JEWISH CULTURE AND CONTEXTS

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A Remembrance of His Wonders

NATURE AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN MEDIEVAL ASHKENAZ

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excrement. "Waste treatment" was a pervasive topic in *Sefer Hasidim* and many other Pietistic texts, and this chapter shows that lowly excrement was invested with lofty theological significance in eschatological and polemical contexts. The book's conclusion selectively surveys the reception of medieval Ashkenazic ideas about nature and the body in the later Middle Ages, and suggests some directions for future research.

CHAPTER 1

Wondrous Nature and Natural Wonders

Heir to all the fantastic notions concerning the universe that were current in the ancient world, with equal title to the wild and wonderful tales that swept medieval Europe, it is a source of surprise not that Jewish literature laid claim to these ideas and stories, but rather that it made so little of them. Compared with the intense popular interest that was focused upon the curious and weird phenomena of nature in the Europe they inhabited, the Jews may be said almost to have neglected the subject altogether—allowing for the circumstance that Jewish writings, with their juridical and exegetical orientation, did not fully reflect the state of popular credulity. Nonetheless, the "facts" that may be culled from them make strange reading enough.

—Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*

In his theological treatise *Imrot Tehorot Hitsoniyot u-Penimiyot* (Pure Utterances Revealed and Hidden), Judah the Pious offers a fascinating argument for the plausibility of God's existence: "If one places hot ash on hot excrement, it will cause harm to the one who produced [the excrement]. And although we cannot see any connection between the excrement and the person's body, nonetheless the body will be harmed by the power of the excrement. Thus, there must be some connection between the two which is too subtle to see. . . . Just as [this connection] is real, even though it cannot be seen by the eye, so too our Creator, may his Name be blessed, is a real entity, whose power is in everything, even though we have never seen Him."[1] In this passage, to which we return in detail below, Judah justifies a common Jewish doctrine—God's existence and omnipotence—using a decidedly uncommon interpretive strategy. The ability to apply heat to and hence "weaponize" human excrement somehow lends credence to a seemingly unrelated theological tenet. Indeed, the invocation of excrement and its magical properties is of a piece with a broader tendency in Pietistic writings to engage intensively with a wide array of fantastic creatures, objects,

and phenomena. In Pietistic works like *Sefer Hasidim*, for example, men turn into wolves, demons work mischief with impunity, magical spells are routinely, sometimes dangerously, effective, and wearing the proper amulet can mean the difference between life and death. If one focuses on these passages—and there are many of them—it is easy to understand why generations of scholars have sought to situate the Pietists exclusively within the "superstitious" worldview of medieval Germanic folk culture. Joshua Trachtenberg's analysis of the "wonders of nature" in medieval Ashkenazic culture is typical in this regard. In the epigraph that begins this chapter, Trachtenberg diagnoses the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz as suffering from a double malady. First, their "juridical and exegetical orientation"—which later scholars would dub "talmudocentrism"[2]—prevented them from engaging with the workings and meaning of their natural surroundings. Second, to the limited extent that they did appreciate or seek to understand the natural world, they were boxed in by the "fantastical notions" and "wild and wonderful tales" that predominated in their northern European surroundings. The Jews of medieval Ashkenaz, in this telling, labored under an ignorance compounded by isolation.

Trachtenberg's generalization has been accepted, and extended, by an array of subsequent scholars who have contended that the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz were at best apathetic and at worst overtly hostile toward exploration of their natural surroundings. Joseph Dan, for instance, has contrasted the approach of Ashkenazic thinkers like the German Pietists with that of their Sephardic contemporaries:

> [Medieval Jewish] rationalist thinkers presented their readers with the wonders of Creation as a testimony of God's power and glory. . . . Kabbalists discovered in Creation reflections of divine forces, and saw its components as paralleling the structure and internal dynamics of the divine realm. This simple, understandable approach was inaccessible to R. Judah the Pious, because its fundamental assumption is that God created the world as an expression of His inner goodness, and that the laws of existence reflect God's goodness, and His love of His creations. . . . Rabbi Judah the Pious and R. Eleazar of Worms developed a different teaching. . . . The laws of existence . . . are designed to create a situation that is difficult for human beings. That is to say, investigation of the laws of the cosmos does not bring man to recognition of God's goodness, but on the contrary, reveals the ways in which God lays burdens on man, and makes things difficult for him.[3]

Nature, in this reading, is an intrinsically antagonistic force, concerning which the Pietists are uniformly pessimistic;[4] Judah and Eleazar

"thus distance the Creator from the world, and from the laws of nature that govern it—*for they do not see nature as a reflection of God's attributes.*"[5] Elliot Wolfson has argued in a similar vein that "the truly esoteric dimension of Rhineland Jewish pietistm . . . is . . . rooted in an essentially negative view about the physical world,"[6] while Haym Soloveitchik has claimed that "the universe, in Hasidic thinking, is empty of harmony and beauty, and above all of *meaning*. No image of God is to be found there, nor does it reflect His wisdom."[7]

This chapter interrogates and ultimately seeks to dispel this general characterization. It argues that the German Pietists saw the natural world as profoundly imbued with theological meaning, and that they invested considerable energy in attempting to understand its workings. The Pietists manifested this preoccupation particularly through their exegesis of a single biblical verse: "He has created a remembrance of His wonders" (*zekher asah le-nifle'otav*—Ps. 111:4), a verse they marshal consistently, and somewhat formulaically, in an array of their writings. In their reading, this verse refers to observable phenomena that attest to theological truths about God and His attributes. The Pietists believed that the created world contains "remembrances" (objects and phenomena discernable to the careful observer) which shed light upon God's "wonders" (namely, theological truths about His nature and attributes). Dan, who was the first to treat this doctrine of "remembrances" in his pioneering work on the German Pietists, understood it in light of his broader sense that the Pietists "do not see nature as a reflection of God's attributes." In a series of studies, he has argued that the only remembrances of interest to the Pietists were those that deviated from, and hence undermined the typical workings of the natural order:[8] "The Creator has, in his kindness and goodness, implanted within reality wondrous and unnatural things that cannot be comprehended according to the laws of nature, in order to enable His pious followers to comprehend Him, and to learn about the wondrous, supernatural capabilities of the Creator Himself, which similarly cannot be understood according to the laws of nature. . . . The true nature of God can be discerned, in their view, only from the supernatural, from phenomena that are exceptions to the conventional laws of nature."[9] This sense that the Pietists prized "the supernatural" at the expense of "the natural" has been widely adopted by scholars writing in Dan's wake, who have agreed that, for the Pietists, "only in the marvelous and the anomalous does one

find the Divinity reflected."[10] The claim has been further extended to Ashkenazic culture as a whole by scholars who have contended that "reliance on natural phenomena as a means of comprehending [theological matters] was an uncommon characteristic" in medieval Ashkenaz.[11]

Now, it is true that discussions of "nature" are conspicuously lacking in Pietistic theological texts—but this is not due to a supposed Ashkenazic antipathy toward the natural world. Rather, it results from the fact that, as far as Ashkenazic Jewish thinkers were concerned, "nature" as such did not exist—at least not lexically. The standard medieval Hebrew term for nature, *teva*, was a neologism coined in the mid-twelfth century by Samuel Ibn Tibbon in his *Perush ha-Milot ha-Zarot* (Explanation of Foreign Terms), a philosophical dictionary intended to supplement his Hebrew translations of Judeo-Arabic rationalist texts.[12] In earlier Jewish sources, *teva* was used to denote either the building blocks of which physical objects were composed—the four elements, for instance, or the four humors—or else, relatedly, the "natures," or specific qualities of things.[13] Ibn Tibbon used *teva* in his translations as a replacement for the Arabic words *tab* and *tabi'a*, to denote "nature" as a systematic and unified construct. The German Pietists did not have access to Ibn Tibbon's translations or dictionary, and so their neglect of "nature" reflects not a principled theological opposition, but simply a lack of conceptual vocabulary. Ashkenazic Jews did have other, related terms at their disposal, such as *hokhmat ha-toladot* for "science,"[14] and of course *ma'aseh bereishit*, which could mean both the process of creation and the created order as a whole. But whether these semantic terms approximated or differed from the Tibbonite *teva* in their meanings can only be discerned if Pietistic discussions of the workings of their physical surroundings are analyzed from the ground up.

The fact that the Pietists were exploring God's "remembrances" at precisely the moment when Jewish (and, as we shall see, also Christian) conceptions of "nature" were being consolidated is of crucial importance. For Pietistic ruminations upon Psalms 111:4 in fact reveal a spectrum of attitudes toward the created world and natural order. On the one hand, the writings of Judah and Eleazar recurrently locate theological profundity specifically in the routine, mundane components of the natural order. In these instances, the Pietists seem to take for granted, and to derive spiritual meaning from, the stability and predictability of the laws of nature. Thus, while the "remembrances"

that they see as meaningful do attest to God's wondrous nature, they are often not *themselves* wondrous. Indeed, the prosaic quality of these "remembrances" is key to the very workings of the Pietists' argumentation, revealing not only an awareness of and appreciation for the conventional workings of nature, but a theological *dependence* upon it. On the other hand, the Pietists not infrequently invoke Psalms 111:4 in their discussions of decidedly non-mundane phenomena—fantastic, extraordinary marvels such as the malevolent potentialities of excrement described above. In these cases, the "remembrances" highlighted are themselves "wondrous," and would seem to destabilize the consistency that the Pietists at other times prized.

But while these divergent approaches seem contradictory at first glance, they are in fact of a piece with a broader tension in high medieval thought—how to make sense of apparently inexplicable phenomena, and integrate them into the broader natural order. This challenge was increasingly taken up by high medieval Christians and Jews alike—not only by the superstitious "folk" but by influential theologians and natural philosophers, who were both fascinated by and suspicious of the *mirabilia* that featured prominently in the literary texts, magical treatises, and travel narratives introduced into Europe over the course of the high Middle Ages. These thinkers arrived at diverse solutions to the tension between natural order and disorderly wonders of nature. But on the whole, their discourses of "science" and "nature" were far more capacious than modern, binary distinctions between nature and the supernatural would lead one to believe, and could include and account for the magical and marvelous alongside the mundane.

By analyzing Pietistic discussions of God's "remembrances" both synchronically and diachronically, this chapter shows that the natural order was indeed a source of theological meaning for the German Pietists. Attention to this dimension of medieval Ashkenazic theology will also allow us to draw linkages between their esoteric works of elite theology and the more popular, outwardly directed genres that conveyed these ideas to a wider audience. Moreover, the very ways in which they conceived of the character and boundaries of the natural order drew upon developments in the Christian setting in which they lived, and with which they were varyingly and substantively engaged.[15]

"HE HAS CREATED A REMEMBRANCE OF HIS WONDERS"

The German Pietists were hardly the first readers of the Bible interested in identifying the precise "remembrances" and "wonders" alluded to in Psalms 111:4. This verse was the subject of a lengthy tradition of Jewish exegesis long before the Pietists came on the scene. The interpretation most common during the medieval period approached the verse from a historical perspective, identifying God's "wonders" with His miraculous interventions in human history. The "remembrances" of these events could vary. One approach was to define the remembrances as the practices and rituals that the Jews were commanded to observe as a means of commemorating God's wondrous deeds. Thus, the mid-twelfth century midrashic compilation *Sekhel Tov* jointly lists the prohibition of eating an animal's sciatic nerve (*gid ha-nasheh*), the commandment of remembering the exodus from Egypt, the prohibition of eating leaven on Passover, and the commandment of dwelling in *sukkot* on the Feast of Tabernacles as "remembrances" of "wonders" that God performed for the biblical Israelites.[16] Passive remembrance is here allied to specific ritual imperatives, since human beings bear the responsibility of maintaining the practices that commemorate God's miracles and activities. A wide range of biblical exegetes—both predating and postdating the compilation of *Sekhel Tov*—read the verse similarly. The eleventh-century French exegete Solomon b. Isaac of Troyes (Rashi), for instance, explains that the verse refers to "the Sabbath and holidays [which God] established for the Jews, about which it is written 'and you shall remember (*ve-zakharta*) that you were in Egypt.'"[17] The twelfth-century itinerant Spanish rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra and the thirteenth-century rabbi Moses b. Nahman of Barcelona incorporate similar readings into their own biblical commentaries.[18] The motif was utilized in other genres as well—a sermon attributed to the fifteenth-century halakhic authority Jacob Molin of Mainz (Maharil), for instance, consists of an expanded, homiletical rendering of Psalms 111:4 that takes the same historical-ritualistic approach.[19]

A related interpretation of this verse linked God's historical "wonders" not with practices, but rather with *objects* that served as "remembrances."[20] Thus, a variety of *midrashim* invoked Psalms 111:4 in their discussions of Lot's wife's metamorphosis into a pillar of salt in Genesis 19: "When Sodom and Gomorrah were overturned, it is written 'And [Lot's] wife looked back' (Gen. 19:26), and she remains a pillar of salt to this day. Why? 'He has created a remembrance of His wonders,' so that the generations will recite the praises of the Holy One, blessed be He."[21] Other midrashim make a similar claim regarding Noah's ark, which they claim was preserved as a sign, lest people forget God's miraculous flooding of the earth.[22]

"THE WORLD FOLLOWS ITS CUSTOMARY COURSE"

This focus on God's role in human history, and the objects and rituals that serve to commemorate it, is dramatically different from the Pietists' interpretive approach; indeed, their reading of the verse seems to be wholly *sui generis*, without precedent in earlier Jewish literature.[23] Psalms 111:4 is invoked dozens of times in the writings of Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Eleazar, in a variety of different contexts.[24] Generally speaking, the argumentation based on this verse is constructed in the following manner: first, a question about some theological proposition is laid out; next, a "remembrance," an object or phenomenon found in the natural world, is presented and briefly described; finally, a correlation is drawn between the remembrance and the "wondrous" theological truth, thus answering the question presented in the first step.

In many instances, the remembrances described in the second stage of the argument are not rarities, or deviations from the natural order; rather, they are common, even mundane components of the physical world. For example, Judah argues that God's omniscience is a tenable possibility in light of the fact that "man's mind can think two thoughts at once, or see in one instant many different colors. He does not comprehend these things in succession, but rather simultaneously. Certainly the Creator, who sees and remembers all things [can do likewise]!"[25] This passage locates spiritual resonance in the routine and prosaic, not in some wondrous exception to the rules of nature. Just as it is empirically obvious that man can think two thoughts or see two colors simultaneously, Judah suggests, it should pose no problem to accept that God can exercise omniscience. A similar line of argument is used to justify belief in God's all-pervasiveness: "The Creator is everywhere. And if one were to ask, "'How can I believe that He is found everywhere, and that nothing is hidden from Him?' . . . He has created a remembrance of His wonders. The glass that is in a window does not block out the lights. . . . How much more ought we to believe in the Creator of everything, that nothing blocks Him."[26] Here, too,

the mundane property of the transparency of glass is used to make sense of the fact that God can be ever-present, even if unseen by the naked eye. God's pervasiveness can be demonstrated on the basis of other common phenomena as well. Thus, Eleazar explains that God's supernal light can be shared among many divine beings simultaneously, "in the same manner that one can make both cheese and butter from milk, and one can boil milk and separate the curds from the whey."[27] Judah, too, compares God's pervasiveness in the universe to the way that a liquid which is placed in one part of a block of cheese will distribute itself equally throughout the entire block.[28]

In other instances, the Pietists not only describe routine phenomena, but also take pains to give naturalistic explanations for why they occur: "If one were to ask: How can one believe that God exists in the world, given that no eye has ever seen Him? It is possible to respond that . . . in the winter, when one is indoors, or in a warm bathhouse, no one can see the breath that one exhales from his mouth and nostrils. Similarly, during the summer the warmth of one's breath is not visible. For during the winter, man's breath is warm and the air is cold, and when [these] two unlike things [meet] the warmth is visible; but warm air eliminates [the visibility of a person's breath]."[29] Once again, the fact that something discernable in nature can be present even though it is invisible proves that an invisible God can exist as well. Both Judah and Eleazar use similar logic in explaining another natural phenomenon, namely that dust can be seen in a beam of light coming in through a window, while dust is invisible outdoors in broad daylight. In discussing this "remembrance," they offer up a programmatic statement about the necessity of the careful investigation of nature: "Since [the outdoor dust] in invisible, should we deny, heaven forbid, that it exists? We must not say this *but rather compare one situation to another until we discover the truth.*"[30] Elsewhere, this same "remembrance" attests to a different theological truth, and is linked to another, equally common natural phenomenon: "I have heard concerning angels . . . that there are those who say they are invisible on account of the subtlety of their bodies. Behold, the fine dust that can be seen in a beam of light that enters a house through a window or crack cannot [otherwise] be seen, on account of its subtlety. Similarly, if one is far away from a spider web, one cannot see it—how much more so [angels], which are even more subtle. And [even] if a spider web is extremely large, when you gather it together it becomes very small—how much more so can spirits contract themselves and become small [as well]."[31] Like the dust in a beam of light, a spider's web is invoked not because it is wondrous, but precisely because it is not—its ubiquity allows the reader to appreciate that the existence of invisible beings is indeed a tenable proposition.

This location of theological meaning within the physical world is also evident in passages where the Pietists derive their information not from direct observation, but rather from earlier sources. In a number of contexts, the Pietists describe the visible signs that confirm the rabbinic teaching that God issued 613 commandments to the Jewish people:[32] "'He has created a remembrance of His wonders'—[the numerical value of] 'of his wonders' is 613, corresponding to the [365] positive and [248] negative commandments. The 365 tendons and the 248 limbs of the human body are a remembrance of this."[33] According to *gematriyah*, the system of letter-number equivalency that was a mainstay of Pietistic hermeneutics, the 613 commandments are encoded in God's "wonders" (*nifle'otav*)—a word whose own numerical value is 613.[34] And these "wonders" are literally "embodied" in the tendons and limbs of the human form: the physical constitution of the human body broadcasts a theological message to those who are attuned to it.[35] Although the link between the 248 limbs in the body and the 248 negative commandments derives from precedents in rabbinic literature,[36] the invocation of the 365 tendons in connection with the 365 positive commandments is apparently original to this Pietistic source.[37]

A somewhat more complex use of this type of argumentation appears in Judah's and Eleazar's discussions of emotion and cognition. Eleazar, for instance, argues, "The Creator is in everything, and all things derive from Him. And should one's heart say, 'How can I believe that there is a God in the world, when no eye has seen Him?' . . . The very intellect and thoughts in one's heart—were one to dissect a person limb from limb, one could not find the intellect. How much more so does the Creator of all exist even though He cannot be seen. Similarly, how connected is a man's heart when he sees a woman and desires her!"[38] The somewhat cryptic final line of this passage is explicable based on a parallel in the writings of Judah: "A man sees a woman from afar, and love is awakened in his heart, even though no ties of love connect her to his heart."[39] Love and desire, the Pietists explain, are invisible forces, like the intellect; nonetheless, they can act at a distance, and still impact the human body physically: "He has created a remembrance of His wonders. . . . Thought alone can

cause a person to fatten or to deteriorate, as it says, 'Good news fattens one's bones' (Prov. 15:30), and depression weakens a person. . . . These [physical consequences] are dependent on thought, without evidence of any action."[40] Other emotions, too, confirm that invisible forces can have powerfully visible effects: "Laughter and anger are dependent upon thought, and we never see any [physical] thing that brings one to anger or laughter—only thought and reflection and contemplation."[41]

Perhaps the clearest articulation of the naturalistic worldview underlying the doctrine of *zekher asah le-nifle'otav* can be found in Judah's and Eleazar's repeated references to the regularity and consistency of phenomena such as the progression of the celestial bodies, or the duration of the reproductive process. Judah, for instance, argues,

> He has created a remembrance of His wonders. . . . "There is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9), so that man should never think that something occurs against God's will, or that maybe a second [divine] power can abrogate the actions of the first one. It is for this reason that [God] set the time and duration of reproduction, each animal and plant species as is customary for it, and the times of planting and harvesting, each in its proper time. And He has never changed and never will change these customs. . . . This is in order that one not think that there is a second God who can contradict the first God. Thus, our sages have said, "The world follows its customary course" (*olam ke-minhago noheg*) in all matters.[42]

The "supernatural" abrogation of the natural order, in this view, would threaten rather than reinforce knowledge of God's "wonders."

This privileging of the "customary course" which the world follows has surprising implications for the Pietistic conception of miracles, deviations from the natural order that overturn the regularity imposed by God on the physical world. With few exceptions,[43] Pietistic sources minimize both the frequency and theological significance of direct divine interventions in the functioning of the natural order. Thus, *Sefer Hasidim* cautions that "one should seek to avoid miracles,"[44] and that if one does experience a miracle, it should not be publicized to others.[45] Similarly, the Pietists express discomfort with apparently miraculous events described in the Bible, and seem more comfortable with figures like Joshua and Samuel, who rarely performed public miracles, than with prophets like Elijah and Elisha, who were constantly the cause or beneficiary of interventions in the natural order.[46] Indeed, in contrasting these figures with one another, Judah categorically asserts, "In times of great need, prophets may

perform miracles, but only when the desired end cannot come about via non-miraculous means. When it is possible for it to come about by some other means, one must not perform a miracle. And when a minor miracle will suffice, one must not perform a great miracle."[47] Eleazar sums up this approach with a programmatic assertion: "It is not the way of God to effectuate the decrees that He is constantly effectuating through open miracles. Rather, [He brings his decrees about] through guidance of the world."[48]

In cases where miracles do prove necessary, Judah emphasizes that God generally chooses to perform them in private, so as not to visibly interfere with the (spiritually resonant) typical workings of the natural order. The destruction of Dagon, the idolatrous god of the Philistines, recounted in I Samuel 5 takes place at night when no witnesses are present, as does the plague of the firstborns in Exodus 12. Even Elisha only resurrects the son of the Shunamite woman in II Kings 4 after first closing the door to his bedroom, ensuring that no one would observe the actual workings of the miraculous event. Judah interprets God's criticism of Sarah's laughter in Genesis 18 in this manner as well—laughing upon finding out that she would bear a son in her old age was her way of publicizing the miracle, which God in turn instructed her to avoid.[49] The angelic instruction to Lot's wife not to look upon the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was an expression of the same desire to keep miracles hidden—her transformation into a pillar of salt was thus a punishment for her having violated the bounds of secrecy.[50] The contrast with non-Pietistic interpretations of Psalms 111:4 is here particularly stark—in earlier sources, the pillar of salt into which Lot's wife was transformed was precisely intended to commemorate and publicize God's miraculous deeds.[51] Discomfort with miraculous intervention also explains the Pietists' conspicuous attempts to minimize the wondrousness of certain scriptural miracles. For example, the inexplicable blossoming of Aaron's staff in the Tabernacle during Korah's rebellion in Numbers 17 is described by the Pietists as rather mundane. In the context of a discussion of the rapidly blossoming trees of the Garden of Eden, Eleazar notes, "You should not be surprised—for Aaron's staff produced fruit in a single night, without being planted. And truffles and mushrooms [grow] in a single day, without being planted or drawing [sustenance] from the ground. And cabbage produces sprouts, even when not [planted] in

the ground."[52] Eleazar here takes an ostensibly miraculous occurrence and diminishes its significance by equating it with commonplace horticultural phenomena.

When it comes to prayer, too, miracles should neither be requested nor invoked as a means of praising God. According to *Sefer Hasidim*, one is prohibited from praying for miraculous interventions in the natural order[53] and should not praise God for performing miracles with impunity: "'Rejoice, oh righteous, in the Lord' (Ps. 33:1)—but not in other joys. . . . This verse does not explain—what 'joy' is [accurate with regard to] the Holy One, blessed be He? Truth—one should not speak lies, [such as], 'The Holy One, blessed be He, makes the heavens into earth, or the earth into the heavens, turns water into wine or honey into wormwood or wormwood into honey.' *Anything that does not usually happen should not be used to praise God.*"[54] In a similar passage elsewhere, Judah echoes this line of reasoning further, claiming that attributing wondrous miracles to God is not only unseemly, but also untrue. In other words, his commitment to the immutability of the natural order leads him to implicitly place limitations on God's omnipotence. In addressing the talmudic prohibition on praising God in overly extravagant language,[55] he writes: "If one were to ask: Since God is omnipotent . . . let us praise Him with all manner [of praises]. It is possible to respond that we ought to praise Him for those things he regularly, visibly does for humanity. . . . For it would not do to say that God can do *anything*, lest one think of things which are illogical, and thereby blaspheme the Exalted One. For instance, one might think, 'Since He is omnipotent, why can he not make today precede yesterday, or [tomorrow] precede today?'[56] For it is impossible for the past to follow the future [chronologically]."[57] It is clear from these passages that both Judah and Eleazar much prefer the regularity, and even constraint, imposed by consistency and predictability over a worldview in which miracles play a destabilizing role. This antipathy toward changing the natural created order is predicated on the belief that that order is hardly haphazard—much less maleficent or antagonistic—but that it rather reflects God's wisdom and desires.

Indeed, this conception of a consistent natural order is evident not only from the specific phenomena that the Pietists cite—the transparency of glass, the steam of one's breath, and dust visible in a ray of sunlight—but, more broadly, from the very rhetorical agenda that their invocations of Psalms 111:4 are intended to further. In their discussions of God's "remembrances," the Pietists were engaged in

a pedagogic and exhortatory strategy aimed at a specific audience. Particularly in the *sifrut ha-yihud*, Psalms 111:4 is invoked in reference to an imagined interlocutor, who raises a succession of skeptical queries regarding the nature of God. "How can I believe that there is a God in the world, when no eye has seen Him?" "How can I believe that He is found everywhere, and that nothing is hidden from Him?" and so on. The goal of the Pietists' exoteric writings—aimed at a "lay" audience rather than a select group of initiates—is to offer convincing answers to these questions precisely by listing examples of mundane substances that, though invisible, undoubtedly exist. That is, it is the very ordinariness of the objects and phenomena, their tendency to be taken for granted, that lends the argument its weight. Drawing linkages between, say, God's invisibility and inexplicable, supernatural phenomena would not meet the needs of the consumers of the Pietists' writings, who were interested in comprehending theological truths about God, not in begging the question through the marshaling of even more unbelievable phenomena.

The notion that the Pietists were concerned with the spiritual edification of those whose faith was less than perfect runs counter to the conventional depiction of the Hasidei Ashkenaz as elitist and withdrawn, closed off from the broader Jewish community and its manifold spiritual failings. Indeed, the possibility that there existed medieval Ashkenazic Jews who were capable of theological skepticism altogether belies the tendency to depict Ashkenazic Jewry as a "pious community," unshakeable in their faith and religious commitment.[58] And yet, there is ample evidence in Pietistic sources that facts on the ground were considerably more fraught than the idealized Ashkenazic self-image would lead us to believe.[59] *Sefer Hasidim*, like the *sifrut ha-yihud*, is rife with discussions aimed at Jews doubtful about basic theological tenets, including God's incorporeality,[60] theodicy,[61] divine omniscience,[62] providence,[63] and so on. As in the examples cited above, the dialogic structure is consistently marshaled in these discussions, suggesting that real conversations about these issues actually could, and did, take place. Hence the following programmatic statement: "People should not harbor doubts about their Creator. Rather, if they have any doubts about the Creator, they should speak with a sage (*hakham*) who is expert in theological matters . . . and who will give a wise and fitting answer to the doubter's words."[64] The Pietists also discuss skepticism explicitly in their writings on pedagogy. Thus *Sefer Hasidim* at one point counsels, "One

must not reveal wondrous teachings to children, lest they say, 'This is nonsense, and since this is false, so are the others [teachings of Judaism].'"[65] Elsewhere, the opposite approach is considered: "Children's minds are like the minds of adults who are dreaming—they accept the truth of everything. So, too, children believe that everything they are told is true, until they are led astray by evil acquaintances."[66] In any event, it is clear that doubts about theological teachings were by no means uncommon during this period, thus necessitating the kind of exoteric response contained especially in the *sifrut ha-yihud*.

In sum, it is crucial to examine not only the content, but also the context of Pietistic invocations of Psalms 111:4. The Pietists' analyses of the relationship between God and the natural world were not abstract or theoretical—they were rather aimed at real-life skeptics, necessitating argumentation that was rhetorically compelling. This need could be met by linking apparently unbelievable claims about God's capabilities with common, prosaic natural phenomena, like steam, the rising and setting of the sun, and so on. The world's "customary course" was not, per Soloveitchik, "empty of harmony and beauty, and above all of *meaning*." Rather, as Eleazar puts it, God "created the world to reveal the power of His actions to His nation"[67]—the spiritual resonance and theological profundity imbued within the created world can be uncovered via careful study and observation. Or, as Judah states categorically elsewhere, at Creation, "God said in his heart: 'Let Me create the world, not because I have any need of it, but in order that my creations might rejoice when I reveal My wisdom to them.'"[68]

EMPIRICISM AND ESOTERICISM

Significantly, the Pietists invoke empirical observations not only to confirm basic theological truths such as God's existence, invisibility, and omniscience, but also to validate the more rarified teachings of the Jewish esoteric tradition. Beginning in late antiquity, Jewish texts identified the creation account in Genesis (*ma'aseh bereishit*) and Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot (*ma'aseh merkavah*) as two major loci of secret knowledge,[69] and the Pietists subject both of these categories to extensive commentary and interpretation—particularly in *Sodei Razya* (Secret of Secrets), Eleazar's massive five-part compilation of esoteric traditions. *Sodei Razya* and related texts were aimed at an audience of initiates, elite disciples who could be entrusted with

secret traditions whose transmission was strictly regulated. In these writings, too, the Pietists invoke and explore the routine workings of the natural order, marshaling an array of naturalistic "proofs" that render their esoteric teachings convincing or comprehensible. As such, the theology of nature they lay out in their exoteric teachings mirrors, and must be understood in light of, the approach to the natural world undergirding their more recondite doctrines.

In *Sodei Razya*, empirical proofs are often marshaled with reference to *Sefer Yetsirah*, a cryptic cosmological text that the Pietists cited from frequently and reverently.[70] *Sefer Yetsirah* focuses in part upon God's creation of the universe, and details the precise sequence in which the primordial elements were formed—God first created air (*ru'ah*), derived water from air, and then fire and earth from water. Eleazar justifies this order using an array of confirmations from the natural world—what the Pietists elsewhere call "remembrances"—some original to his writings, others culled from a range of earlier sources:[71] "There is an example in the world: If one breathes into the palm of his hand, it will become wet, and thus we know that water emerged from air. Fire emerged from water—for if water is heated in a clean glass vessel, and placed in the sun during the summer time, it can be used to light bits of flax. And stones [come from] fire [and water], for if you fill a pot [with water] and boil it for many days, the vessel will produce something like a piece of stone. All this is intellectually logical (*sevarat ha-da'at*)."[72] Man can thus comprehend the order of God's creation of the elements by being attentive to the moisture in one's breath, the ability of a water-filled glass vessel to focus sunlight and kindle a fire, and the crystallization of minerals that have been boiled in water for an extended period.[73] Using such observable phenomena, as filtered through *sevarat ha-da'at*, as a way of making sense of the order of creation, clearly comports with the Pietists' instructions to "compare one situation to another until we discover the truth."[74] Eleazar similarly justifies the creation of water from air by invoking "the wet moisture of speech," observable in the steam that comes from one's mouth during the wintertime, "when the air is cold and the body is warm, and steam comes out of one's mouth like smoke."[75] The same "smoky" steam allows Eleazar to verify that God could indeed speak at Sinai "from within the fire" (Deut. 4:13), since "the steam [of one's breath in winter] resembles thin pillars of smoke."[76] That water originates in air is also proven by the fact that dew collects on the ground overnight, even when it does not rain.[77]