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**“A Sage Understands of His Knowledge” (*mHag 2:1*).
Degrees and Hierarchy of Knowledge in Abraham
Abulafia¹**

“Um sage de seu entendimento entende” (mHag 2:1). Graus e hierarquia do conhecimento em Abraham Abulafia

Abstract

This paper addresses the degrees and hierarchies of esoteric knowledge as they are stipulated in the thirteen Century kabbalist Abraham Abulafia. The stating point is a well-known Rabbinic statement: «a sage understands of his own knowledge». This Rabbinic dictum resonates also in Abulafia's kabbalistic texts and designates the need for an autonomous understanding of a esoteric topic that is either difficult or subject to secrecy. In his *Or ha-Sekhel (The Light of the Intellect)*, Abulafia largely elaborates on degrees and hierarchies of esoteric knowledge and distinguishes between three progressive epistemological degrees. As a result of this, Abulafia stipulates a three-ranked hierarchy of knowledge: wisdom, intelligence, and knowledge.

Keywords: Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmud, Kabbalah.

Medieval Authors: Abraham Abulafia.

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Resumo

Este artigo analisa os graus e hierarquia do conhecimento esotérico estipulados pelo cabalista do século XIII Abraão Abulafia. O ponto de partida é uma declaração rabínica bem conhecida: «um sage de seu entendimento entende». Este *dictum* rabínico ressoa também nos textos cabalísticos de Abulafia e designa a necessidade de uma compreensão autônoma de um tópico esotérico que ou é difícil ou sujeito a segredo. Em seu *Or ha-Sekhel (A luz do intelecto)*, Abulafia elabora longamente os graus e hierarquias do conhecimento esotérico e distingue entre três graus epistemológicos progressivos. Em resultado disso, Abulafia estipula uma hierarquia de três níveis de conhecimento: sabedoria, inteligência e conhecimento.

Palavras chave: Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmud, Kabbalah.

Autores medievais: Abraão Abulafia.

Abraham Abulafia (1240 – ca. 1292) was one of the most prominent figures of the thirteenth century Spanish Kabbalah. He was an important Jewish educational figure for Jewish mysticism and is considered the founder of «prophetic Kabbalah», according to a famous formulation of Moshe Idel². In his very articulate, often obscure speculation, Abulafia adopted—or rather *adapted*—some ideas from current Christian apocalypticism, transformed them into his own religious *Weltanschauung*, and transferred them back to his Jewish and Christian contemporaries³.

In my paper, I will specifically address the degrees and hierarchies of esoteric knowledge as they are stipulated some of his writings, on the basis of Rabbinic literature⁴. In particular, I will show how Abulafia has established specific degrees and hierarchy of knowledge, both on the basis of specific philosophical presuppositions and with respect to a famous Rabbinic statement—«a sage understands of his knowledge» (*mHag* 2:1)—that he interprets esoterically as a sign of a specific epistemological structure of reality.

² Moshe Idel's scholarship has contributed the most to the modern understanding of Abraham Abulafia, since his PhD in 1976: M. Idel, *Kitvey Rabbi Abraham Abulafia u-Mishnato*, PhD Dissertation, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1976; M. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, State University of New York Press, New Albany 1988; M. Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1988; M. Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1989; M. Idel, *Abraham Abulafia. Lashon, Torah ve-Hermeneutiqah*, Soqen, Tel Aviv 1994; M. Idel, *Abraham Abulafia, An Ecstatic Kabbalist, Two Studies*, Labyrinthos, Lancaster Ca., 2002.

³ On this topic, see the seminal work of H.J. Harvey, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans, and Joachimism*, State of New York Press, Albany 2007.

⁴ All the translations from Rabbinic literature are mine.

§1 *The Early Sources: Mishnah and Tosefta Tractate Chagigah*

My stating point is a well-known Rabbinic statement that occurs both in the Mishnah and in the Tosefta—«a sage understands of his knowledge». This expression occurs in the early Rabbinic literature with an overt intention: limiting someone's liability of accessing esoteric knowledge before he has reached a proper age and a proper education. Yet this limitation is treated differently in the Mishnah and in the Tosefta. For clarity's sake, I segment the two long quotations in different portions, in order to emphasize their mutual similarities and differences:

מ' חגיגה ב א	ת' חגיגה ב א
<p>אין דורשין בעריות בשלושה ולא במעשה בראשית בשנים ולא במרכבה ביחיד אלא אם כן היה חכם ומבין מדעתו</p>	<p>אין דורשין בעריות בשלושה אבל דורשין בשנים [ולא] במעשה בראשית בשנים אבל דורשין ביחיד ולא במרכבה ביחיד אלא אם כן היה חכם ומבין מדעתו</p>
	<p>מעשה ברבן יוחנן בן זכאי שהיה רוכב על החמור והיה רבי אלעזר בן ערך מחמר אחריו אמר לו רבי שנה פרק אחד במעשה מרכבה אמר לו לא במרכבה ביחיד אלא אם כן היה חכם ומבין מדעתו</p>
	<p>אמר לו מעתה ארצה לפניך אמר לו אמור פתח רבי אלעזר בן ערך ודרש במעשה מרכבה ירד רבי יוחנן בן זכאי מן החמור ונתעטף בטליתו וישבו שניהם על גבי אבן תחת הזית והרצה לפניו עמד ונשקו ואמר ברוך ה' אלהי ישראל אשר נתן בן לאברהם אבינו שיודע להבין ולדרוש בכבוד אביו שבשמים [...]</p>
<p>וכל המסתכל בארבעה דברים רתוי לו כאילו לא בא לעולם מה למעלן מה למטן מה לפניו מה לאחור וכל שלא חס על כבוד קונו רתוי לו כאילו לא בא לעולם</p>	

One should not discuss sexual transgressions to three people, nor the work of Creation to two nor the Chariot to one, unless he was a wise [who] understands of his knowledge.

One should not discuss sexual transgressions to three persons rather to two, nor the work of Creation to two rather to one, nor the Chariot to one, unless he was a wise [who] understands of his knowledge

The work [of Creation]: Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was riding on a donkey and Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh was riding a donkey from behind. He [Eleazar] said to him: «Rabbi teach me a chapter from the work of the Chariot». He said to him: «Have I not told you nor the Chariot to one unless he was a wise [who] understands of his knowledge?»

He said to him: «Hence I shall expound before you». He said to him: «Speak!» R. Eleazar ben Arakh opened up and began expounding the work of the Chariot. Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai went off from the donkey and wrapped himself in his robe. And both of them seated themselves on a rock under an olive tree and he expounded before him. He stood up and kissed him. And he said to him: «Blessed is the Lord God of Israel who has given to our father Abraham such a one who knows how to understand and to expound for the sake of the honor of his Father in Heaven» [...] (*tHag* 2:1)

Every one speculates on four things, it were better for him if he had never come into the world: what is above and what is beneath, what was before creation, and what will be after all will be destroyed. And every one who does not revere the glory of his Creator, it were better for him he had not come into the world. (*mHag* 2:1)

This synoptic arrangement of the Mishnah and the Tosefta allow us to appreciate some important similarities and differences between these two early Rabbinic sources.

At first, the Mishnah provides a clear ruling about the pedagogical limits while treating sensible material—sexual transgressions, mysticism associated to cosmology («the work of Creation») and mysticism associated to esoteric visions («the Chariot»). This general ruling is fundamentally received also in the Tosefta that provides only few details more about the number of students that might be involved. Both the Mishnah and the Tosefta agree on the fundamental ruling of limiting the access to esoteric knowledge—specifically to one who is both «wise» and able to understand «of his knowledge». The meaning of this last expression is not given but one can presume that it is meant that this educated man shall be able to understand all that is implicit in this esoteric explanation.

Yet the Mishnah and the Tosefta appear to understand differently the impact that this legal ruling (*halakhah*) might actually have. On the one hand, the

Mishnah concludes with a dramatic anathema against those who might indulge into «speculation». On the other hand, the Tosefta not only does not report this anathema but it also indulges into a long nonlegal narrative (*aggadah*) that might be divided into two minor units: a general re-assessment of the previous ruling by Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh who was asked by Rabban Yohannan ben Zakkai to teach him about the most esoteric «work of the Chariot»; the description of Rabbi Eleazar actually teaching Rabban Yohannan ben Zakkai, not without some sense of irony—since Rabbi Yohannan goes off his donkey as if he were going off the Chariot. In the end, the Tosefta points again to the necessity of limiting this knowledge only to those who have specific requirements—knowing, understanding, and expounding.

§2 *The Talmudic Sources: Tractate Chagigah in the Yerushalmi Talmud and in the Babylonian Talmud*

The treatment of this early Rabbinic ruling in the two Talmudim is quite complex, since it both accept the vision of the Mishnah about the intrinsic limits to esoteric knowledge and the indulgence of the Tosefta for actually accessing it.

Indeed both the Yerushalmi and the Bavli quote from a baraita that is textually very close to the Tosefta and introduce a number of dramatic details associated with the effects of teaching about the «work of the Chariot». Differently from the Tosefta that does not inform us about what it is happening while expounding «the work of the Chariot», both the Yerushalmi and the Bavli encapsulate this revelation within a supernatural frame made of angels, fire, and the Divine Presence.

י' חגיגה ב א ע' ט"א

מעשה ברבן יוחנן בן זכאי שהיה מהלך על הדרך רוכב על החמור ור' לעזר בן ערך מהלך אחריו אמר לו ר' השניני פרק אחד במעשה המרכבה אמר לו ולא כך שנו חכמים ולא במרכבה אלא א"כ היה חכם ומבין מדעתו אמר לו ר' תרשיני לומר דבר לפניך אני אמר לו אמור כיון שפתח ר' לעזר בן ערך במעשה המרכבה ירד לו רבן יוחנן בן זכאי מן החמור

ת' חגיגה יד"ב

ת"ר מעשה ברבן יוחנן בן זכאי שהיה רוכב על החמור והיה מהלך בדרך ור' אלעזר בן ערך מחמר אחריו אמר לו רבי שנה לי פרק אחד במעשה מרכבה אמר לו לא כך שניתי לכם ולא במרכבה ביחיד אלא א"כ היה חכם מבין מדעתו אמר לו רבי תרשיני לומר לפניך דבר אחד שלמדתני אמר לו אמור מיד ירד רבן יוחנן בן זכאי מעל החמור ונתעטף וישב על האבן תחת הוית אמר לו רבי מפני מה ירדת מעל החמור

הלכו וישבו להן תחת אילן אחד וירדה אש מן השמים והקיפה אותם והיו מלאכי השרת מקפצין לפניהן כבני חופה שמיחין לפני חתן נענה מלאך אחד מתוך האש ואמר כדברייך אלעזר בן ערך כן הוא מעשה המרכבה מיד פתחו כל האילנות פיהן ואמרו שירה (תהילים צו)

אז ירננו כל עצי יער כיון שגמר ר' לעזר בן ערך במעשה המרכבה עמד רבן יוחנן בן זכאי ונשקו על ראשו ואמר ברוך ה' אלהי אברהם יצחק ויעקב שנתן לאברהם אבינו בן חכם יודע בכבוד אבינו שבשמים

It happened once that Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai was traveling on the road riding a donkey, and Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh was walking behind him. He said to him: «Rabbi, teach me one chapter on the Work of the Chariot!» He said to him: «Did the Sages not teach as follows: Nor the Work of the Creation before two, unless the person is wise and able to understand on his own!» He said to him: «Rabbi, allow me to say something before you». He said to him: «Speak!» Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai dismounted from the donkey.

He said: «It is not proper that I should be hearing the Honour of my Creator while riding on a donkey!»

And a fire descended from heaven and surrounded them. And the Ministering Angels were leaping about them like guests at a wedding rejoicing before the bridegroom. One angel spoke from out of the fire and said: «The Work of the Chariot is precisely as you described it, Eleazar ben Arakh!» Immediately, all the trees opened their mouths and began to sing «Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy!» (Psalms 96:12).

מיד פתח ר"א בן ערך במעשה המרכבה ודרש וירדה אש מן השמים וסיבבה כל האילנות שבשדה פתחו כולן ואמרו שירה מה שירה אמרו (תהילים קמח).

הללו את ה' מן הארץ תנינים וכל תהומות עץ פרי וכל ארזים הללויה נענה מלאך מן האש ואמר הן הן מעשה המרכבה עמד רבן יוחנן ב"ז ונשקו על ראשו ואמר ברוך ה' אלהי ישראל שנתן בן לאברהם אבינו שידוע להבין ולחקור ולדרוש במעשה מרכבה

Our Rabbis taught: Once Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai was riding on a donkey, and R. Leazar ben Arakh was driving the donkey behind him. He said to him: «Rabbi, teach me one lesson in the Work of the Chariot!» He said to him: Have I not told you previously that the Work of the Chariot is not expounded before one person unless the person is wise and able to understand on his own! He said to him: «Rabbi, allow me to say before you something which you taught me». He said to him: «Speak!» Immediately Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai dismounted from the donkey and wrapped himself up. And he seated himself on a rock under an olive tree.

He asked him: Rabbi, why did you dismount from the donkey? He said: Is it possible that you should be expounding on the Work of the Chariot, and the Divine Presence is among us, and the Ministering Angels are accompanying us and I should be riding on a donkey!

Immediately, Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh began the Work of the Chariot and he expounded, and a flame descended from heaven and encompassed all the trees in the field. All broke out in song. Which song did they utter? «Praise the Lord from the earth, ye sea-monsters, and all deeps... fruitful trees and all cedars... Hallelujah» (Psalms 148:7, 9, 14). An angel answered from the flame and said: «This indeed is the Work of the Chariot!»

When Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh concluded the Work of the Chariot, Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai stood up and kissed him on his head. And said: «Blessed is the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who has given to our father Abraham a wise son who knows how for the sake of the honor of his Father in Heaven» [...] (yHag 2:1 7a)

Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai stood up and kissed him on his head. and said to him: «Blessed is the Lord God of Israel who has given to our father Abraham such a one who knows to understand and investigate and expound for the sake of the honour of his Father in Heaven» [...] (bHag 14b)

The textual differences between the Yerushalmi and the Bavli are at first minor with respect to the differences between the Mishnah and the Tosefta—yet they are particular relevant while examining the present topic: the degrees and hierarchies of knowledge.

At first both the Yerushalmi and the Bavli agree how to provide a more dramatic atmosphere to the bucolic scene of Rabbi Eleazar ben Arach teaching to Rabban Yohannan ben Zakkai. Both these texts provide a number of details in order to emphasize how this esoteric revelation is solemn: trees, fires, angels, and the Divine Presence somehow participate into this revelation. Even the previous—probably ironic—allusion to the act of «descending» from the donkey is permeated by solemnity: one has to «descend» from a donkey while speaking of such elevate matters.

Yet the most notable difference—apart from the different quotation from the Psalms—probably is the final gloss when Rabbi Eleazar ben Arach is praised for his abilities. Whereas the Yerushalmi is quite elliptic by calling him simply as someone «who knows», the Bavli abounds in details: «who knows to understand and investigate and expound». As far as it is difficult to deduce a specific epistemological distinction between these verbs, it is obvious that this constellation suggests that «the Work of the Chariot»—the esoteric knowledge— involves different degrees of knowledge. With respect to the early formulation, there is indeed a specific elaboration on someone's expected epistemological competencies: the Mishnah and the Tosefta required «a sage [who] understands of his knowledge»; the Yerushalmi vaguely speaks of someone «who knows»; finally, the Bavli expands this ability into three further categories: someone's «knowledge» of «understanding», «investigating», and «expounding».

More specifically, the Bavli implies, coherently with the Mishnah's concluding anathema, that the presence of «intelligence» shall be accounted as a fundamental precondition for accessing esoteric matters. According to the original

setting of the Mishnah, the passage from *mHag* 2:1 would submit the reception of this esoteric knowledge to the (oral?) teaching of a master but would also imply that the sage who is told such a truth is required to possess a specific degree of intellectual autonomy. How to articulate this complex of traditional teaching and individual abilities is a question that Abraham Abulafia has tried to answer by establishing a specific degree of knowledge between the acts of «understanding», «investigating», and «expounding».

Before examining I will provide some additional information about Abulafia's notion of language, intellect, and knowledge—that are essential to understand the new setting of the Mishnaic ruling «a sage understands of his knowledge».

§3 *Abulafia's Notion of Human and Divine Language*

The assumption that a human being is able to access supernal knowledge of the divine reality is based on the presupposition that communication between these two realms is possible. Jewish Kabbalah has usually identified this connection with language: specifically, the Hebrew language.

As far as this assumption is widespread almost in the entire history of Jewish mysticism, Abulafia's position about this is of particular interest due to its subtle connection with the passage from the Mishnah that I have previously examined. Abulafia emphasizes, as most of the thirteenth century kabbalists, the ontological connection of language with the divine reality—distinguishing between three linguistic grades: human, angelic, and divine language. Yet that what is particularly pertinent in the present contest is Abulafia's association of the Hebrew language with the supernal structures of the Chariot, as he overtly maintains in his text *Chotam ha-Haftara* («The Seal of Addition»), extant in manuscript:

כי השמות דומים בעניני הרכבתם לענינים ההויים והנפסדים מצד אחד ולקיימים מצד אחר. ואמנם הקיימים קראום החכמים מעשה מרכבה והאחרים קראום מעשה בראשית וסוד זה תרפ"ב עברית וסוד זה שב"ט

In addition, you must know that on the one hand, the Names in their form of combination are likened to the phenomena that subsist and pass away, and on the other hand, to those that endure. Indeed, those that endure are called the «work of the Chariot» and the others are called the «work of Creation» and the secret of this is 682, «Hebrew», and this is the secret of the «staff»⁵.

⁵ I refer here to Moshe Idel's translation in *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* from Ms. Rome-Angelica 38, fol. 45b. The numerology of תירבע («Hebrew») and גשעמ הבכרמ («The Work of the Chariot») is also found in Ms. Jerusalem 8° 1303, fol. 54a, in a passage of an untitled work by Abulafia. For the original text, see: Idel, *Abraham Abulafia*, cit., p. 63. The association with «staff» (numeric value 311) is not explained.

The meaning of this passage quite transparently depends on the numeric value of the word «Hebrew» (תִּרְבַּע) that is 682—just like the numerical value of the expression «work of Chariot» (הַבְּכָרָה הַשְּׁעָמָה). Abulafia uses this numeric equivalence with a specific purpose: assuming that there is a specific ontological connection between language and reality—specifically between the Hebrew language and the Chariot. On account of this numeric equivalence Abulafia is able to assume that Hebrew is not a conventional language like the vernaculars of the Gentiles. *Hebrew* is both a metaphysical and intellectual language in this precise sense: it provides a connection with the metaphysical reality due to the intellectual connection between God and humans.

§4 *Abulafia's Notion of Love as the Union of Human and Divine Intellect*

The intellectual connection between God and humans is founded on a number of philosophical assumptions mostly derived from Greek-Arabic speculation: the notion of *nous neotikòs*—introduced for the first time by Aristotle in the third book of *De Anima* (III.5) and possibly penetrated into Judaism through an Syro-Arabic mediation as *al-‘aql al-fa‘al* (العقل الفعال) at least since the time of Al-Farabi and eventually received as *sehkel ha-po‘el* (לְעִיפָה לְכַשׁ) in Hebrew.

It is indeed well established that Abraham Abulafia had been introduced to Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* by his teacher: the prominent Rabbi Hillel ben Samuel of Verona. Rabbi Hillel had also copied many parts of Averroes' treatise on the conjunction with the «active intellect» in his work *Tagmulei ha-Nefesh* («The Rewards of the Soul»). Although this work had been written in 1288-1291—that is, some years after the meeting of Abulafia—it is still useful to understand the amount of philosophical works to which Abulafia might have been exposed⁶.

⁶ Hillel's major work is *Tagmulei ha-Nefesh* (written in 1288–91; published from an imperfect manuscript by S. Halberstamm in 1874). The first two sections of this book are only a translation of Dominicus Gundissalinus' *De Anima* (or *Liber Sextus Naturalium*), whereas the third and fifth sections are based on the *Tractatus de Anima Beatitudine* («Treatise on the Beatitude of the Soul») ascribed to Averroes. The sixth section is a copy of Averroes' three treatises on the connection between «matter» and «active intellects», according to the Hebrew translation by Samuel ibn Tibbon. Finally, the seventh section is a translation of Thomas Aquinas' *De Unitate Intellectus*. On the activity of Gundissalinus, see the recent: N. Polloni, *Domingo Guindisalvo. Una Introducción*, Síndéresis, Madrid 2016. See also: N. Polloni, «Gundissalinus and Avicenna. Some Remarks on an Intricate Philosophical Connection», *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale*, 28 (2017) pp. 515-552. For a general survey in the medieval translations

The philosophical notion of «active intellect» usually serves in Abulafia a double purpose: providing a sort of ethical-metaphysical ideal to which man should conform if not transforming himself into a sort of divine *intellectus agens* and providing the metaphysical justification for the intellectual connection with God during the mystical—ecstatic—experience. Abulafia assumes already in his commentary on the *Guide to the Perplexed* that the divine effluence can literally descend into man through specific intellectual channels and that it can also return to its supernal origin by dragging the human intellect with it in a sort of mystical ascension.

In the present context, I don't have time to treat a number of specific differences in the evolution of Abulafia's thought. One could think, for instance, to Abulafia's early notion of «speech»—*dibbur* or *dibbur kadmon*—as a means for this *unio mystica* but also to its later development in a sort of «divine grammatology»: specifically, the assumption that the divine effluence is «metabolized» by the organs of the human boy and eventually «transformed» into a written book. This would require an investigation into the large set of ecstatic techniques—fundamentally based on vocalization of the divine names and the hyperventilation produced by this—that Abulafia has elaborated in order to produce such an ecstatic condition in the Jewish individual who is praying. In the present context it is sufficient to remark that this intellectual connection—regardless of its most specific form and cause—is essentially possible because God may be object of intellectual love, as it is assumed in his *Or ha-Sekhel* («The Light of the Intellect»):

ומפני שבין שני אוהבים שני חלקי אהבה שהיא שבה דבר אחד בצאתה לפועל הורכב השם בשני חלקים, והם שתוף אהב"ה אלהי"ת שכלית עם אהב"ה אנושית שכלית והיא אחת, כמו ששמו כולל אחד אחד, מפני חבור מציאות האנושי עם המציאות האלהי בעת ההשגה השווה עם השכל במציאות, עד היותו היא והוא דבר אחד. וזהו כוחו של האדם שיוכל לקשור החלק התחתון וידבק בעליון, וירד העליון וינשק את הדבר העולה לקראתו, בדמות החתן המנשק את כלתו בפועל מרוב חשק אמיתי מיוחד לתענוג שניהם מכה השם.

The name [of God] is composed from two parts since there are two parts of love [divided between] two lovers, and the [parts of] love turn one [entity] when love became actuated. The divine intellectual love and the human intellectual love are connected being one. Exactly so the name [of God] includes [the words] one one, because of the connection of the human existence with the divine existence during the intellection—which is identical with the intellect in [its]

of philosophical works, see: A. Fidora – N. Polloni (eds.), *Appropriation, Interpretation, and Criticism. Philosophical and Theological Exchanges between the Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin Intellectual Traditions*, Brepols Publishers, Turnhout 2017.

existence—until he and he become one [entity]. This is the [great] power of man: he can link the lower part with the higher one, and the lower [part] will ascend and the higher [part] will descend and will kiss the entity ascending towards it, like a bridegroom actually kisses his bride out of his great and real desire, characteristic of the delight of both, from the power of the name [of God]⁷.

The identification of God with Love is derived from the numerical equivalence of the Hebrew term *ahavah* («love»), which is 13, and the numeric value of the Tetragrammaton, which is 26: therefore, the supernal couple of an individual and God necessarily form «two loves» whose numerical value, obviously 26, corresponds to the numerical value of the supernal Name of God.

§5 *Abulafia's understanding of this sentence: three degrees of knowledge*

Only after these brief, preliminaries on Abulafia's notions of the human-divine language and the divine intellectual love can we truly appreciate his treatment of the Mishnaic ruling: «a sage understands of his own knowledge».

Despite some allusions—not surprisingly—in his *Or ha-Sekhel* («The light of the intellect»), the decisive passage is to be found in the still unpublished *Chotam ha-Haftara* («The Seal of Addition»), which was written in 1280 and has been studied, in manuscript, both by Gershom Scholem and by Moshe Idel. The passage is long but extremely clear if not even transparent in its assumptions:

כי זאת החכמה לבדה היא הכלי הקרוב לנבואה יותר משאר חכמות. ואמיתת המציאות כשידענה האדם מתוך מה שלמד מן הספרים המורים עליה יקרא חכם. וכשידענה בקבלה שמסר לו מי שידעה על פי השמות או מי שקבלה מפי מקובל יקרא מבין. אבל מי שידעה מתוך לבו על פי משה ומתן שנושא ונותן בינו לבין עצמו על מה שהגיע בידו מן ענייני המציאות הנחשב יקרא דעתן. ואמנם מי שידע אמיתת המציאות על דרך שנקהלו בלבו אלו השלשה עניינים הנזכרים שהם החכמה מרוב למוד, והבינה המקובלת מפי המקובלים האמיתיים, והדעה מרוב משה ומתן במחשבה, איני אומר שזה האיש יקרא נביא לבד, אלא בכל עת שפעל, ומהשכל הנפרד לא התפעל או התפעל ולא השיג שממנו התפעל, אבל אם התפעל והשיג שהתפעל דין הוא אצלי ואצל כל שלם להקרא בשם מורה על היות שמו כשם רבו. אם בשם אחד או יותר ואם בכל שמותיו, מפני שהוא לא נפרד מרבו. והנה הוא רבו ורבו הוא, שכבר דבק בו דבוק שאי אפשר להפרידו ממנו בשום סבה, כי הוא הוא. וכמו שרבו הנפרד מכל חמר יקרא תמיד שכל משכיל מושכל אשר שלשתם עניין אחד בו לעולם בפעל, כן זה המיוחד בעל השם המיוחד יקרא שכל בעת שישגי בפועל, ואז יהיה מושכל משכיל שכל בפועל כרבו. ואין או הבדל ביניהם אלא מפני שרבו תכלית מעלתו בעצמו ולא בזולתו מן הנבראים כולם. וזה הגיע אל מעלתו על ידי הנבראים ובאמצעותם.

This wisdom (*chokhmah*) alone is the best instrument for prophecy, better than all the other [forms of] wisdom. And the essence of reality, when known by someone from what he

⁷ I refer here to Idel's translation in *Eros and Kabbalah* from Ms. Vatican 233 fol. 115a. For the original text, see: Idel, *The Mystical Experience of Abrahah Abulafia*, cit., p. 113.

learned from books dealing with it, should be called wise (*chakham*). But when he will know it by means of a tradition, transmitted to him by someone who knew it by means of the [divine] names, or [received it] from a Kabbalist, he should be called someone who understands (*mevin*). But whoever will know it from [introspection into] his heart, by means of a negotiation in his mind concerning what was available to him about mental reality (*ha-metziy'ut ha-nehshav*), will be called knower (*da'atan*). However, whoever will know reality by means of the three manners that gathered into his heart, namely wisdom [emerging] out of much learning, and understanding received from the mouth of true Kabbalists, and knowledge [emerging] out of much negotiation in [his] thought, I do not say that this person is called only a prophet, but as long as he was active, and he was not affected by the Separate Intellect, or he was affected but did not know by whom he was affected. However, if he was affected, and he was aware that he was affected, it is incumbent upon me and upon any perfect person that he is called a teacher (*moreh*) because his name is like the name of his Master, be it only by one, or by many, or by all of His names. For now he is no longer separated from his Master, and behold he is his Master, and his Master is he; for he is so intimately adhering to Him that he cannot, by any means, be separated from Him, for he is He. And just as his Master, who is detached from all matter, is called the knowledge, the knower, and the known, all at the same time, since all three are one in Him, so shall he, the exalted man, the master of the exalted name, be called intellect, while he is actually knowing; then he is also the known, like his Master; and then there is no difference between them, except that his Master has His supreme rank by His own right and not derived from other creatures, while he is elevated to his rank by the mediation of creatures⁸.

At first this text intends to provide insight into the state of ecstasy. This is a self-induced condition through a series of ecstatic-esoteric techniques—reading, vocalizing, and breathing in a specific way—that elevate the individual to the degree of becoming his own's «master» (*moreh*).

Yet regardless of this specific dimension of prophecy—what interests us in the present context is the articulation of three degrees of knowledge that follow a particular interpretation of the Mishnaic ruling. Abulafia evidently reads: «a sage understands of his own knowledge». Notably Abulafia has interpreted this ruling not simply as a «allusion» to a specific constellation of knowledge rather as a *description* of a specific epistemological hierarchy. This implies that every term mentioned in this sentence actually refers to an discrete, individual epistemological reality: therefore, this ruling does not simply establish a norm to be followed on account of the Mishnaic anathema against those who dare to indulge in metaphysics; more radically this ruling reveals the secret of knowledge—better put, the secret of its progression from «wisdom» to «intelligence», and from «intelligence» to «knowledge». At the apex of this sort of literal, linear

⁸ I quote from Ms. Munich 285, fol. 26b according to the translation provided in G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken Books, New York 1974, p. 139.

interpretation of the Mishnaic ruling, Abulafia then puts the epistemological ideal of a «gnosis»—a «knowledge» that elevates the human being from its material condition to his spiritual election as a partner of the divine intellectual love.