8. Saada, Amanat, 4–10; Saada, Beliefs and Opinions, 5–12.
9. Saada, Amanat, 10; Saada, Beliefs and Opinions, 13; Saada, Commentary on Ecclesiastes, ed. J. Qafih (Jerusalem: Sura, 1976), 17–18.
10. Saada, Amanat, 193–4; Saada, Beliefs and Opinions, 236–9.
12. Saada, Amanat, 44–58; Saada, Beliefs and Opinions, 50–66.
14. For instance, Saada, Amanat, 97–110; Saada, Beliefs and Opinions, 112–16.
17. Malter, Saadia, 228.
18. R. Drory, The Emergence of Jewish–Arabic Literary Contacts at the Beginning of the Tenth Century [Hebrew], Literature, Meaning, Culture 17 (Tel Aviv, 1988); Drory, Models and Contacts—Arabic Literature and its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture (Leiden: Brill, 2000), ch. 5.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

Defining Jewish Neoplatonism is no easy task, due in no small part to the difficulty of defining “Neoplatonism.” In an effort to best understand these categories, I will isolate two conceptual issues—the nature of the Godhead, and its relation to the cosmos—in Plotinus (the pagan third-century founder of Neoplatonism), and then, with recourse to Solomon ibn Gabirol in the first case and IsaacIsraeli in the second, I will examine the extent to which these issues can be seen to exist—unmodified—within the corpus of Jewish Neoplatonism. By suggesting, first, ways in which each of these Plotinian issues seems, prima facie, at odds with the parallel Jewish Neoplatonic views, but then by emphasizing how in fact they are reconcilable with the Jewish versions, I will challenge oversimplified estimations not only of the nature of Plotinus’ own philosophy, but of what real differences exist between it and Jewish Neoplatonism. In this way I will have indirectly been examining what exactly counts as “Neoplatonism,” Jewish or otherwise. By proceeding in this way,
I hope to do justice to the elusive connections that exist between various Neoplatonic textual traditions. By focusing on the works of two early Jewish Neoplatonists, this chapter, rather than attempting to be comprehensive, suggests conceptual starting points from which one might address and evaluate the degree, implications, and development of Neoplatonism in any number of other Jewish texts.

Before proceeding, a further clarification of my methodology is in order. In what follows, I aim to analyze Ghiberti and Israel along Plotinian lines. Of course, neither Ghiberti nor Israel was directly influenced by Greek texts of Neoplatonism, and the Arabic versions of Plotinian and Proclean materials by which they were influenced contain many changes from Plotinus' Enneads. While mindful of this fact, I am here interested in questioning the extent to which textual changes between Arabic and Greek Neoplatonic texts need be taken as representing deep philosophical differences between the two traditions. I suggest that they need not be seen as representing such differences. While it is certainly possible that, for example, the replacement of Plotinus' notion of a One "above Being" with a God identical to Being, and a similar textual replacement of "emanation" with "creation ex nihilo" might represent major departures from Plotinus' worldview, in what follows I aim to examine the extent to which such changes might nonetheless be seen in genuinely Plotinian terms. As long as I can reconcile terminological changes in the Arabic Neoplatonic traditions (and in the Jewish texts that are rooted in those traditions) with Plotinus' own views, there is no prima facie reason to take those changes as reflecting deep conceptual upheavals of Plotinus' own views. In presenting below what I denominate as the "Neoplatonic Naming Principle" and the "Neoplatonic Causal Principle," as well as in addressing the different senses of "nihilo" in "creation ex nihilo," I attempt to provide some means by which the reader might more readily entertain conceptual reconciliations between Arabic (and Jewish) texts and Plotinian Neoplatonism.

**JEWISH NEOPLATONISM IN CONTEXT**

Among the earliest Neoplatonic Jewish thinkers are IsaacIsraeli (850–c. 932/35) and Solomon ibn Gabirol (1021–1054/5). Because of the rootedness of early Jewish Neoplatonists within a host of Arabic textual traditions (Islamic Spain and North Africa being the home of the Jewish Neoplatonists), we might meaningfully categorize them under the broader heading "Arabic Neoplatonists." In fact, Jewish Neoplatonism reveals traces of a huge mix of oftentimes conceptually disparate philosophical and theological Arabic materials, including the vulgate and "longer" versions of the *Theology of Aristotle*, the *Liber de Causis* (or, *Kalam fi mahd al-khayr*), the pseudo-Empedoclean Book of Five Substances, Ibn Hazm's *Neoplatonist*, the encyclopedic works of the Ikwan al-Safa' (The Brethren of Purity), and the writings of al-Kindi, al-Farabi, and Ibn Sina. Additionally, we find reverberations of more esoteric Jewish and Islamic materials such as the *Sefer Yetzira* (and its commentaries), the *Ghayat al-Hakim*, and Gnostic Isma'ili materials. Add to this mix Arabic translations of works of Plato, Aristotle, and Neopythagorean treatises and it becomes clear just how many conceptual possibilities must be weighed before interpreting even a single claim within a text of Jewish Neoplatonism.

Apart from the specific background philosophical sources, I might also note that an investigation into a number of literary forms, philosophical as well as non-philosophical, is often helpful, even necessary on occasion, toward the goal of retrieving as complete a picture as possible of a given Jewish Neoplatonist's philosophical doctrine. In addition to philosophical treatises, many of our authors also composed Bible and/or *Sefer Yetzira* (Book of Creation) commentaries, as well as devotional and secular poems, many of which are replete with philosophically revealing details. The complicated philosophical system of Ghiberti, for example, is presented not only in his famous *Mekor Hayyim* (Lat. *Fons Vitae*), but also in a commentary on Genesis attributed to him by Abraham ibn Ezra, and is certainly evidenced in many of his poems.

Finally, many Jewish Neoplatonic ideas might additionally be found amidst the rich tapestry of kabbalistic materials, though one must caution against anachronistically reading back later ideas into the earliest Jewish Neoplatonic thinkers.

**IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF PLOTinus: TOWARDS A SUBLTER APPRECIATION OF JEWISH NEOPLATONISM**

Turning to an analysis of Jewish Neoplatonism, I will proceed as follows: I commence with Plotinus' views on (1) the nature of the Godhead, and (2) the nature of the Godhead's relationship to the
cosmos, along with parallel Jewish Neoplatonic discussions of these issues. In each case, I first examine the ways in which the Jewish Neoplatonic thesis seems to be a rejection - or at least a significant modification - of Plotinus. I then show, in each case, that the Jewish Neoplatonic thesis in question need not be seen in fact as representing any philosophical departure from Plotinus' own.

On the Nature of the Godhead: The Godhead as Being, the Godhead as “Above Being”

GABIROL AND PLOTINUS IN CONFLICT? Neoplatonic texts reveal in general an interest in various grades of reality, a great “chain of being,” with one level nested in the next, leading, through a gradual series of ascending layers, to the Godhead itself, the highest level in the hierarchy. In this regard, consider some of the systemizations shown in Figure 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plotinus</th>
<th>Liber de Causis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. One (= above Being)</td>
<td>1. Pure Being (Anniyya mahdah), Being Only (Anniyya qua aset)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Universal Intellect (= Being)</td>
<td>2. Intellect (First Created Being)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. World Soul</td>
<td>3. Soul</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proclus

1. One (= above Being)

2. Henads

3. Limit and Unlimited

4. One-Being

5. Life

6. Intellect

7. Soul

8. Nature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gabirol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. First Essence, Creator, Being Only (Esse Tantum)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Universal Matter, Universal Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Universal Intellect (First Created Being)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. (World) Rational Soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. (World) Animal / Sensitive Soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. (World) Nutritive Soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Sphere / Nature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Neoplatonic Hierarchies of Being

Turning for our purposes to one main difference between these two pagan and two monotheistic cosmologies, one finds that whereas Plotinus and Proclus are committed to a Godhead that is a One above Being, our two monotheistic Neoplatonic systems have in common the apparent rejection of any such description of the Godhead. Instead of placing God “above Being,” these systems identify God with Being [Arabic, anniyya⁹], Being Only [Esse Tantum]. (In addition, in the case of Gabirol himself, one should note his descriptions of God as the “Primum Esse”⁷ and “Esse Verum,”⁸ as well as his demarcating an infinite principle of Active Being [Esse Agentis].⁹)

For the Jewish Neoplatonic identification of God with Being Only, consider the following: At a point in the Pons Vitae [FV] where Gabirol addresses the relevance to God of the four questions that can prima facie be asked of any being, “whether?,” “what?” “how?” and “why?”, he suggests that only the existential “whether?” question (“an est?”), i.e. “whether [something exists]”) can be properly asked of God. This latter question is based on Aristotle’s classification at Posterior Analytics 2:1, and it is in Gabirol’s granting to God only an existential “thatness” that he may be seen as identifying God with Being Only. In context, Gabirol’s identification of this existential question is presented in the following exchange in the FV:

Master: ... I say that existence (esse) from the highest to the lowest extremes is distinguished by four orders, viz.,

a. “whether it is” (“an est”),

b. “what it is” (“quid est”),

c. “how it is” (“quale est”) [i.e. what sort of qualities X has],

d. “why it is” (“quare est”).

Moreover, of these, the most worthy is the one concerning which it is asked only “whether it is,” not “what it is” or “how it is” and not “why it is,” as in the case of [sic] the Exalted and Blessed Unity, and after this is the one concerning which it is asked “what it is,” not “how it is” or “why it is,” as in the case of Intellect; after this is the one concerning which it is asked “what it is” and “how it is,” not “why it is,” as in the case of Soul; after this is the one concerning which it is asked “what it is” and “how it is” and “why it is,” just as in the case of Nature and the things generated from it; and each one of these is ordered according to the order of number.

Disciple: In what sense?

Master: Since the question “whether it is” is posited according to the order of “one,” since it is being only [quia est esse tantum]. . . .

From the fact that Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, in his Hebrew translation of this passage, employs the term metziut for esse, Munk suggested that the Arabic term used by Gabirol here would have been anniyya.¹¹ I might add that the language of “Being Only” in the
above passage quite clearly recalls anniyya faqat (lit. “Being Only”) which we find in both the Liber de causis and the Arabic Plotinian materials to describe the Godhead. This notion of God as a pure Being devoid of any complexity or limitation may be linked to the Mu’tazilite doctrine of the absolute unity of God (himself seen, as is the case for Gabirol, as a pure essence), and it might also be related to the identification of God with pure and simple Being in Sufi theosophy.  

In the above remarks in FV, then, we find that one can only ascertain that God exists (and not what his essence is). From this suggestion, together with Gabirol’s clear description of this Being as the First Essence (al-dhat al-ula, as evidenced in some of the extant Arabic fragments of the Fons Vitae), God emerges as the essence which is one with pure Being. In this way, God is essentially unlike any other existent.

God thus construed as Being Only, then, would certainly seem to differ from the Plotinian One that is, on the contrary, “above Being.”

GABIROL AND PLOTINUS RECONCILED. In what follows, however, I offer considerations that would lead us to question whether the Jewish Neoplatonic “God who is Being” must in fact be taken as conceptually distinct from the Plotinian One “above Being.”

One must first note that in both the Arabic (incl. Jewish) Neoplatonic textual milieu, as well as in Plotinus’ corpus, God is certainly “above limited [finite] Being.” On this, all of our thinkers agree. Thus, one finds within the Arabic Neoplatonic tradition a bifurcation of anniyya into anniyya faqat (“Being Only”) or anniyya mahda (“Pure Being”)¹⁵ on the one hand, and “created being” on the other, with the claim that the former is above the latter.

In this regard Gabirol treats Intellect, the first occurrence of “form in matter,”¹⁶ as the first created, or limited, being. But, this being (Intellect) is additionally said to be the cause of “esse” in all lower things,¹⁷ and as such additionally emerges as a brand of generic Being per se in which all other composite entities subsist. It is clear that God is “above Being” in at least the sense of transcending the limited grade of Being associated with Intellect, as well as transcending, by extension, all lower composite entities that partake of the Being of Intellect.

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Any suggestion, then, that this God is nonetheless not identical with Plotinus’ Godhead “above Being” seems to rest on the assumption that, in fact, Plotinus’ description is meant as something more extreme than merely “above limited Being.”

However, consider the extent to which one might take Plotinus’ own description as simply meaning “above limited Being.” At Enneads 5.5.6, remarking on the access we have to knowing the One, Plotinus says: “the one wanting to contemplate that which is above the intelligible will contemplate the whole of the intelligible having been removed, since one learns ‘that it is’ in this way, with the ‘what it is’ having been removed.”¹⁰ Following Altmann and Stern,²⁰ one might see Plotinus’ claim here as suggesting that the One is subject only to the existential “whether” question, and not to the “what” question. But, if so, this is no different from Gabirol’s above treatment of God’s “thatness.” So in this regard, Plotinus’ treatment of the Godhead is identical to the monotheistic Neoplatonist’s account of “God as [identical with] Being.”

Consider the sense in which Plotinus places his One “above Being”:

Since the substance which is generated [from the One] is form – one could not say that what is generated from that source is anything else – and not the form of some one thing but of everything, so that no other form is left outside it, the One must be without form. But if it is without form it is not a substance, for a substance must be some one particular thing, something, that is, defined and limited; but it is impossible to apprehend the One as a particular thing: for then it would not be the principle, but only that particular thing which you said it was. But if all things are in that which is generated [from the One], which of the things in it are you going to say that the One is! Since it is none of them, it can only be said to be beyond them. But these things are beings, and being: so it is “beyond being.”¹³

The One emerges in Plotinus as the principle, origin, and cause of all Being and beings, but is itself devoid of any limitation, and hence is itself “above Being” (epikeine ontos, lit. “beyond being”). But given this gloss on the Plotinian description of the Godhead as “above Being,” there seems to be no reason to deny the equation of Plotinus’ One with the Arabic tradition’s anniyya faqat/mahda, and hence, with Gabirol’s God as Being Only.
render plausible the possibility of privileging the “pre-esse” state of matter over that of formal being, one may here note Gabriol’s association of formal being with limitation, finitude, \(^{28}\) and difference, \(^{29}\) with matter (or pre-esse) on the contrary emerging as a pure, unlimited (formless), and infinite potency associated with unity and sameness. \(^{30}\) It is this sort of structure (together with a number of detailed claims about matter which I treat of elsewhere) \(^{31}\) that enables us to see in matter a superiority over the “act of being” associated with the formal. We might summarize this unexpected victory of matter over form as the emergence of potency over act, of “pre-esse” over “esse.”

Consider the implications of these results for our description of the Godhead in light of Gabriol’s own analogical methodology in which the order of things in the microcosm is used to reveal the order of heavenly things (itself rooted in his Neoplatonic belief that the order of things in the microcosm reflects the order of heavenly things). \(^{32}\) In light of the “microcosmic” priority of “pre-esse” to “esse” that we have just noted, an analogy between pre-esse and God seems to suggest itself quite readily, in that both are infinite, predetermined potencies that precede any formal limitation. Material pre-esse – as infinite, pre-limited potency – is to the formal act of esse, just as God as infinite, pre-limited potency is to Being (to the formal act of esse). While God is not the same as matter, on this analogy he certainly seems to have more in common with the matter of composite existents than with their formal act of being. \(^{33}\) Gabriol’s own principle of analogy seems to suggest, then, that God is more akin to “pre-esse” than to esse, or that he can be accurately construed as “above Being.”

A third approach to reconciling Gabriol’s description of God as [only] Being with Plotinus’ description of a God who is “above Being” is not so much a reconciliation as it is an acknowledgment of the centrality of paradox within Neoplatonic texts. Gabriol’s description of God as “Being” need not rule out attributing to him a description of God as “above Being,” even if we take “Being” in both cases as referring to a single reality, unlimited Being only. In fact, that God is actually both identical with and “above” some reality is not only a possibility for Gabriol, but one that would follow closely in the spirit of Neoplatonic apophasis, in which the utter transcendence of the divinity demands that one speaks of him in paradoxical terms.
I might note that this spirit of paradox leads in general to a fluid ontology of the divine realm in Gabirol's *Fons Vitae*, in which God, Will, First Matter, and First Form each seem to be treated under prima facie conflicting descriptions. While these conflicting descriptions need not be seen as paradoxes, the general point seems to reveal a heightened appreciation of the relatively intractable nature of the object in question. Consider just some of the descriptions that arise in the *Fons Vitae* [Figure 2]:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God</th>
<th>Transcendent Immanant, Creator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Above Being</td>
<td>Pure Being, True Being, First Being, [i.e. Being Only] First Substance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Substance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Will</th>
<th>infinite, unlimited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>finite and limited</td>
<td>[in relation to Form, or, with respect to Intellect]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Matter</th>
<th>infinite, unlimited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>finite and differentiated</td>
<td>[here in the sense of a composite, “Matter + Form substance”]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(here symbolically</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linked with the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Divine Throne”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>image, and perhaps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with the “ayin” or,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Nothingness” of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Keter Malkhat</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>esse and source of unity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>esse and source of diversity</td>
<td>[here in opposition to unity of matter, in association with Limit]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(here as Second Unity, manifestation of Will, impression of the True First Unity [God])</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Descriptions of Reality in Gabirol

When describing a realm that is beyond knowing or definition, one must employ a fluid discourse, by whose opposing affirmations and negations one comes closest to uncovering that which cannot be uncovered.40

I have so far addressed the extent to which the relationship between the Jewish Neoplatonic conception of God as Being can consistently and meaningfully be described in Plotinus' own terms as a One "above Being." I turn now to considering the reconcilability of Plotinian emanation with Israeli's prima facie doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.

Jewish Neoplatonism

*On the Nature of God's Relation to the Cosmos: Emanation and Creation*

**ISRAELI AND PLOTINUS IN CONFLICT?** It may well seem that Isaac Israeli's invocation of "creation" to describe the origination relation between God and the cosmos puts him directly in opposition to Plotinus. Further, it seems that any monotheist thinker would have no choice but to reject Plotinus' description of an "emanating" divinity, on the grounds that such a description of the Godhead (1) seems to rob God of a freely willed creative relationship to the cosmos, problematically submitting him instead to forces of insurmountable necessity, whereby his relationship to the cosmos is entirely beyond his control; and (2) blurs the line between creator and creation, by describing the cosmos as flowing forth from the essence of the divinity himself.

In what follows, I will respond to (1) by showing why Plotinus' God is not in fact robbed of freedom and will, and is certainly not subject to necessity in a problematic way. And in responding to (2), I will emphasize the extent to which the blurring of lines between creator and creation has not generally been seen as problematic from the monotheistic [religious] perspective. After removing the critical force from the above two anti-emanation observations, I conclude that behind the language of creation in Israeli emerges none other than Plotinus' emanating Godhead.

**ISRAELI AND PLOTINUS RECONCILED.** To respond to the theist's charge that a Plotinian Godhead is not free, but rather is problematically bound by necessity, I offer the following considerations about necessity and freedom:

As long as it is God's own essential goodness that accounts for his emanating, the Neoplatonist need not admit to any "necessitation," or to the presence in the Godhead of the sort of necessitation that brings with it negative overtones, those ordinary cases of necessitation where there is compulsion by some force from without, a compulsion related to the negativity of the material and irrational in the cosmos. On the contrary, when Plotinus speaks of the Godhead's activity as arising "out of necessity," this does not fall under ordinary necessitation [compulsion from without], the kind of necessity that the monotheist critic wishes to identify Plotinian necessity with.
In effect, I suggest that the critic has unjustifiably attached to the unique necessitation of the Godhead’s overflow a set of negative associations inappropriately drawn from considerations of ordinary cases of necessitation. As such, the critic’s attack on Plotinus’ worldview here fails to strike home.

As for the denial of bona fide freedom in Plotinus, if one turns to Plotinus’ discussion at Enneads 6:8, one finds an explicit description of the One’s having willed itself freely. More importantly, though, are the reasons we are given by Plotinus for why the One is neither free nor willing, none of which seems to rob the Godhead of anything such as suggested by the monotheistic critic of Plotinus.

In light of the Neoplatonic Causal Principle [NCP above] – that, as the cause of freedom in all things, God is himself above freedom – and by applying the Neoplatonic Naming Principle [NNP above], we could well say that God is freedom itself! In effect, his being said to be not “free” is not, as the above monotheist criticism seems to suggest, an attribution to God of some lack, rather it is as an acknowledgment of God’s role as the cause of all freedom and as freedom itself. Understanding the matter in this way lends plausibility to seeing Plotinus’ worldview as amenable to monotheistic values (and vice versa). Prima facie, one has no reason to insist that Arabic and Jewish Neoplatonic texts reflect a deep opposition to Plotinus and his views.

Freedom and necessity are invariably intertwined in the Neoplatonic tradition concerning creation, and I now turn to cosmology with a view to ascertaining the possibility of reconciling, of bridging the gap between, Israeli with Plotinus, if possible.

Creation ex nihilo is standardly rooted in Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning, God created [bara] ...”) and in the Qur’anic description of God as the Badi’ (absolute creator). Straightaway, we should note that the biblical notion of creation ex nihilo can be taken in at least two different ways, an “orthodox” way and an emanationist way.

According to the former (“orthodox”) way of taking creation ex nihilo, one stipulates at least two things: [1] the world is created by God “from nothing,” in the sense of “not from something/anything”; and [2] the creative act is not a flowing forth of things from the essence of God. On this view, taking creation ex nihilo as “creation not from something” not only blocks any suggestion of emanation, but additionally ensures no mistaken identification of nihil with the “something” which is matter (the “something” which is a “no-thing”). [This sensitivity is reflected in the use in many contexts of the Arabic expression la min shay’ [“not from a thing”] as opposed to the expression min la shay’ [“from no thing”]].

However, a second account of creation ex nihilo, one that points in the direction of a Plotinian emanationist view, may be found as well. On this account, the nihil of creation ex nihilo is identified with God himself. This identification of God with nihil is based either on treating “nothing” as a name for God or, more generally, on seeing God as “he who is beyond all predication,” and hence, as essentially “no-thing” as far as human cognizing is concerned. Taken this way, creation ex nihilo reveals nothing different from Plotinus’ own emanationist account of the divinity’s relation to the cosmos.

Turning to Israeli, there is debate over which of the above two creation ex nihilo accounts best describes his own talk of ikhtira (“invention,” “origination,” or “making anew”) and ibda’ (“absolute creation,” or “innovation”) in such claims as “the first created things [mukhtara’at] are two simple substances...” While Altmann defends a reading according to which this “absolute creation” is taken by Israeli in the “orthodox” sense, Wolfson suggests the possibility of taking this creation in an emanationist sense. That Israeli is committed to Plotinian emanation as it concerns those things arising from intellect (including the emergence of the natural realm) is beyond doubt (we find his likening that process to the sun’s natural radiation in such claims as “the light which emanates from intellect is essential [dhati jawhari], like the light and shining of the sun, which emanates from its essence and substantiality [dhatiha wa-jawhariyyath].”). The question is only whether it is simply this sort of emanation or a genuinely “orthodox” sense of creation ex nihilo that Israeli means to denote in his talk of the “absolute creation” of the first two substances. In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to considerations for and against seeing in Israeli a genuinely orthodox sense of creation ex nihilo.

In initial support of seeing in Israeli a commitment to orthodox creation ex nihilo, recall his description of the first creations in terms of “innovation” and “making anew” [al-ibda’ wa’l-ikhtira’], terms that he defines as “making existent existences from the
non-existent” (ta’is al-aṣṣat min lays). However, as we have seen in the above account, creation “from nothing” (or, from the non-existent) might indeed be taken in an emanationist sense. So we need more information to support a genuinely orthodox creation ex nihilo reading in Israeli. To this end, we may turn to Altmann, who draws our attention to Israeli’s demarcation (in The Book of Substances) of two causal mechanisms: (1) causality by action, which is creation by the power and by the will [min al-qudra wa-l-itada] by way of influence and action [‘ala sabāb al-ta’thir wa-l-fi’il]; and (2) essential causality, which is an “essential and substantial” (dhati jawbari) emanation, one which, as we have seen, is “like the light and shining of the sun, which emanates from its essence and substantiality.”

Since (according to Altmann) the second of these clearly corresponds to emanation, it follows that the first denotes something different, viz., orthodox creation ex nihilo. However, does this really follow? As Wolfson has argued, one might just as readyly conclude that these two causal mechanisms pick out two varieties of emanation: one kind of emanation that is not entirely “unconscious,” and that describes the relationship between God and the first creation[s], and one regular Plotinian variety of emanation that describes the relationship between all lower cosmic stages. While Wolfson’s remarks suggest that the kind of emanation that Israeli predicates of God is not straightforwardly Plotinian, one might go even further to suggest that there is here no need to see any real departure from Plotinus at all. Even Plotinus can be read as distinguishing the relevance and nature of the first emanation from all other emanations (an emanation that, given his description of the One’s having “willed itself freely,” might even be described as the sort of “not entirely unconscious emanation” to which Wolfson advert[s].

Turning back to Altmann, one finds a second argument for seeing Israeli’s creation ex nihilo as non-emanative, a second argument that he himself describes as “the most potent argument against any attempt of interpreting his [Israeli’s] use of the term creation ex nihilo in an emanationist sense.” Altmann here reasons as follows: We know that Israeli is committed to the presence of not one, but two “first creations” [viz., First Matter and First Form]. But as such, Israeli cannot have held an emanative account of God’s creative act without violating the Neoplatonic rule that, in the arena of emanation, “from one comes only one.” To successfully avoid breaching the “from one comes only one” rule of emanation, Israeli clearly must not have taken these first two creations as products emanated from (the one) God, but as the effects of an orthodox creation ex nihilo. Altmann thus suggests that Wolfson’s emanationist reading of Israeli only seems appealing because Wolfson ignores the two first substances, First Form and First Matter.

I must note, though, that, even if Altmann were correct in his suggestion that only orthodox creation ex nihilo could save Israeli from violating Neoplatonic doctrine, one cannot rule out the possibility that Israeli was indeed guilty of just such a violation. As such, one cannot simply conclude that Israeli’s understanding of God’s creative act was non-emanation. More importantly, one might undercut Altmann’s above strategy by questioning his own assumption that Israeli’s two simultaneous first creations, First Form and First Matter, would, if emanated, stand in genuine conflict with the “from one comes only one” rule. For, what if the two were really, in some important sense, one? Then there would be no problem in reconciling their emanation from God with the “from one comes only one” dictum. Turning to Israeli, we find that he does indeed describe the two first creations as comprising the single Intellect. Since there is a real sense in which for Israeli the two in question are also a single one (viz., Intellect), a suggestion on Israeli’s part that these “two” emanate from the Godhead would not amount to a violation of the Neoplatonic “from one comes only one” rule. Once again, Altmann’s argument that only orthodox creation ex nihilo is amenable to Israeli’s Neoplatonic cosmology is undermined, and one is left with the genuine possibility of seeing in even Israeli’s talk of “absolute creation,” the Plotinian doctrine of emanation.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested ways of blurring the lines between “Being” and “above Being,” as well as between creation ex nihilo and divine emanation. I have done this in order to encourage a greater sensitivity to the possibility of discovering sameness (between seemingly disparate traditions), even in apparent difference. I hope in this way to have provided both a sense of the sorts of issues at play in Jewish Neoplatonism, as well as a useful lens through which one might
begin to reconceptualize the relationship between monotheist and pagan traditions.

NOTES


3. For example, Gabirol privileges Will over Wisdom in his Fons Vitae, but Wisdom over Will in his poetic corpus; see n. 5 below.


7. FV 5.32, 316, 23 & 26; 317, 21 & 25. As Gabirol’s original Arabic text is non-extant, references are to the twelfth-century Latin translation of the Fons Vitae (FV), which is earlier and more complete than Falaquera’s Hebrew translation, cf. Baeumker’s edition, Avencebroliis [Ibn Gabirol]


22. While not stated as a “naming principle” per se, Proclus’ remarks at, e.g., Elements of Theology, Proposition 104 clearly evidence this phenomenon. For this principle in Plotinus, see Enneads 6:8 on God as “freedom” because he is the cause of freedom; see my treatment of this below.

23. For a circumscribed application of this principle within even the Liber de Causis, see Proposition 2, and the claim that the First Cause is above eternity because eternity is caused by it.

24. See, e.g., FV 5:42, 333; 16.


27. Pessin, “Solomon ibn Gabirol.”

28. See, e.g., FV 5:28, 308, 7–12, where Form is distinguished from Will in terms of the former’s being finite.


30. FV 4:1, 272, 2–3, and 4:1, 212, 7–8.


32. For a general introduction to this methodology in Gabirol (including an enumeration of four different applications of this method in the Fons Vitæ), see J. Schlanger, La philosophie de Salomon ibn Gabirol [Leiden: Brill, 1968], 141–57, and on the “macrocosm/microcosm” in general, 313–16.

33. This theme in Gabirol would additionally seem to suggest that materiality is the clearest mark of the divinity, a theme that, while not consistently reflected throughout the Fons Vitæ, nonetheless finds support in the claim that “Material is created from Essence, and Form is from the property of that Essence, i.e., from Wisdom and Unity” [FV 5:42, 333; 4–5]. While the principle of materiality follows immediately from the First Essence, the principle of form emerges from Wisdom, a modification of that First Essence.

34. As I have already noted (see n. 5), Gabirol’s notion of Will—taken under this exalted description—is sometimes seen as identical to the divinity himself.

35. FV 5:28, 308, 7–12.

36. Will in its finite and limited actuality is also described as “Word,” see Pines, “Points of Similarity” on the relation of this idea to Saadya.

37. Gabirol sometimes uses “Matter” and “Substance” interchangeably, see his claim to this effect, e.g., at FV 1:12.

38. For the depiction of Matter as the Divine Throne in Gabirol, cf. FV 5:42. Gabirol also talks of the Throne in his celebrated poem Keter Malkhut [The Royal Crown] [for Hebrew text, see Shirei Shlomo ben Yehudah ibn Gevirol, II [Shirei qodesh], ed. C. Bialik and Y. Ravnitsky [Tel Aviv and Berlin: Drur-Verlag-Gesellschaft, 1925], poem number 62, 62–78; for an English translation, see B. Lewis, Solomon ibn Gabirol, The Kingly Crown [London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1961]. In this poem, the Throne, while not specifically called “Matter,” is described as “higher than all height” [Lewis, Kingly Crown, 28].

39. See Lewis, Kingly Crown, 33 (“That Will called to the void and it was cleft asunder”). For related analysis of this line [though with the suggestion that this “void” – or “nothingness” – refers to Avicennian pre-existent essence], see Pines, “Ve-qara el ha-ayin.”


41. See Enneads 6:8:12, 13, 21.

42. See Enneads 6:8:15, where human freedom is presented in terms of striving toward the Goodness of the Godhead.


44. In support of seeing “nihil” as literally naming God, note Armstrong’s translation of Enneads 6:9:3, which has Plotinus naming the One “nothing” [ouden]. Altman and Stern, however, point out that Armstrong’s rendering of Plotinus is here incorrect [Altman and Stern, Isaac Israeli, 156, with n. 2].

45. This “creation”/“innovation” terminology in Israeli may be traced to al-Kindi, himself preceded in this regard by pseudo-Ammonius, “On the Opinions of the Philosophers.” It might also be noted that it is under the influence of this notion in Israeli that Joseph ibn Zaddiq draws the distinction between khalq [creation ex ati`qua, or generation] and ibda'
6 Judah Halevi and his use of philosophy in the *Kuzari*

The Book of Refutation and Proof on Behalf of the Despised Religion, better known as The Kuzari, is one of the last and most popular works of medieval Judaism's premier poet, Judah Halevi [c. 1075–1141]. While originally undertaken to respond to the queries of a Karaite scholar, it was reworked and expanded over nearly two decades into the artful and multifaceted dialogue we now possess. Halevi crafted it to address a broad array of religious, philosophical, and cultural issues that concerned him and his contemporaries in the wake of bloody conflicts generated by the Reconquista and the First Crusade. These reflected ongoing quarrels between belief and unbelief and between belief and belief, both within and among the cultures and communities of Andalusia, which continue in important ways to this day. While the work is generally regarded as apologetic in character, it is no mere polemic. Rather, its theological defense of Judaism is deeply informed by philosophy and respectful of both its integrity and methods. In what follows, my goal is to analyze and explain a number of Halevi's key ideas and arguments, to show how he uses them and also revises them, to raise a number of salient questions about them, and to identify the trajectory of their reappearance later in the dialogue.

The Kuzari begins with an unnamed narrator mentioning how he was asked about any argumentation he had against those who differ with the Jews, such as the philosophers, the adherents of other religions, and sectarian dissenters. This reminded him of the arguments of the Jewish sage who had persuaded the king of the Khazars to convert centuries before. As is well known, the story behind the narrator's recollection tells of a Khazar king who had a recurrent dream, "as though an angel were addressing him." Its message was
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