Originality of Jews

The view of Jews current in modern times is that they are a people whose culture is devoid of original, spiritual creativity and to characterise it as having the sole function of virtuoso reproduction. Consequently, the stress is on a reworking and interpreting something that others have brought into being, whether in the field of philosophical ideas or in relation to original creations in the arts and sciences.

Typical of this characterisation as alien to original creation, while making theirs the art of reworking, is an incidental remark made by the ageing Kant about Solomon Maimon, one of Kant's earliest serious critics. Kant had previously said of him that Maimon had shown a more profound understanding of his work than other critics, but now that the great critic was himself the object of Maimon's pen, Kant spoke of him as 'improving on critical philosophy' , thus voicing his attitude towards Jews 'who like to award themselves respect and importance at the expense of others' (Kant Correspondence). Maimon did indeed give to Kant's thinking a perspective that history has adopted ; one should also not forget Maimon's impact on the German post-Kantian Idealism of Fichte and Hegel, namely the impact on the dialectic format. Maimon is here presented as a second-hand interpreter, just as the later neo-Kantianism of H.Cohen was presented as simply the transformational, intellectual work of a Jewish philosopher.

We do not dispute the factual research into cases of works that modify and reconstruct - incidentally, we believe that such activity to be of significant importance. It is worth pointing out that denying Jews the ability to be original in their productivity increased in a period that showed a certain cultural decline; a period that followed an era that had seen overwhelming evidence of Jewish original creativity, namely the era of Medieval Christianity with its religious atmosphere, which evaporated with the Enlightenment. Objections voiced against Jews in the earlier period had focused on things other than originality. The new fault-finding developed at a time that saw a diminishing of the - albeit negative -importance of Judaism of the people who could not be converted to the Christian meaning of life, a factor that now moved into the background.

The religious argument against Judaism lost its force because religion as such was beginning to lose ground in the face of reason and science. Jewish spirituality seems to have been confined, once and for all, to religion, and so it became very easy to overlook a Jewish role in the emerging new Western culture, particularly in the area of the origins of modern European philosophy.. The European historian depicted his world and wrote it as if Jews were absent from it. At best,he granted them - as he did to Arabs - a role as transmitters and translators, the role of acquainting Medieval Christian thought with Aristotelian philosophy, according them a mere technical role in the origins of Scholasticism.

Along with this, leaving out from the Jews' contribution to the birth of Western thinking all content and matter was presented as so self-evident that this dismissal of Jews as not having contributed any content to European philosophy elicited no objection whatever, neither in non-Jewish writing of cultural history, nor, indeed, in Jewish accounts. Thus, the work by J. Guttman on the philosophy of Jews can open with the phrase: 'There is actually no such thing as a philosophy of Jews'. Given this perspective, it is not surprising to find that

this attitude held good in practically all questions of time sequence in the history of thought, where philosophical concepts depend on information about earlier or later influences; with ease and almost without hesitations, decisions assume that Jewish contributions are derivative and not original.

Let us select one truly seminal problem complex from the history of thought in order to open a discussion of its place in both Jewish and non-Jewish culture; let us look at a field that deals with the the theory of number and numbers in philosophy, a field of inquiry that reaches from the meaning and essence of numbers in metaphysics to the philosophy of mathematics. It is a subject that emerges very early on in the history of philosophy in antiquity and is central mainly in two topics, both of which focus on the relation of numerals to metaphysics; one is the direction taken by Pythagoreanism, the other that of Kabbala and its sources.

It is almost impossible to open a book on the literature and history of certain texts of Kabbala that does not accord a role to speculation about numbers. And, inevitably, historians will claim that specific concepts raised by the philosophical imagination are derived, directly or indirectly, from Pythagoreanism or Neo Pythogorean sources. One example out of many is a treatment of the subject by the historian Steinschneider. He writes about the dating of the much debated Sefer Yetzira and sees no problem in presenting this work as an outcome of NeoPythagoreanism.

Let us pause here for a moment and consider that there are some significant philosophical ideas, as we shall shortly show, that may explain why the above connection to Pythagorismi is so standard. The question arises, is there a link between the character of a people and certain philosophical tendencies. Whether to attribute certain ideas to the mentality of a nation is an interesting question; in this case, was the theory of numbers - something that took up so much space in the writing of Medieval Judaism - once again a borrowing from external creative intuition or was it an indigenous creation?

We first need to see why the philosophy of numbers, the subject itself and the much debated origins of this field of thought, deserve such special philosophical significance. We have become accustomed, under the influence of a certain rationalistic perspective, not to accord great philosophical merit to the metaphysics of numbers of the Pythagoreans; even less to that of Kabbala; we tend to dismiss them as fairly fruitless ‘mysticism’. We have to admit that this very extensive area of thought does include aspects of knowledge of uneven merit, some inspired, profound and legitimate, others superficial speculations that play around with mystery -filled notions’ . All of these are thrown together under the heading ‘mysticism of numbers’. Nor must we forget that there exists a charlatan mysticism with hardly any value . But then we have an acknowledged ‘mystical element’ in the thought constructs of thinkers such as Plato and Hegel, where the mystical aspect of certain propositions by no means precludes a largely scientific basis. This combination of solid ground and darkness has earnt Mysticism not only a place in the the history of philosophy, but perhaps even the first place.

However that may be, the basics of Pythagoreanism, according to which ‘Number is of the essence of all things’ first appear and are given extensive expression in Plato’s thesis of

Ideas. Plato was familiar with this earliest conception of the very important notion of Pythagoreanism, that ‘a certain metaphysical essence underlies all things’. In the last version of his formulations, Plato went over directly to making the connection between metaphysical ‘Ur’ images of all things, the Ideas, and numbers. It is this basic notion of an already existing, albeit hidden and hard to explain relation between the visible things of the world on the one hand and their structured pattern given by the metaphysical nature of numbers on the other hand, that characterises both Pythagoreanism and the Hebrew speculations that find their expression in Kabbala.

From Plato and the Pythagoreans, the, often tortuous, lines of thought lead to the inventive thinking of NeoPlatonism and NeoPythagoreanism, which then see the earlier teachings in a new light, alter and reformulate them.From two centuries before the Common Era until two centuries after, Western philosophy treads the paths of NeoPlatonist and NeoPythagorist concepts, And it is during this very same period that Hebrew philology places the first origins of that Sefer Yetzira which presents the very extensive metaphysic of numbers. It constitutes a point of crystallisation that engenders a whole Hebrew literature of commentaries and system building.
The philological question of the dating of the origins of Sefer Yetzira is one of the most debated in the history of literature. We do not propose to enter into that debate and herewith set it aside.
The perspective taken in Sefer Yetzira focuses on the content, given the following assumptions:
Assumption No.1. Basic to all existence and creation is the idea that all entities have a number aspect. Kabbala uses the term Sefirot, which means ‘numbers’, to describe the attributes of G-d or of Being. That means that such numerals are not abstractions in the way we ordinarily understand numbers, where the content of the world is seens as countable, a numeral being a number format. Here, numbers are are seen as attributes of the eternal and possess a content in and of themselves, which is not normally accorded to the nature of numbers, such as Being, Nothing, Power etc. Understandably, there are only a few such ‘Ur numbers’ or ‘Ur attributes’, since only the first few elements in the domain of numbers, the initial numbers, have this property , namely that their numerical nature, in and of itself, allows the representation of ontological fundamentals, such as the conditions for what is possible, e,g, the concept of Oneness as such, duality as such, etc. The Ur number and the ontological state are thus one and the same; the latter is defined by the former.

2). The logical unfolding, the way of proceeding in the domain of numbers, in its remote and remotest regions becomes less and less principle based; it becomes the ontological ground base of the drive that brings forth the boundless, manifold phenomena out of the few given attributes of Being.

3). The letter ciphers of Hebrew also and at the same time function as numerical symbols; in that abundance of phenomena they constitute a kind of conceptual elements.

4).The vehicle for this development of the boundless, manifold given phenomena from the few Ur-attributes is the principle of structured permutation and combination.

This notion of ground elements and permutations has philosophical significance and needs to be stressed here if we wish to understand the historical process of philosophical thinking in terms of the problems that relate to it. The closest important historucal stage, where a kind of 'conceptual alphabet' is based on the principle of arithmetic permutation plays an important role is the 'ars magna' or 'generalis' of Raymundus Lullus (1232-1316). According to Lullus, eighteen absolute predicates of being constitute all of Being and unfold through the method of permutation. Lullus sought to illustrate this concept by means of an external mechanism of a system of turnable circles, determined by the 'Ur' predicates. His illustration was mistaken for the concept; it earnt scant esteem from philosophical critics and was dismissed by them, just as the earlier metaphysics of numbers of Kabbala had been dismissed, even more forcefully, as 'number mysticism' by the Rationalists. We do not share this view.

Someone who may not wish to follow Kabbala's speculations or Raymundus Lullus and is looking for some objectivity, may yet see their methods as pre formations of speculations that exerted considerable influence on scientific thinking in the past - an influence it is presently even seeking to increase, the ideas namely of an 'alphabet of thought', as Leibnitz phrased it. Such a person may see the relationship of Kabbala and ars magna or generalis like the relation of alchemy to chemistry or of the physics of Aristotle to modern natural sciences; he may well also realise that the former constitute the groundwork for the latter. The suggestions made by Leibnitz, in his work 'De Arte Combinatoriae as well as his concept of a 'mathesis universalis' have served as leitmotif for a 'scientia generalis' in Husserl's phenomenology; albeit there, the momentum of permutation has receded.
It is worth noting that another development in twentieth century also takes up this principle. In several of his writings that discuss ontology, Oskar Goldberg enters into the fundamental role of permutation in the subject of Being and of epistemological methodology. We do not propose to enter into his line of argument here.

Our concern in this short overview is simply to raise an awareness of the essential importance and the, as of as yet, continuing fruitfulness of an 'ontology of number' and its laws in shaping philosophy.

We can now return to the question, to which national character, to which cultural thinking should we attribute the origin of this line of thought, the question, whether the philosophy of numbers was borrowed by Judaism, as many have claimed, from the world of Hellenism, more specifically from Pythagoreanism, or whether what we have here is an original area of thought, in keeping with the character of Judaism. With this we now enter the domain of philology and cultural history.

Superficially, the decision on determining the origin of the number metaphysic and its evaluation as the original creative thinking of one of the two cultures sets it between the two positions, that of Pythagoreanism and that of Kabbala, more specifically, that of Sefer Yetzira. As already noted, we do not intend to offer new arguments in the endless debate on the dating of Sefer Yetzira. We propose to take an entirely different approach, one that will, we hope, provide an unequivocal resolution. The answer, the validity of which we plan to demonstrate, reads as follows: The philosophy and metaphysic of numbers is a totally

original product of the Hebrew mentality. It clearly dates back to its own sources that are unquestionably far older than those of Pythagoreanism and are much more likely to have influenced Pythagoreanism than the other way round.

The basis for this claim is not the unstable ground nor the multiple indirect conclusions derived from the dating of this or that work or other source. We believe that the problem solving by dating has been superseded by more scientific procedures. These do not just consider the date of a redaction, but focus on the stylistic format of the main text of ancient of ancient Hebrew literature: in this case, the Pentateuch.

In 1908, Oskar Goldberg published a study on the stylistics of the Mosaic document and, giving a wealth of examples, showed that the Pentateuch text has a dominant recurrence of an architecture of numbers. Outstanding, for example, is the number seven, which also has a significant role in the content and which seems to serve as a kind of heading for a certain number of sections of the text. For instance, were one to look for a heading in terms of Western stylistics, for the section that deals with the struggle of Moses and Amalek, one would note that, in the course of the narration - and only within its framework - the name Moses appears seven times and the name Amalek appears seven times. Goldberg shows how the text makes use of stylistic variants, replacing proper nouns with pronouns, cleverly alternating plural and singular pronouns, etc., all with the stylistic aim of placing emphasis on the number seven in that particular section. As already stated, the stylistic purpose of the text structuring here is to stress, to underline a given content by repeating both names seven times.

A number web is interwoven into the entire text of the Pentateuch and this has led to efforts to search for the linguistic and psychological significance of the phenomenon. Consider, to begin with, the function of number in the meter rhythm of the language - perhaps akin to the use of ‘six’ in the Greek form of the hexameter. Hebrew relates a numerical structure to the content of the narrative and thus relates the subject matter to the number. Clearly, creating such a connection to the sense of the linguistic presentation heightens the significance of the number far more than does giving an external role to it in the language of a formalised presentation. The number now becomes sense-related and, as such, the number ‘means something’ as is, indeed, evident, for instance, in the structured use of the number seven in the Pentateuch.

Goldberg offers a second argument, one that we do not intend to make part of our case here, since there is not, as yet, sufficiently scholarly evidence available. The argument has it that there are remarkable paradigms, which the metaphysics of numbers could cite, suggesting that, because a number of passages in the Pentateuch make such striking and notably frequent use of the numerical value of the Name of G-d, we should assume that the redactor saw that number as the basis of everything countable in the text. The passages point to a relevance of word count, letter count, the numerical value of letters and, by no means least, the content value of the passage. According to Goldberg, one would be justified in describing such passages as a rendering, in numerical writing an unfolding of the Name of G-d; one would understand the Name in number form as the metaphysical context, the actual essence of everything narrated there. The number would then be the tool enabling

the articulation of the metaphysical content of the Pentateuch. The tradition of Kabbala takes this literally: 'we find ...that all creation and language[of the text] originate from one Name'.

However, as already said, it does not have to to be the actual number value of the Name of G-d that serves as context for the metaphysical significance, for this to be present. Already the use of the number seven (of which the Kabbala says, 'He loved the number seven under all of heaven')which Goldberg showed to be indisputably dominant, presupposes the meaningful role of numbers; it is naturally different but equally graphic and ancient. And it is this fact that Goldberg's analysis documents in that ancient text of Hebrew writings. The fact that numbers mean something is evidence that the spirit of the Hebrew language has a quite different and far more intensive focus than does a general, widely acknowledged treatment of 'special' numbers; otherwise, the impact of numbers laden with meaning would not be so manifest in their amazing stylistic arabesque of numbers as is the case in the Pentateuch.

Throughout their history, Jews have had a sense for the importance of numbers and their meaningful concealment within their foremost religious document. They very actively expressed that sense throughout the centuries by searching in the Torah, counting, reckoning and working on combinations in order to uncover how the hard to understand, meticulous coding was wrought. In the Middle Ages, a kind of disciplined system developed around the calculations focused on the religious text, namely the so-called 'Gematria'; even while it did not not offer radical insights, it followed an age-old tradition of seeking to explain the text in terms of an inherent link between numbers and the holy text as regards both content and meaning. If we add the hugely widespread literature of Kabbalistic speculations on numbers to the markedly predominant tendency of both rationalists and mystics to work on numbers in the field of religion, we readily assume this disposition to be inherent for Jews, one that goes far back into their history. The emphasis on numbers is evident; one might say that the Jewish world view 'metaphysicises' numbers, This intellectual trait is present in early and late Judaism, in antiquity and in the Middle Ages.

We can also point out a yet more basic explanation for the inherent link between Jewish thinking and the number factor, a source that conditions the Israelite religion, namely the Hebrew language as such. Here, again, we shall make use of Oskar Goldberg's research, namely his scholarly study of myth, Die Wirklichkeit der Hebraer. The Hebrew language is not sound-, but letter-based. Vowels are relatively incidental; the letters, i.e. consonants present a configuration with a wholly arithmetic structure. One sees that the amazing structural regularity of the Hebrew verb in most of the language used , always consists of three letters that form the root of the word. This leads to the idea that the combination of sequences and permutations of the three root letters must have a regulated connection to the meaning of the word. This would imply that, in Hebrew, there has to be present an at least intended linguistic content, where the meaning of a word and its logical variants are represented by an analogous variation in a system of number cyphers; - a proposition that remains persuasive, even though it can sometimes prove difficult to work out the actual link between a content and a root letter combination.

An example from the paradigms of Kabbala may illustrate what is meant. Take the case of ONEG, ענג which means ‘enjoyment, delight, Its root letters can be rearranged to mean ‘plague’, NEGA נגע . The arithmetic combinations , characteristic of the Hebrew language, are rooted in the language and its laws and would seem to counter the claim that the number theories of Kabbala may be derived from the Gnostics - the claim of the historian H.Graetz. The latter writes that Sefer Yetzira belongs within the sphere of influence of Gnostic constructs; he also finds a model for the method of letter combinations in the work of the Greek speaking Gnostic, Markos, and cites the latter’s attempt to arrive at infinity from a very small number of ground elements. For instance, writing the word ‘delta’ uses five basic letters,: the *delta* itself, *epsilon*, *lamda, tau* and *alpha.* - and these letters are then in turn, written by using other letters. As letters continue to engender further letters, the way can lead to a potential infinite.What a wealth of letters has resulted from a single one! Graetz, envisaging this impossible parallel, writes: ‘One can see from this that the compiler of the Sefer Yetzira while dealing with the nature of the Hebrew language, had a much easier case to make, less forced and thus more successful than Markos did with Greek. Hebrew does indeed seem to structure its roots by a combination of letters that can create new roots with a different, even an opposite meaning’. This particular passage was selected in order to bring to light the opposite of what it actually intended to show, namely the singularity of the Hebrew language and its innate link to numbers - as distinct from the Greek, built on altogether different principles. The passage illustrates the fact that, in Hebrew, the letters themselves constitute elements; the combination possibilities are inherent in Hebrew; the close linkage is evidence of a natural relationship to numbering, one that precedes the later, more conventional use of figures to denote numbers. (As Goldberg says in the above mentioned work: ‘the letters of the Hebrew language….are numbers’).

If we consider the connection between the philological and the cognitive aspects, i.e. between ‘word’ (nomen), ‘concept’ (notio) and ‘integral’, we see that the series : word - concept-integral, i.e. the ‘number’ basis in the Hebrew ‘word’ , we realise that the intellectual link is much closer, firmer and more deeply rooted in Hebrew than it is in other languages and philosophies.Hence, basis = number is unique to Hebrew in that it is integral,linguistically; here, and only here,can we add the equation: basis = number and basis = word to the equation: word=number.

The number basis permeates the whole text of the Pentateuch, evidence that the relation between language and number is present from the earliest text; it also indicates an original, metaphysical significance of the number. Even if we add the original kabbala’s disposition to stress this significance, as evident, for instance, in the use of Gematria, the following conclusion stands: whatever the dating of a work such as the Sefer Yetzira may be, the metaphysical idea of the link between number and essence has a precedent in the Pentateuch; the structure of the Hebrew language is clearly anchored in the origins of Hebrew thought.

Following on that conclusion, it would seem clear that the period between the original Mosaic teaching and the earliest literature on number metaphysic cannot have been simply ‘empty’. It has to be thought of as linked by a substantive tradition. And that means that The number

metaphysic of the Jews was independent of Pythagoreanism; it implies a time line of tradition that reaches back much further than manifest Pythagoreanism.

Let us look at a juxtaposition of the Jewish number metaphysic and the Pythagorean one that may be significant for current, and perhaps also for future thought. We need to remember that Pythagoreanism , as is well known, was not 'philosophy', in the sense of other Greek philosophy, such as 'natural philosophy; it was, rather, a religious movement, carried by a closed sect, whose articles of faith point to religious ideas that did not originate in Greece, but in the orient. Thus, e.g. reincarnation in Pythagorean thought points to an Indian origin. The cultural circle in Asia Minor where we find Pythagoreanism was,as history tells us, only part of a periphery in Greece; other than that, it was within the radius of influence of other cultures. The actually Greek elements in Pythagoreanism are not so much the religious and metaphysical areas; these, they were reluctant to discuss, as Aristotle reports already, but rather their reach into a future of mathematics. "The Pythagoreans were the first to concentrate seriously on mathematics", says Aristotle (Metaph.1,5,985b 3ff). Harmony and mass in nature was more suited to their spirit and to the spirit of Greece; their number metaphysic was on the edges, on the horizon of Pythagorean interest. Its core concern was the discovery of certain number relationships in nature, in the elementary harmonies found in music and geometry.

While we can find echoes of a principle that refers to a systematic happening, the Pythagoreanism of antiquity nowhere derives creation of the All from number. They did look beyond the appearance of number, but we do not find there the universal process of bringing forth. That is because they fail to place any stress on the thing that constitutes the starting point for creation and number, the thing which, from its outset, characterises the Hebrew metaphysic and to which it gives special emphasis. The Pythagoreanism of antiquity nowhere stresses the One. Yet it is this awareness of the depth of meaning of the One that grants the Hebrew metaphysic its mastery of the domain of numbers and of the origin and creation of all things.

You could say that Pythagoreanism looks from the realm of phenomena and the harmony of mass to the underlying transparence of numbers, while the Hebrew tradition looks out from Oneness, via the nature of numbers, to the realm of phenomena and describes the creation of phenomena, which is achieved by the self propelled act of the Oneness.

As a result, Pythagoreanism also lacks a second, fundamental principle, one that is responsible for the fact that the Hebrew number metaphysic is still productive. This lack, that persists in both the old and the later Pythagoreanism, strangled it, preventing a continuation into the new age of thought: what was lacking were the philosophical concept of permutation and combination.

This, ultimately, explains why great thinkers in the Middle Ages and in modern times, and thus in European thought, connected to Kabbala and not to Pythagoreanism. Consequently, two well known philosophers, in whose epistemology both permutation and combination played a significant if not the central role, were inspired by Kabbala. We mean Raymundus Lullus and Leibnitz.

(Conclusion and notes missing. Esther Ehrman).