“A Sage Understands of His Knowledge” (m Hag 2:1). Degrees and Hierarchy of Knowledge in 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.

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.

Il 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:

One should not discuss sexual transgressions to three people, 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 Yohnnan ben Zakkai was riding on a donkey and Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh was riding a donkey from behind. He [Eleazer] 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» […]

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.

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 receipted 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 divided into two minor units: a general re-assessment of the previous ruling and the description of 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.

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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 incapsulate this revelation within a supernatural frame made of angels, fire, and the Divine Presence.
It happened once that Rabban Johanan ben Zakcai 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 in 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 Zakcai 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).

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 Zakcai 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 Zakkaï 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 Zakkaï 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 Zakkaï. 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:

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».

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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 «Hebrew» (יהיע) and «The Work of the Chariot» (างננ) 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» (הברitur) that is 682—just like the numerical value of the expression «work of Chariot» (הבריט השער). 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 receipted as sehkel ha-po‘el (спешל הפועל) 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 exposed.

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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 Animae Beatitude («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 the activity of Gundissalinus, see the recent: N. Polloni, Domingo Guindisalvo. Una Introducción, Sindéresis, 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»):

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]
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].

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:

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 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 creatures.

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

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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.