

Zohar and Iamblichus

By Yehuda Liebes

Moshe Idel, my friend and colleague, has reshaped our understanding and image of Cabbala in many ways. One of the major themes of his research is the *Hermetic* and Neo-Platonic mystical-magical complex of praxis and ideas, dealing with drawing down spiritual forces from supernal entities. Idel dedicated to it much research, demonstrating the major role this theme played in Jewish mysticism and its development from Cabbala to Hasidism.¹ In the following article, dedicated to Idel and to our friendship, I'd like to make some contribution to this research, by establishing a possible literary connection between a paragraph dealing with this theme in the *Zohar*, the Cabbalistic 'Bible' (written in thirteenth century Spain), and a passage from Iamblichus, the Syrian philosopher of the third and fourth century of the Christian era, the foremost representative of *Hermeticism* and theurgy within the Neo-Platonic philosophical school.

In propounding its lore about idolatry and magic, the *Zohar* does not pretend to be original. It refers explicitly to its sources, saying:

Come and see: If a person is drawn toward the blessed Holy One – his desire pursuing Him in this world – then afterward, when he departs, he

¹ Moshe Idel, *Hasidism – Between Ecstasy and Magic*, SUNY, Albany 1994. See also Moshe Idel, 'The Magical and Neoplatonic interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance', *Jewish Thought in the sixteenth Century* (ed. Bernard D. Coopermann), Harvard University Press 1983, pp. 186-242; Moshe Idel, 'Hermeticism and Judaism', *Hermeticism and Renaissance* (eds. Merkel & Debus), Associated University Presses, 1988, pp. 59-76; and many other publications.