The Return of the Gods: Greek-Roman Mythology and Jewish Cultures in the Eighteenth Century.

# Before the Statue of Apollo

In 1899, the young Hebrew poet Saul Tchernichovsky (1875–1943) stood in front of a statue of Apollo at the University of Heidelberg. It was a copy of *Apollo Belvedere* from the fourth century BC, which stands in the Vatican (Shavit 2009). The poet, who was then clearly under Nietzschean influence, saw in the statue of Apollo a dizzying representation of life and beauty, which in his eyes was a complete contradiction to the entire Jewish tradition in which he had been educated. Tchernichovsky wrote to Apollo:

I come to thee, O god long since forgot,  
God of the moons of old and other days…  
Glorious youth and god, comely as spring,  
Who conquered the sun and mysteries of life…  
I am the first to come to thee again…   
Passions stifled by unmanlike folk  
Awake in their prison of a thousand years…  
I come to thee and bow before thine image,

Thine image—symbol of the light in life;  
I bend the knee to life, to beauty, power…[[1]](#footnote-1)

From Tchernichovsky’s point of view, traditional Judaism has forgotten Apollo, and with it has forgotten poetry and the deep creative life – beauty, heroism, and life itself. The binary opposition that the poet presented was a common way in the nineteenth century to describe the relationship between the classical tradition and the Jewish-Talmudic tradition. A long line of historians, philosophers, and artists, Christians and Jews alike, expressed this sentiment (Shevet 1992, Dickman 2004). How accurate is this contrast in its historical sense? How thick and absolute was the partition between the Greek Apollo and the biblical Moses in Jewish life experience and religious literature during the modern era? Very little has been written about Graeco-Roman mythology in the rabbinical world during the Middle Ages and the early modern era (Idel 1980, Bonfil 1997, Ben Shalom 2001 and the sources he cites), and almost nothing about the eighteenth century. In the current article, I would like to offer a first glance at some focal points of such mythological engagement in the Central and Eastern European Judaism of the eighteenth century. We will start our journey on the Jewish street in Prague, facing a dense and bustling procession of Jews.

End of April, 1741. A son was recently born to Maria Theresa by Caesarean section, and the Jewish community in Prague is celebrating, marching in the streets. Blasts of trumpets, the rumble of drums. At the head of the procession is the Jewish postman, a wig with a long braid on his head, and above it, an elegant hat. After him, accompanied by two trumpeters, rides Shimon Wolff Frankel – the ‘primatur’ – the mayor of the Jewish city, so says the inscription in German that describes the detailed drawing of the procession of the Jews through the streets of the city (Zierlicher Aufzug 1741, Silver 2019). In the early modern era, the city was the political unit of the greatest importance. Urban processions are understood in the research literature to represent the different parts of society and the internal relations between them. They can be seen, as Edward Muir has suggested, as a kind of unwritten ‘urban constitution’ just before the era of the state constitution that would begin in a few decades on the distant continent of America (Muir 2005: 255–252; and more locally: Muir 1981: 211–185).

It is therefore unsurprising to see the head of the community, Shimon Wolff, among the participants of the procession of the Jewish city of Prague, in the first row. It is also unsurprising to find scholars and rabbis, representatives of the religious-traditional leadership, in the second row. The Jewish guilds (butchers, tailors, bookbinders) also emphasize their importance in the community structure with flags on huge poles. Yet what catches the eye is the enormous figure of Bacchus. Six Jews lead his carriage, and he himself is riding on a giant wine barrel. Behind him, a Jew dances with a bottle of beer. Not far from him is a giant platform carried by eight people, on which the god Pan is depicted as he plays his long shepherd’s flute. Forest animals are also carried on the platform, peeping from between the trees, enchanted by his melody (Zierlicher Aufzug 1741. Pan is under number 18, and Baccus under number 31. See Silver 2019 on the accompanying text).

Why are Bacchus and Pan marching on the Jewish street?[[2]](#footnote-2) What was their role in the cultural composition of Jewish communities in Europe in the eighteenth century? This question should naturally be directed to the rabbi – the representative of religious authority in the traditional Jewish community in the early modern period (on the Prague community and its processes, see Sperston 2014, Shochet 1961, Kahana 2013). Let us turn to the row of bearded rabbis in the second row of the procession. One of them is Rabbi Yehonatan Eybeschütz (1690–1764), who served at that time as the senior rabbinical authority in the city’s Jewish community. Three years after marching alongside Bacchus and Pan in a parade, Rabbi Eybeschütz surprisingly described the importance of Greco-Roman mythology for Jewish culture (on Rabbi Eybeschütz, see Klemperer 1858, Samet 2010, Kahana 2021: 262–356). In a sermon at the synagogue, the rabbi explained that the sun and the stars allocate their qualities to human beings, such as strength, beauty, and eternal life. Mastery of ancient Hermetic and astral techniques, the rabbi claimed, helped the people of Greece and Rome to channel the astrological and Hermetic powers of the sun and stars to create giants, heroes with superhuman strength, and women of heavenly beauty. Because of these supernatural powers, humans described them as gods (‘bearers of the title god’ in his language). The bewitched magical world, described by the rabbi to his listeners in 1744, was ‘expelled’ from Europe in the modern era and survives only in distant cultures: in China and India, as well as in wild tribes in Peru. There, you can find mathematical engagement in Hermetic techniques of this sort. The absence of giants from Europe in the eighteenth century, continued the rabbi, has led many contemporary scholars to cast doubt on the very existence of the gods and the validity of the testimonies of Homer and Suetonius. The ancient literary traditions of the West, said the rabbi, are in doubt today (Eybeschütz, 1988 [1737]: 89, and see p. 150). See Kahana 2021: 262–356 ).

The rabbi’s interest in the eighteenth-century Christian polemic about the historical truth behind Greco-Roman mythology (on the polemic, see, for example, Feldman and Richardson 2000, Israel 2001: 359–374; idem 2003) may also arouse our interest: in what way did Hercules and Minerva, Helen and Aphrodite become familiar figures to the rabbi’s Jewish audience? Why was it so important for the rabbi to fight for the scientific and historical truth on which they were based, particularly at this time? To answer the questions, we will have to go back a bit.

# The Sixteenth Century: The Importers of Gods

In the middle of the twentieth century, Jan Seznec (Seznec [1940] 1995) described three interpretive systems through which Greek mythology persisted from antiquity to medieval culture, the Renaissance, and the beginning of the modern era.

The first path was euhemerism. Euhemerus claimed, already in the fourth century BCE, that the source of myths is in the historical figures of extraordinary people – founders and inventors. Over the years, the stories glorified their heroes and turned them into gods. The second path was allegorical interpretation, which presented the figures of the gods as representations of psychological forces and moral requirements. The third path was the scientific path. Astronomy and astrology (a clear distinction between the two did not exist in the Middle Ages and early modern period), for example, contained a treasure trove of mythological knowledge that was transmitted through these disciplines through changing times. The more astral and magical branches of material research in the Renaissance significantly promoted mythological images. These functioned as dynamic talismans and powerful scientific mediators between the universe (the macro-cosmos) and the human world (the micro-cosmos). An extreme example of this idea was the identification of Jesus with Hercules in the sixteenth century. Their heavenly qualities were described as identical and as informing one another (Sheehan 2010: 247. On the reaction of the church, see, for example, Seznec 1995: 263–278).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Returning to sixteenth-century Jewish society, we find there writers such as Abraham Zakut (1452–1515) and Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508). The two acquired the best version of an Iberian humanistic education in the scholarly circles surrounding the kings of Portugal and Castile in the fifteenth century. Their rabbinical works, written at the end of the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth century, brought a vast treasure of figures from Greek-Roman mythology into the literary universe of Jewish scholarship in the Hebrew language (Ben Shalom 2001; see also Lawee 2001, Skalli 2021). Despite the continuous interest in classical history among medieval Jews (Bonfil 1997), the importation of this wealth of mythological knowledge was unprecedented. For Zakut, an astronomer and astrologer by profession, this importation was part of writing a synchronous world history – biblical and global history intertwined.

Zakut sets the Amazons during the era of Reu (son of Peleg, sixth generations from Noah) and claims that they lived in Germany. Jupiter and Prometheus were contemporaries of the biblical Jacob and Joseph, and so on (Zakut 1963 [1566]: 231–239).

Zakut’s tight interweaving of biblical history and the classical tradition was created under the deep influence of Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* (560–636). In doing so, he created a history of the world containing a plethora of mythological creatures: Prometheus, Atlas, and Mars, three different Jupiters, and a multitude of centaurs. Beside them, we find Hector and Archelaus, heroes of the Trojan War, and, of course, Hercules. Even goddesses were not absent: Minerva, Ceres, and Persephone, the seven daughters of Atlas, the seven Sibyls, and, as mentioned, many Amazons. Zakut described all these as the founders of important disciplines such as the art of war or agriculture, as founders of cities, oracles, and heroes set on extraordinary quests. Their exceptional traits made them gods in the eyes of ancient peoples, who established religious rites suitable to their exceptional powers. Zakut also meticulously describes these rites (Zakut 1963 [1566]: 231–239).

Another path to importing mythology was the interpretation of the Bible. In this genre, Don Isaac Abravanel stood out. Abravanel imported the heroes of mythology to enhance and deepen his interpretation of the Bible and give it a more ‘historical’ dimension, typical of Renaissance writers. Another motive was creating a close and ongoing connection between the Jewish-biblical story and contemporary Europe – his and his readers’ place of residence. In Spain, where he lived before the expulsion and Italy (after it), descriptions of ‘mythological founders’ of specific settlements were common (see Kouneni 2020, Nawotka 2021, Zeldes 2012). Abravanel ‘judaicized’ this motif in his work (see, for example, Abravanel 1954 [1511], 2 Kings, 25, Isaiah, 35; Abravanel 1954–1960 [1579], Deuteronomy 4). Abravanel combined the various historical and political figures, understood euhemeristically, with a more scientific type of description. He identified mythological figures as the bearers of astral powers. He claimed that the spiritual forces they could draw upon provided additional logic for the founding of cities and countries, the development of science, and the growth of European culture and also, in parallel, to events from biblical history (see, for example, Abravanel 1960 [1579], Genesis 11, Exodus 25; Abravanel 1954 [1511], Kings 1, 3, Isaiah 35).

If we take a broader view of the sixteenth century, Zakut and Abravanel can be seen as the trailblazers for a small circle of writers less than a hundred years later. Mythological material drawn from existing sources (such as the writings of Zakut and Abravanel) and new ones were included in *Maor Eynayim* [The Light of Eyes] by Azariah de Rossi (Mantua 1574*), Shalshelet HaKabbalah* [The Chain of Tradition] by Gedaliah ibn Yahya (Venice, 1587), and *Tzemach David* [Branch of David] by David Gans (Prague 1592). In the seventeenth century, *Sefer HaYashar* [The Book of the Upright] (Venice 1625) can be added to this list. These books differed in their genres and subjects, but the result was a medium-length Jewish bookshelf on which a new stream of mythological materials (combined with rabbinical material) previously unknown in Hebrew. These included historical chronicles of the Jewish people and the world (like *Tzemach David*), philological investigations (like *Maor Eynayim*), and thicker and more universalist descriptions of the biblical story (like in *Sefer HaYashar*).

The first to adopt the new Hebrew bookshelf were seventeenth-century Christian humanists. Many of them read Hebrew and incorporated the results of their study of Hebrew works in their Latin works of humanistic scholarship. Others created Latin versions of these Hebrew works (Dunkelgrun 2017: 336–337). It made sense that the new Hebrew literature would align with the existing interests of the Christian humanists under whose influence it was created. But did these materials resonate also within the Jewish-rabbinic creative world? Did they influence its contents?

Yosef Haim Yerushalmi (1996 [1982]: 26–52, 85) answered this question unequivocally in the negative. Yerushalmi understood the appearance of the bookshelf just described as a local Jewish response to the expulsion from Spain. In the coming centuries, he claimed, Jewish interest in history waned, and these creative outlets were forgotten and neglected.[[4]](#footnote-4)

# The Kabbalistic Path: The Kabbalistic Reincarnations of the Soul of the Roman God Janus

A brief examination of Yerushalmi’s thesis regarding mythological knowledge (the topic of this article) presents a different and even opposite picture.

The processes of ‘importing the gods’ in the sixteenth century were followed in the eighteenth century by painstaking and detailed works incorporating the gods as native to the traditions of rabbinic culture. The most prominent work in this field is *Seder HaDorot* by Rabbi Yechiel Halperin (Halperin 2003 [1769]). Halperin (approximately 1660–1746) was a knowledgeable and talented rabbinical writer, and he sought in *Seder HaDorot* to organize the wide-ranging and numerous components of the rabbinical traditions that had accumulated over the years before him. This account began with the Creation and ended in his own era, and for the sake of achieving it, Halperin created detailed comparisons among Talmudic sources, obscure midrashim, sections of the *Zohar*, and other traditions. The writings of Abravanel and Zakut, *Tzemach David*, *Shalshelet HaKabbalah,* and *Sefer HaYashar* could all be found on the rabbinical bookshelf in his library. The mythological traditions that he read in these books, in Hebrew, were already internally Jewish knowledge in his eyes, which should be compared to other sources of rabbinical knowledge over the generations. The result is a kind of Talmudic scholarship in which mythological figures become internal elements. For example, Prometheus, who brought down fire from Olympus, was compared in *Seder HaDorot* to Adam, who, according to one midrash, struck two stones together on the first Saturday night and produced fire from them. In the style of a Talmudic question, Rabbi Halperin asks: Is it the same character? Or perhaps they can be distinguished? According to the sources of *Seder HaDorot* (*Shalshelet HaKabbalah* in this case), the Amazons built the Temple of Diana in Rome, one of the seven wonders of the world until it was destroyed. The Amazons also made a covenant with the inhabitants of Troy, and only Alexander the Great defeated them on the battlefield. Since then, they have disappeared. Rabbi Halperin questions this tradition based on a story in tractate *Tamid* in the Babylonian Talmud, where wise women persuaded Alexander not to fight against them. The similarity between the two stories leads Rabbi Halperin to suggest that the anonymous women from the Talmud are the Amazons. However, the difference between the traditions causes him to question the mythological tradition based on the Talmud – did Alexander really defeat the Amazons, or should we correct the account and conclude that the women convinced the emperor that there was no point in waging war against them? (Halperin 2003, Volume I: 12–16, 18 and see Ilan 2006: 6–10). To these scholarly Talmudic adaptations of the traditions of mythology to traditional rabbinic discussion, *Seder HaDorot* adds the ‘last word’ in the field of seventeenth-century Jewish culture – the Lurianic (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, 1534–1572 and his students) reincarnation literature from Tzfat (on reincarnation see for example Scholem 1995: 280–284; Ogren 2009 ). The sophisticated Kabbalistic approach to the transmigration of souls from generation to generation combined with mythological heroes that had already been incorporated as part of the internal canon of rabbinic literature generated complex and fascinating metaphysical dynasties in *Seder HaDorot.*

Nimrod, the rebellious biblical hero, for example, is identified with Zoroaster (the Persian-Iranian god who is also included in the rabbinic descriptions of the sixteenth century). Nimrod-Zoroaster rolled six hundred years in the tunnel of time – and became Sennacherib, and then Nebuchadnezzar, and finally also Ephraim, son of Joseph, who is tied to the messiah son of Joseph. Two-faced Janus, is identified with Noah and his son Japheth. The two were reincarnated as Jacob, and then part of their soul was reincarnated as Moses! Another part of their soul was reincarnated as Samson. Halperin describes Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome raised by a she-wolf, as the reincarnation of the two sons of Balaam – the biblical sorcerer. The same soul was later reincarnated as Oreb and Zeeb, the two Midianite princes in the Bible, who realized the astral power derived from Romulus and Remus in the art of witchcraft in which they had been trained – one using a figure of a raven and the other rendering his face that of a wolf (in Hebrew Oreb means Raven and Zeeb means wolf). Even later emperors were sometimes involved in the cycle of reincarnation. Nero was described as a reincarnation of Samlah from Masrekah – an ancient biblical king (Genesis 36, 36). His soul was finally rectified when he was reincarnated again, and this time as the renowned rabbinic sage Rabbi Meir (Halperin 2003 Volume 1: 19, 130–131, 179, 210; Volume 2: 506). The reincarnation literature is a strong example of multi-generational creativity in the Jewish tradition. There is a certain cultural logic in integrating the heroes of mythology into it. Recall that the mythological heroes were incorporated into Jewish literature in the sixteenth century in a fragmentary manner – as historical facts. This type of description usually presented them without the tumultuous adultery plots and complicated family relationships that characterized their stories in the Homeric corpus or the writings of Ovid. In Halperin’s Talmudic-Kabbalistic tapestry, the characters from the classical tradition were naturalized within the Jewish pantheon, and there they found, with the help of Talmudic traditions, the Midrash, and the Zohar, along with the virtuosic possibilities opened to them by the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, new Jewish familial ties.

*Seder HaDorot* was and still is an integral part of every rabbinical library. Great rabbis from the Chatam Sofer (1762–1839) to our contemporary Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky (1928–2022) wrote comments on it, adding interpretations and corrections, and there is no yeshiva library where it cannot be found. It is fascinating to discover that in the middle of this work of traditional knowledge lies, visible to all, a complex cache of mythological knowledge. Hercules and Achilles, two-faced Janus, Amazons and Sibyls, march between the pages of *Seder HaDorot* without apology or fear. Rabbinic society’s pantheon of gods was shaped here for the generation in which it was written and for generations to come.

# The Scientific Path: The Jewish-Talismanic Temple and the Classical Tradition

Compared to the diligent, traditionalist incorporation of mythological material in *Seder HaDorot,* Halperin’s contemporary Rabbi Yehonatan Eybeschütz’s provocative use of it stands out, as its purpose was utterly different. Rabbi Yehonatan, like Halperin, relies on the sixteenth-century work of Zakut and Abravanel, whose euhemeristic thesis he sought to refine.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, in contrast to the commitment of *Seder HaDorot* to the accepted, euhemeristic interpretation, which remained historical even when it passed through the accelerator of reincarnations, Rabbi Yehonatan incorporated strong astral and alchemical components, which were far more explicit and significant than his inheritance from Abravanel’s writings. These scientific components strongly echo Rabbi Yehonatan’s close ties with the circles of Bohemian heretic nobles – the Rosicrucians and their heirs, the Freemasons (Kahana 2021: 301–356). The astral and alchemical science they proposed to the people of their time offered a magical alternative to the soulless mechanistic philosophy brought to the world by Descartes and many of his successors (see, for example, Yates 1972, McIntosh 2011). In this environment, Rabbi Yehonatan designed his Jewish version of a messianic scientific religion. Within the symbiotic weave he created between religion and science, Eybeschütz described Solomon’s ancient Temple – which the Jewish people await its rebuilding – according to the traditions of mythological witchcraft in a scientific-astral hue. According to Eybeschütz, the golden tree that he says King Solomon planted in the Temple contributed to the scientific manipulation, astral and alchemical that in those years turned the Sons of Zion – Jews of Jerusalem from those distant days – into ‘men of gold’ (see Lamentations 4:2) – bearers of mythical powers. These powers included extraordinary physical powers, such as those of Hercules; heavenly beauty, such as that attributed to Venus and Aphrodite, and unlimited wealth, such as those of the Greek Plutus or the Roman Fortuna (Eybeschütz תשמ״ח [תקלז] : 89, 150; Eybeschütz 2009, vol. 4: 121, vol. 5: 132. See Kahana 2021: 301–356, 364–365).[[6]](#footnote-6)

In these astounding arguments, the scientific and historical evidence of the authors of the epics of Greco-Roman mythology, with whom Eybeschütz explicitly expresses his acquaintance (he calls them ‘writers from ancient generations,’ Eybeschütz 2009 vol. 5:132), has become the only window through which one can peek into the magical Jewish past and from it – into the messianic future. Without Hercules and Helen, Prometheus and the Amazons, the Jewish rabbi argued to his listeners, the Jewish people would have neither a temple nor a messiah. Eybeschütz’s discourse about mythology was intertwined, as we have already seen, with the critical discourse in Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment critics of mythology with whom Eybeschütz grappled often intertwined the critique of the gods with the critique of religion, which they believed was also (like mythology) filled with superstitious beliefs and fictional stories (see, for example, Toland 1704; Israel 2001: 609–614, Feldman and Richardson 2000: 3–33). In this European discourse, the fate of religion often intertwined with the fate of the gods. Eybeschütz adopted these dependency relations in a profound way. The exaltation of the gods and their ‘placement’ within the Jewish Temple was his creative response to this specific challenge. As strange as it may sound to our ears, he claimed that there can be no Temple in the past or future without the close background of the traditions of classical mythology.

# The Messianic Path: The Messiah is a Woman with a Sword in her Hand.

Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* (1791) depicts the Masonic Temple of Wisdom, a kind of wonderous adaptation of Solomon’s Temple, which Rabbi Yehonatan Eybeschütz also depicts under a similar Masonic influence (Kahana 2021: 335–337).[[7]](#footnote-7) However, Mozart’s opera did not leave the realm of the opera house, while more was about to happen regarding Rabbi Yehonatan’s magical Solomon’s Temple.

Rabbi Yehonatan’s son Wolf Eybeschütz (1738–1806) and Jacob Frank (1726–1791) were two prominent (and at times competing) leaders of Sabbatean groups in the second half of the eighteenth century. The term ‘Sabbateans’ perhaps conceals more about the two than it reveals, as the two were not interested in systematic theology. The German author Goethe described the Frankist court as an endless masquerade ball (see Arnsberg 1965: 9–12, Maciejko 2011: 238–239), and he was largely correct. In both groups, beliefs and identities replaced each other at breakneck speed, and only the leader’s personality cult remained stable (see Maciejko 2011, Michaelson 2022). In both Wolf Eybeschütz’s and Frank’s courts, mythological components of their messianic-materialistic pretensions were cultural assets that could be realized and turned into real economic and political capital. Both Wolf and Frank claimed that they possessed the ancient golden alchemical tree of King Solomon and that they had complete control over the arteries of cosmic overflow (Emden 1877 [1762]: 4a, 48a-b; Doktór 1997, paras. 735, 414, 418, 1274. See also, paras. 600, 714 among others).[[8]](#footnote-8) Rabbi Yehonatan’s schema was fully implemented in both courts in a way he probably never imagined. Elements of the corresponding mythology connected to this schema also took the stage with great intensity. For Wolf Eybeschütz’s court, nude figures were painted in the salon of the mansion he built in the suburbs of Hamburg. The figures were engaged in a dance that seemed to depict the dance of Aphrodite – the goddess of love and sexuality – when she betrayed her husband Hephaestus with Ares, the god of war, passion, and dance (Emden 1877 32b. See also10b).[[9]](#footnote-9) As Yehuda Liebes (2007: 124–127) has already noted, the temple of Aphrodite was appropriate to Wolf Eybeschütz’s followers, as that group stood out among the Sabbatean groups for its blatant use of grotesque sexual imagery.[[10]](#footnote-10) Such images were characteristic of the Sabbatean book *VaAvo HaYom el HaAyin* [I Came This Day to the Well] (Eybeschütz 2014), which was attributed to Rabbi Yehonatan Eybeschütz, Wolf’s father. However, the father’s lofty and complex Kabbalistic play of the marriage of the God of Israel with the primordial God and the ten sefirot became a visual–mythological scene based on the Greek and Roman heritage in the son’s circle, including sexual acts between believers. The violation of familial sexual taboos is one of the most basic defining features of the lives of the gods in mythology – siblings are married to each other and betray each other incessantly. In Wolf Eybeschütz’s court, these mythological narratives became a reality; the Word became the flesh.

For Jacob Frank, violation of the sexual taboo was also part of a mythological construct. According to his vision, the ‘sons of the gods’ will reunite with the ‘daughters of man’ and create new creatures that will have superpowers, such as those of Aphrodite and Hercules (see Rapoport–Albert 2011: 157–174). Imagine the bearded Eastern European Jews from whom Frank sought to produce brave warriors with the following words, which he repeated to his followers in various versions, over and over again:

For these are eternal life.

Wisdom and beauty

Stature strength

And immeasurable wealth

And no weapon had the power to harm you.

(*Divrei HaAdon* [Words of the Master] paragraph 326. Similarly, paras. 99, 166, 319, 375, 410, 1274).

Women in Amazon costumes had a similar role; these accompanied Frank wherever he went. The messiah, Frank taught, is a woman. And not just a woman. The warrior woman will replace the Jewish man, and the sword in her hand will replace the prayer in his mouth (Doktór 1997, paras. 397, 565, 609, 821; Mandel 1979: 105–112, 163; Maciejko 2011: 188–201, 241, 263). The mythological setting combined with astral thinking allowed Frank to shape a return to an immortal ancient past, from which he sought to draw the energy to move a revolutionary political and libertarian polity (Michaelson 2022)– into a messianic present.

# Restoration: Classical Mythology as a Lost Jewish Secret Doctrine

The eighteenth century neared its end. Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschütz’s pantheistic visions of unity between religion and science, like those of Jacob Boehme and Amos Comenius, have lost their charm. Jacob Frank and Wolf Eibeshitz left the stage one after the other. The figure who developed from the mythological elements in their heritage an oeuvre of metaphysical power and literary influence for generations to come was a Hasidic thinker whose life led him in poverty and deprivation, without beautiful women, without warriors and swords, from Mezhbizh to Breslov and Uman – relatively small towns on the edge of Eastern Europe.

In the tales that Rabbi Nachman of Breslov ceremoniously told to the small circle of Hasidim that surrounded him, one can easily identify a conscious and clever use of an astonishing amount of mythological motifs:

A bird flying like Icarus towards the sun. Birds fight, like the Stymphalian birds, whose poisonous feces are a weapon of war. A blacksmith sits in a desolate place, and like Hephaestus, he makes tools for the entire world. A horn of plenty, like the cornucopia of Plutus and Fortuna, from which coins come out without limit. Huge giants of great power. A mesmerizing melody, like that of Orpheus, which cannot be resisted. A spring from which flows wine, like the one created by one of the nymphs who accompanied Dionysus. A hidden sword, like that of Zeus; whoever holds it gains wonderful powers. A metallic monster, like Talos, who has supernatural powers. Women with superhuman beauty who are kidnapped and held captive. In contrast, warrior women whom no man can stand against (see Nachman of Breslov 1949: 12–15, 21–22, 35, 46, 38, 68, 77–78, 94–96, 114–115 119–120, 122–123, 127, 130, 154, 158, 162–163; Mark 2014: 219, 311, 452). Dozens and perhaps hundreds of such figures fill the pages of the stories. In their background is an ordered, coherent point of view.

All these, explained the Rebbe to his followers, are nothing but components of an ancient secret doctrine that was lost. The Kabbalah of the Zohar, which is overprocessed, over-structured, and too explicit, is what caused this primitive childhood language to be forgotten over the years. Now, as the crisis of modernity shatters the world into fragments, only a return to this forgotten layer of culture can renew the world and bring forth a ‘new path’: a vital, wild, and strong religiosity (see Nachman of Breslov 1949: 6, 100–101; Mark 2014: 322, and compare Har Shefi 2013; Kaufmann 2020: 120–125). See also Mark, 2014: 1–51).

Nachman of Breslov did not read Latin editions of Homer, nor did he read Isidore of Seville. He was exposed to mythological motifs mainly from folklore, contemporary periodicals, and casual conversations with Jewish and perhaps also non-Jewish scholars. The mythological emphasis in his work can be understood from the role he intended for it in the renewal of Judaism in his time. In order to understand the circumstances of the renewal of mythology in *Sipurei Ma’asiyot* [The Stories of Deeds], it is helpful to compare him to someone who engaged in an astonishingly similar enterprise under the same historical circumstances – the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744). In *The New Science* (Vico 1836 [1725], Volume 5), Vico sought to compose a new mythopoetic mystical system. Its vitality is drawn from the same crisis – the rational philosophy of the inhabitants of the big cities, written by the thinker from the periphery, a Neapolitan – is actually a mirage of progress; its meaning is cultural disintegration. Vico argued that the foundations of human culture and all mythologies were laid in the wild ‘age of the gods’. This era was replaced by the institutional ‘age of heroes’ of the founders of cities and laws and the well-formulated mythological narrative. Now, a third era has replaced them – the ‘age of men’, of elegant words. The philosophy of the Enlightenment, as it increasingly spews out a plethora of words and abstractions, creates a hollow, empty, and ignorant existence. The philosophical age, or the skeptical or ironic ages as he sometimes calls them, moves away from the concrete, mythological thinking that has always and still stands at the base of human consciousness – today as ever. The skeptical man, the fruit of the age of men, becomes a utilitarian creature. He actively undermines and destroys the foundations of his culture, which, out of a deep historical necessity, will eventually return to a new, violent, and wild mythological era (Mazzotta 2014; see Berlin 1980; Berlin 2013; Mali 2012).

# Conclusion: Dawn of the Gods

The intense laboratory of Jewish history in the eighteenth century brought a plethora of mythological representations to the stage. Amazons and Cyclops, incredibly beautiful women, and mighty heroes stood at the forefront of a Talmudic-traditional work (as in the case of the Halperin), a heretical work (as in the case of Frank), and a spiritual-allegorical work (as in the case of Nachman of Breslov). Sometimes, it was the culture of the European city that inspired a procession in which Baccus, Pan, and satyrs marched through the city’s street on holidays. Sometimes, it was a folk culture – less refined but much more sophisticated in its aspirations (like with Nachman from Breslov). Even more frequently, it was a literary heritage – the heritage of sixteenth-century humanist writing, whose influences are noticeable in both Eybeschütz and Halperin. Astral and alchemical thinking also helped to develop sophisticated use of such motifs (as with Eybeschütz, father and son, and Jacob Frank). Each of these manifestations of mythology still requires detailed research. In light of all this influence – why did Saul Tchernichovsky, the twenty-four-year-old we met at the beginning of the article, declare the mythological path to be forgotten? Part of the solution to this puzzle lies in another development of Jewish culture, which also belongs to the late eighteenth century. The Jewish Haskalah movement was an internal Jewish branch of the European Enlightenment that arose in the German principalities in the last decades of that century. The Haskalah sought for itself an ancient Hebrew ethos, similar but different from that which the enlightened Christians of Germany admired. The denigration of Greek mythology helped the *maskilim* (as they called themselves) to argue for the establishment of a new-old Hebrew identity. *Shirei Tiferet* [Songs of Glory] (Berlin, 1789) by the Jewish *maskil* Naphtali Herz Wessely (1725–1805) was a very influential ideological expression of this trend: Like his contemporary Herder, Wessely turned to ancient Hebrew poetry. Unlike Herder, who systematically compared the biblical epics with those of mythology, Wessely criticized any such mix. My poetic forefathers, Wessely claimed, are Jacob blessing his sons and the Song of the Sea as sung by Moses. In his opinion, the hallucinations of Homer and the erotic poetry of Anacreon (as he described them) had no place in the new Hebrew poetry (Rosenblum 1983, Dickman 2004. For a slightly more complex picture, see Cohen 2018). Only when another hundred and thirty years had passed would Tchernichovsky – with whom we opened our discussion – publish the first Hebrew-language editions of Anacreon’s poetry (Warsaw 1920) and the Iliad (Berlin 1930–1934. See Cohen 2018). Nachman of Breslov was intimately familiar with Wessely’s poetry and highly valued it (see Green 1979: 273). The past he sought to resurrect, however, was, as we saw, utterly different. Specifically within this intense version of Hasidic culture, mythology’s heroes, gods, and goddesses have a fundamental, foundational role.

The first wave of interest in mythology that we described, in the sixteenth century, mainly dealt with borrowing content from the outside. In the eighteenth century, the second wave mainly involved deep processing, internalization, and adaptation processes. The heritage of Greco-Roman mythology was incorporated in the eighteenth century into the core areas of rabbinic culture – into the language of Kabbalah (as with Halperin) and into Jewish description of the enchanted mechanism of the ancient Temple (as with Eybeschütz). Even more radical was Nachman of Breslov’s attempt to use mythological elements not to update the ancient language of Kabbalah, but to undermine it (!) in favor of a primary, wild, and vital language. The failed messianic experiment, mediated by Wolf Eybeschütz and Jacob Frank, demonstrated the productive power of a mythological presentation to function simultaneously in the city streets (as in Jewish processions, which preceded them by several decades) and in hearts and minds – as a scientific-libertarian doctrine heralding the integration of Jews into the opulent culture of European nobility. It sought to use an alchemical laboratory that would create a clone of the Jews possessing superpowers.

Friedrich Schiller, a herald of German Romanticism, described in 1788 his longing for the Greek gods who once ruled the world in the distant past. Their retreat in the face of the new scientific era, he claimed, took a deep foundation from the human soul and the joy from his life. Schiller’s poem ‘Die Götter Griechenlandes’ was an important harbinger of German Romanticism (Schiller 2004: 10–16, Highet 2015: 376–391). It is doubtful whether such a lament could be heard from his contemporaries in the Jewish world in which we wandered in this article. The late adoption of Greek mythology in Jewish society led to the fact that in contrast to euhemeristic-style historical minimalism and the humanist heritage of the Renaissance that Jewish cultures absorbed in the sixteenth century, the metaphysical aspect stood out in the eighteenth century. The Jewish heroes of the century breathed new life into the godly figures they inherited from their predecessors. The Lurianic doctrine of reincarnation, modern alchemy, the breaking of sexual-libertarian taboos, and ancient-forgotten mysticism breathed life into the Greek and Roman gods imported into Hebrew-speaking Jewish culture only two hundred years earlier.

1. Translation by L. V. Snowman. <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/statue-apollo> [Accessed Sept. 9, 2024]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bacchus also marched in previous Jewish parades in the city, as is testified in documents from 1768 and 1716. See Silver 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Seznec also described a fourth, encyclopedic, path, in which the various traditions were combined. Another path worth adding to his analysis is the political-regional path in which the heroes of mythology were identified as founders of cities and states. For the sake of simplicity, I am ignoring these important details here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yerushalmi’s thesis is discussed from different angles in the research literature. See, for example, Funkenstein 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Abravanel was a dominant influence on Eybeschütz as is evident from the many conspicuous quotations from the former’s work in Eybeschütz’s various writings. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This astral thesis is developed with a creative combination of traditions from the Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 21b, 26a, 39b, and *Gittin* 58a. Eybeschütz combined, with great creative power, traditional reliance on the existing and accepted knowledge found in these sources with religious-scientific knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Emanuel Schikaneder (1751-1812) who, like Mozart, was a member of the local order of Freemasons, wrote the libretto with the links to Solomon’s Temple. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In Frank’s case, he himself described his control over the golden trees. An English translation can be found in the edition by Harris Lenowitz 2004. The paragraph numbering is identical. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The identification of the nude dance painting with the mythological scene in the temple of Aphrodite (the temple of Venus) may be the interpretation of the describer, Rabbi Yaakov Emden (1698-1776), who persecuted Yehonatan Eybeschütz and his son Wolf, and for this reason visited the Hamburg palace that was abandoned due to Wolf’s debts. Interesting here, anyway, is Emden’s expertise in mythology that provided him with the theoretical context for this hostile analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Liebes (2007: 126) convincingly compared the accepted practice in the Wolf’s circle of sexual relations between a guest and his hostess to the relations of deception and jealousy between Zeus and Hera - the goddess of family and marriage in Greek mythology. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)