

Forty Days to Revelation  
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The Jewish mystic seeks to have the secrets of the heavenly spheres revealed to him. To that end, there are well-trodden paths to pursue. Scholars have delineated many of the actions undertaken by the putative mystical traveller. We will attempt in what follows to add to some of their observations and obtain a more coherent picture by re-examining the specifics of fasting as it appears in the Merkabah literature.

In a famous thousand-year old responsum [Otzar Hageonim to Hagigah 14b], Hai Gaon described mystics of his day in the following terms: "Many of the sages were of the opinion that when one who satisfies the various required traits that are stated and described [in the Mishna] wishes to gaze upon the chariot and peer at the mansions of the celestial angels he has procedures to perform. He should fast [yamim yeduim] on known days [or a known number of days], place his head between his knees -- this is what Scholem calls "Elijah's posture" -- and whisper [or incant] toward the ground many specified hymns and praises. Thus, he peers into his own interior and [inner] chambers, just as one who can see with his own eyes, seven mansions and gaze as though he is passing from mansion to mansion, seeing what is therein. There are two mishnayot taught by the tannaim on this matter, called the Greater Heikhalot and Lesser Heikhalot. This is public and well known."

We have here and in a responsum of his father, Sherira Gaon, to Jews in Fez, early references to the Heikhalot literature. Regardless of whether one subscribes to the psychological interpretation Hai gave to the mystical experience of his contemporaries, this is presumably a faithful description of the *modus operandi* of the *yordei merkabah* of his generation, if not of previous eras, and in particular of the use of *Heikhalot* in Jewish mystical quests. Fasting as a means of inducing a mystical trance, mentioned by Hai, is of course cross-cultural and well-attested world-wide (including Egyptian prophetesses, Pythagoreans and Sufis, among others). The natal posture, head between knees, as used in Heikhalot Rabbati and as described by Hai, is according to Scholem derived from Elijah on Mount Carmel. This posture was used by Chinese conjurers, Sufis and Hassidic masters, as well.

Indeed, fasting and other limitations on food intake appear a fair number of times in the *heikhalot* literature. Nehunia ben HaQannah taught R. Ishmael to fast 40 days in order to see Sar Hapanim, the Prince of the Presence (or Sar Hatorah, Prince

of the Torah). Also in *Merkavah Rabbah* [684] we read [...]. These 40-day fasts in *Maaseh Merkavah* and parallel places in *Hekhalot* are discussed by Grunwald, Swartz [*Physical Prayer in Ancient Judaism*], and others.

Fasting in Daniel and the Apocrypha appears in conjunction with prayer, sometimes followed by revelation. In Talmudic and Midrashic sources, as well, one can find numerous references to fasting. Rabbi Levi says in Genesis Rabbah: *benakom sheyesh ekhile ushtiya erchilistee mekartea* which gives a general motive for abstention from food while seeking contact with Heaven.

In particular, fasts often precede visits by Elijah, as those of Rav Anan in Bavli Ketubot, of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi in Yerushalmi Terumot 46b, and in the *Maasei* of Nissim Gaon. Bavli Bava Metziah 85a recommends a 40-day fast so that one's offspring will not forget the Torah.

As one can readily see, and as pointed out by many, certain periods of time appear more often than others, particularly 40 days, but also 7, 12 and 30. Presumably, these round numbers were considered more conducive than others to attaining revelation. It comes as no surprise that the number 40 held special significance for readers of Tanakh, considering that Moses fasted for 40 days, as stated in Exodus 34:28; he fasted for another 40 days according to Deut. 9:18, and thrice according to the Tankhuma (Ki Tissa 31). Elijah travelled (without food) for 40 days as well during his mysterious journey to Horeb (I Kings 19), in analogy with Moses. Abraham abstains from cooked food and wine for 40 days in the Apocalypse of Abraham.

The question we wish to address here is whether *certain* times of the year were considered by Jewish mystics to be *more* propitious for visionary experiences than others. When Hai Gaon spoke of *yamim yedum*, did he just mean a set *number* of days or was he referring to certain *specified* days? We think that the prevalence of 40-day fasts suggests an answer, namely that the fasts and incantations described in *Hekhalot* are associated with Shavuot and Yom Kippur, specifically, just as Liebes has demonstrated that these are the times at which the Idrot were described as being held by medieval kabbalists. Grunwald says [*Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, p. 102], "It is probably through the influence of these magical performances -- described in Greek and Hebrew magical texts -- that we find in some Hekhalot texts the idea that certain practices are useful only for bringing about certain experiences at specific dates. Thus we find special practices for mystical experiences and revelations which are to be accomplished on the Feast of Shavuot, on New Year Day, at the beginning of each month, etc."

In *Studies in the Zohar* [pp. 74-84], Liebes argues that the Zoharic work, *Idra Rabba*, describes a mystical convocation held on Shavuot and (less certainly he says) that the *Idra Zuta* describes such a ceremony performed on Yom Kippur. As evidence he points to a number of factors, including the following:

One indication is that *Idra Rabba* and *Zuta* are customarily recited as part of the *tikkun* for Shavuot and Yom Kippur, respectively. Furthermore, the two *Idrot* are presently located in the sections of the Zohar corresponding to the Shabbat readings at the time of the year in which those holidays fall.

The content of the *Idrot* is more indicative: *Idra Rabba* deals with *maaseh merkavah*, the esoteric interpretation of the first chapter of Ezekiel which has long been read as *haytera* on Shavuot, despite mishnaic prohibition. We know that Shavuot had mystical connotations in classical times. *Idra Rabba* also deals with the Torah, the giving of which is traditionally strongly associated with Shavuot. Overall, it is similar to the description of the *tikkun* for Shavuot in the Zohar (and elsewhere in kabbalistic literature). Similarly, *Idra Zuta* speaks of entering the Holy of Holies, as the High Priest did on Yom Kippur, and we also have Talmudic indications of Yom Kippur visions.

These convocations in the Zohar may well have been associated with fasting, though Shimon bar Yohai asserts that he himself had no need to fast. At the same time, three rabbis are said to have died as a result of the *Idra Rabbah* and Shimon himself dies at the culmination of *Idra Zuta*.

In the *Prayer of R. Shimon b. Yohai* [Eisenstadt 553a; cf. *Perek Rashbi*, Eisenstadt 555], Bar Yohai is said to have fasted 40 days in the cave before the secrets of the future were revealed to him. The language is taken directly from Ezekiel: *niflehu li shaarei shemeyim vaereh merot elakim*. Then, he *again* prayed and fasted for 40 days until he saw the angel who filled in the details of the prophecy.

Liebes already suggested that similar mystical connections with these holidays were already prevalent in Talmudic times and that this is perhaps the background for the holidays' later connection with *Idra Rabba* and *Zuta*. We suggest more specifically that the frequent reference to 40-day fasts means that at least some of the visions described in *Heikhalot Rabbati* and *Zutarti* are in fact associated with Shavuot and Yom Kippur. Not just any 40 days, but preferably the same 40 days as did Moses.

According to traditional chronology, Moses fasted for 40 days after receiving

the tablets on Shavuot, and again for 40 days prior to receiving the second tablets on Yom Kippur. Specifically, *Tanḥuma* has Moshe on the mountain from Shavuot until 16 Tammuz; then from 20 Tammuz until the end of Ab; and finally from the beginning of Ellul until Yom Kippur. It is thus easy to imagine that later mystical journeys would be undertaken to correspond exactly with what Moses underwent. The older *Heikhalot Zutarti* (near the end) speaks explicitly of fasting for 40 days until Yom Kippur [Schafer, Section 424]: "R. Akiva said, whoever wishes to study this mishna and to utter this name should fast for 40 days and place his head between his knees until the fast takes hold of him and he incants towards the ground, not the heavens.... [or weakens, in some manuscripts] He should practice this from month to month every year from thirty days before Rosh Hashana, from the New Moon of Ellul until Yom Kippur, so that Satan will not malign him."

In the Aramaic *Sar Torah* part of *Measeh Merkavah* [unique to the NY manuscript, 572] a fast of nine days ending on Shavuot is mentioned, as well as 40-day fasts: Elsewhere, R. Ishmael is quoted as saying [cf. 313]: "I was 13 years old and my mind was occupied every day I was engaged in fasting. When R. Nehuniah b. HaQannah revealed to me the Prince of the Torah, Suriel, the Prince of the Presence was revealed. He said to me: The name of the Prince of the Torah is Yofiel, and everyone who seeks him must sit for forty days in fast." In the version of this story in [Section 565], R. Ishmael gives up after 12 days and employs the 42-letter name of God, whereupon the Prince of the Presence says in anger: "Son of a stinking drop! I will not give it to you until you sit for 40 days." So he does.

Second point, *Heikhalot Rabati* and *Measeh Merkavah* dwell on the Chariot and the Torah (especially in the *Sar Torah* parts) and the same arguments as advanced by Liebes regarding the Idrot apply here. That is, Ezekiel's vision and the giving of the Torah were long ago connected to the Feast of Shavuot. These themes are central both to *Idrot Rabbah* and *Heikhalot Rabati*.

Third, Moses plays an important role in *Heikhalot*. *Heikhalot Zutarti* [336] speaks of the secrets obtained by Moses on Mt. Sinai and [388] cites the verse in Deuteronomy pertaining to the giving of the second (!) tablets in particular, which as we have seen, took place on Yom Kippur: When the 40 days were up, Moses forgot everything until God called Yaphyaphia, Prince of the Torah, who gave the Torah to him as a present. Not just *Heikhalot*, but also the Midrash, portrays Moshe as having difficulty remembering what he was taught during those 40 days.

Fourth, I'del [*Kabbalah*, p. 164], Grunwald [*Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, p. 96], and others have pointed as precedent to visions the High Priest is

said sometimes to have had on Yom Kippur, such as that of Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha in Bavli Berakhot. Indeed Rabbi Ishmael, who is portrayed as High Priest, plays a prominent role in *Heikhalot Rabbi*. There is also some evidence of a connection between *Heikhalot Zutarti* [405] and *maaseh bereishit*, which is appropriate for Yom Kippur, lying between the traditional date of creation and the synagogue reading of *breishit*.

Finally, perhaps these mystical fasts are connected with *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* and *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*: Elbaum [in Dan, *Early Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 139-150] shows the strong overall relationship between Eliyahu Rabba and Zuta, on the one hand, and *Heikhalot* on the other. The Bavli [Ketubot 105b] connects Rav Anan's fasting with his mystical meeting with Elijah and composition of *Eliyahu Rabbah* and *Eliyahu Zuta*, however related these works may be with what goes under that name today and since gaonic times. Elijah, of course, also fasted for 40 days, and it is in *Eliyahu Zuta* [4] (as well as in *Tanhuma*) that we read that Moses' second 40 day fast ended on Yom Kippur with all Israel fasting along.

Since *maaseh merkavah* (which presumably began as an interpretation of Ezekiel's vision of the throne of glory, but is at least later closely related to the graphic imagery of *shir hashirim* and the anthropomorphic physiogomy of *shir qamah*) is the subject of *Heikhalot Rabbi*, it would have made for a certain measure of symmetry were *Heikhalot Zuta* related to *maaseh bereishit*, that is to an esoteric interpretation of matters somehow relating to creation, *mah yemaalah*, *mah yemata*, *mah yefanim*, *mah yechor*, since as we said the beginning of Genesis is read in the synagogue shortly after Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah is midrashically and liturgically identified with the time of creation. There seems to be some slight evidence of such a connection, one explicit mention [405] and perhaps the fact that *Seder Rabba deBereshit* [428-467] is appended to *Heikhalot Zuta* in some manuscripts.

We have then reason to suggest that early Jewish mystics fasted for forty days either before or after Shavuot and before Yom Kippur in their attempt to reach down into the celestial heights of the supernal universe. They sought mystical insights into the secrets of the Torah, and the nature of the divine Chariot, on Shavuot, and on Yom Kippur they quested for an understanding of what preceded and followed creation. This practice, to which Hai referred, presumably continued into medieval times, as reflected in the *Idrot*, and in the Shavuot visions of the Shekhina by mystics like Joseph Caro and Alkabetz.

Finally, we suggest that the word *heikhalot*, which we translated mansions, but

is usually translated palaces, is etymologically related to the lunar mansions of ancient Hindu astronomy. The connections between the twelve signs of the Zodiac and Kabbalah are explicit; a stellar background to Ezekiel's chariot has long ago been suggested; the close relationship between angels and stars is also obvious and well-known. Taking this stellar-connection further, note that the Hindus divided the ecliptic into twenty-eight "mansions", each of which was named after an asterism, though the exact identifications of most of these star groupings were already unknown a thousand years ago when Abu Raihan al-Biruni wrote about India. The number twenty-eight (that is, four sevens) comes from the fact that the average sidereal month is  $27 \frac{1}{3}$  days long, so the moon makes one circuit through the stars in something between 27 and 28 days. In any event, these star configurations are called "mansions" by the Hindus and "houses" by the Chinese, and may underlie the angel-inhabited *heikhalot* envisioned by the *gadolai merkavot*.