, in several contexts, adopted and adapted customs and traditions from the remnants of those who observed *minhag Eretz Yisrael* and other Jewish

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65 Ibid., 266.

66 Ibid., 359.

67 Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (Yale University Press, 1998), 423.

groups that had been all but stamped out in the Crusades and persecutions of prior centuries.

We will not find it in the "canonical" Rabbinic literature of the Land of Israel—Mishnah, Tosefta, Midrash, Talmud Yerushalmi—which in the main hewed to the three-and-a-half-year cycle, obliviating *Simḥat Torah*. However, we may have a hint to this effect in another work of the same liturgical poet who revealed the ancient Eretzisraeli observance—his own observance—of *Simḥat Torah*. The *piyyutim* of Kalir for *Shemini 'Atzeret* mention *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah* relatively frequently, and to a greater extent than those for *Sukkot*.[68] In one *piyyut*,[69] *Shemini 'Atzeret* is conflated with the day of redemption, when the Temple is restored; on that day—i.e., today—"just as in the joy of *sho'evah* they sought Him, so too with the joy of drawing (from the wellsprings of salvation) they will seek Him; just as with the flute of five and six they praised Him, so with flute-led circle-dances they will encircle Him." The joy of *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah*, clearly identified as that of seeking God, anagogic ascent—is extended to the eighth, the day upon which salvation will arrive (Isaiah 12:3) and the circumambulation will be done around God Himself (cf. *bTa'anit* 31a). One can perhaps visualize seventh-century Jews singing this Kaliric *piyyut* while circumambulating the zodiac mosaics which adorned so many Byzantine synagogue floors (some even with King Helios in the center!)[70]—dancing with the stars.

The earliest *piyyut* that found its way into the *Simḥat Torah* liturgy is one which predates the age of the *paytanim*, the content of a blessing in the Eretzisraeli tradition, *Asher Biglal Avot Banim Gidal*. The poem is an encomium to Moses against the background of the events of the Sinai revelation and Moses' death. The climax of the acrostic is Moses' unparalleled heavenly ascent: "Go, Moses, rejoice in your greatness, for there is none like you among all the prophets. Who ascended the heaven into the cloud, and who beheld the image of our God? Moses ascended into the cloud, and also perceived the image of our God."

The praise of Moses' unparalleled divine ascent at the occasion of reading of his death calls to mind Philo: "And some time afterwards, when he was about to depart from hence to heaven, to take up his abode there,

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68 Prof. Shulamit Elizur, personal communication. She notes that this could be for purely technical reasons, as there are simply more topics to be covered in *sukkot piyyutim*—the sukkah, four species, etc.

69 Daniel Goldschmidt and Jonah Frankel, *Maḥzor Sukkot Shemini 'Atzeret ve-Simḥat Torah* (Koren, 1981), 389. I am indebted to Prof. Elizur for this reference.

70 Jodi Magness, "Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 59 (2005), 1–52.

and leaving this mortal life to become immortal, having been summoned by the Father, who now changed him, having previously been a double being, composed of soul and body, into the nature of a single body, transforming him wholly and entirely into a most sun-like mind; he then, being wholly possessed by inspiration, does not seem any longer to have prophesied comprehensively to the whole nation altogether, but to have predicted to each tribe separately what would happen to each of them, and to their future generations, some of which things have already come to pass, and some are still expected, because the accomplishment of those predictions which have been fulfilled is the clearest testimony to the future" (*De Vita Mosis* 2:288).

Seen as the culmination of *Simḥat Beit ha-Sho'evah*, by which Jewish pilgrims managed to achieve *anagôgê,* to dance on high, heading toward the Great King, *Simḥat Torah* aims to go one step beyond—to the realm *above* the stars, past the pure and unmixed beams of concentrated light, to reach the empyrean realm where only one man has gone before. And this time, to draw down not rain, but redemption itself.

While R. Isaac Luria has a remarkably well-ordered system to account for the theurgical meaning of the *'aravah*-circumambulations—in the context of a broader theory which spans the sundering of the Divine feminine on Rosh Hashanah to its *hieros gamos* on *Shemini 'Atzeret*—there is nothing in his oeuvre to explain the hakafot of *Simḥat Torah*, in which he participated so enthusiastically. While kabbalist R. Shalom Sha'arabi linked the latter to *keter*—the ultimate, crowning emanation that completes the *sefirot* of *'or makif* drawn down in the *'aravah*-circumambulations of the prior week—R. Yaakov Hillel (*Sefat ha-Yam Sukkot*, 6) argues that this has no basis in the writings of the Ari. Rather, the *Simḥat Torah* dances have no *kavannot*. Systematization and description fail at this level, at the apophatic path of enlightenment by the Indescribable and Ineffable. ☙