

## SLIMY STONES AND PHILOSOPHY Some Interpretations of *Tohu wa-bohu*

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### THE BEGINNING

In the beginning of creation, the earth was empty, without form and void. The creation account in the first chapter of Genesis tells us how, from this state called *tohu wa-bohu* (תהו ובהו) in Hebrew, God created and formed the world in the course of six days. However, the world is not all that grew out of *tohu wa-bohu*, – these two words clearly presented a challenge for Jewish thinkers and commentators who generated a tradition of ingenious interpretations. It may seem improbable that the almost mythical image of the second verse in Gen. 1 could have anything to do with the sober philosophy of Aristotle. We shall see, however, that such a connection is made. But first we shall start at the beginning.

I have no reason to question the literal meaning of *tohu wa-bohu*. Although the words are not very common in the Bible, there are still ample occurrences to allow us to compare the meanings<sup>1</sup>. Emptiness, chaos, void, but also lack of worth and being in vain match the context in all cases. Also the ancient Aramaic translations, *targumim*, translate the expression as “waste and empty”<sup>2</sup>, or “waste of all people and empty of any cattle”<sup>3</sup>.

*Tohu* is especially common in the book of Isaiah. A particularly influential reference to *tohu* and *bohu* occurs in Isaiah 34:11, where the prophet describes God’s revenge on Edom: “He shall stretch over it line of *tohu* and stones of *bohu*”<sup>4</sup>. The line and stones can be interpreted as builder’s tools: a measuring line and a plummet. As we shall see, this verse will be used as a proof-text in Talmudic and medieval times to support new meanings given to *tohu* and *bohu*, and the analogy to a builder will constantly reappear.

## GREEN LINE, SLIMY STONES

In the Talmud and the Midrashim, *tohu* and *bohu* are most often used in their plain meaning. A typical example is of God reducing the world to *tohu* and *bohu*, for instance in case Israel would not have accepted the Torah (Exodus Rabbah 47:4). There are also allegorical interpretations like those dealing with the Jewish history: *tohu* and *bohu* are explained as the various exiles (Genesis Rabbah 2:4) and the whole history is divided into three periods of two thousand years each: a period of *tohu*, a period of Torah and a period of the Messiah (Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu Rabbah 2:1).

There are some more special passages, though. In Genesis Rabbah 10:3, the heaven and the earth are compared to two beautiful disks immersed in a pool of water. As long as the pool is filled with water, the beauty of the disks cannot be seen, but when the water is drained off, the disks become visible. Likewise, when the world was *tohu* and *bohu*, the heaven and the earth were not visible until *tohu* and *bohu* were removed. Literally, this could be read as identifying *tohu* and *bohu* with water. In Talmudic times, water was considered by some to be the first matter created<sup>5</sup>, and even later water is often closely connected to *tohu* and *bohu*. On another level, one can question what it is that needs to be removed in order to bring heaven and earth into existence. Is it the Primeval Chaos, like in Plato and some early Greek philosophers? Or is it the privation as with Aristotle?<sup>6</sup>

In another, well-known passage of Genesis Rabbah<sup>7</sup>, a pagan philosopher confronts Rabban Gamaliel by referring to Gen. 1:2: "Your God is a great artist, but he did have good help: '*tohu, bohu, darkness, air, water, abyss*'". Rabban Gamaliel denies that these things would have been of help to the Creator and supplies biblical verses to prove that all these elements were created. What is interesting, although not evident at first sight, that at least in the eyes of the philosopher, *tohu, bohu* and darkness are more than mere qualities. They are considered equal to elements and as such useful in the process of creation. Moreover, Rabban Gamaliel's objection is not to this; he reacts because he considers all things having been created.

Speculation in, among others, matters of creation was discouraged as attested by the prohibition in Mishnah (Hagigah 2:1). However, several teachings are recorded in the name of Abba Arikha, also known as Rav. In Hagigah 12a, Rabbi Judah teaches in the name of Rav: "Ten things were created on the first day: heaven and earth, *tohu* and *bohu*, light and darkness, wind and water, length of day and length of night."

Here again, *tohu* and *bohu* are considered as created entities, not mere qualities. After the usual scriptural verses to support Rav's statement, follows a very strange teaching:

It has been taught: *tohu* is the green line which encircles the whole world and out of which darkness proceeds<sup>8</sup>, as it is said (Ps. 18:12) 'He has hidden in the darkness that is around him'. *Bohu* are the slimy stones, sunk in the deep, out of which water is issued<sup>9</sup>, as it is said (Is. 34:11) 'He shall stretch over it line of *tohu* and stones of *bohu*'.

The passage is presented as an anonymous teaching, but it is probably also from Rav<sup>10</sup>. Either way, it makes little sense at first sight. The passage might be about the order in which the elements were created. The Talmud and the Midrashim show a clear interest in the order of creation, as is attested by many recorded opinions about whichever was created first: heaven or earth, light or darkness and so on. Taken in this light, the passage could be interpreted so that

1. Out of *tohu* becomes darkness.
2. Out of darkness, light is created.
3. Out of *bohu* becomes water.

Combined with other teachings of Rav, a complete order of creation can be reconstructed (Vajda, 1989, 121). Debates on the order of creation were often triggered by external pressure: more than once does the rabbinical literature record such questions posed by a non-Jew. In the Greek world, the quest for the primal element<sup>11</sup> had been active since the beginnings of Greek philosophical thought.

There is a further possibility. Many sayings of mythical character have been recorded in the name of Rav. In his times, Gnostic and other myths proliferated, and he introduced kosher versions of such myths to ward off the attraction of the alien myths<sup>12</sup>. A green line and slimy stones make little sense when taken literally, and there could well be a contemporaneous myth behind the saying.

One clue is given by a strange diagram of the Gnostic Ophite sect that is mentioned by Origen in his *Contra Celsum*<sup>13</sup>. The meaning of the Ophite diagram is obscure, but it includes yellow (green) and blue circles associated with light and darkness, respectively. Kurt Rudolph gives a reconstruction of the diagram in his book *Gnosis* (Rudolph, 68–69). The reconstruction is based on a typical ancient earth-centered universe consisting of concentric spheres for the planets and the stars. What is specific to this diagram is that beyond the stellar spheres you'll find the additional spheres of Leviathan, Paradise, a blue circle (sphere) of darkness and a yellow circle (sphere) of light.

Urbach considers the Ophite myth and Rav's dictum in a footnote in his work of rabbinical thought (Urbach, 774 n. 47), and tends to emphasize the differences. In the Ophite diagram, for instance, the green circle is of light, but in Rav it is of darkness. According to Urbach, Rav's saying is simply based on the verse of Isaiah and there is no reason to interpret Rav's circle as any-

thing more than the horizon. Urbach does not exclude, however, the possibility that Rav could have used some myth here, which has been lost to us.

Anyway, we have here two very similar images from the same time period (3rd century C.E.). Rav's green line encircles the world. The Ophite yellow sphere surrounds the whole universe, if we can trust Rudolph's reconstruction<sup>14</sup>. Both have to do with light and darkness. Taken in this context, the *tohu* is the outermost sphere, whereas the stones of *bohu* lie deeply in the lowest depths, at the center of the universe.

So much for the speculation. If there ever was such a basis for Rav's dictum, it was lost. Meanwhile the dictum about the green line and slimy stones was to become one of the most popular prooftexts whenever *tohu* and *bohu* were mentioned in subsequent Jewish literature.

## FROM UNREAL TO REAL

Many medieval sages attributed the 'green line and slimy stones' dictum to Sefer Yetzirah. Abraham Ibn Ezra quotes the passage as being from Sefer Yetzirah in his commentary on the Torah (on Gen 1:2), likewise does Judah Halevi in his *Kuzari* (*Kuzari* 4:25). *Tohu* and *bohu* occur twice in the more commonly used texts of Sefer Yetzirah, but a green line and slimy stones are not mentioned. Anyhow, the passage occurs in the text used in the commentary of Saadia Gaon<sup>15</sup>. It is possible that in medieval times, Rav's dictum was thought to originate in Sefer Yetzirah rather than in the Talmud. As Sefer Yetzirah was traditionally considered to be ancient<sup>16</sup>, it is natural that the medieval Sages considered it to be the original source<sup>17</sup>.

Sefer Yetzirah describes how God creates the world with 32 mysterious ways, which are then identified with the 10 cardinal numbers and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each cardinal number also presents a stage in the creation, which starts from the spirit (*ruah*) of God, then proceeds to wind or air (*ruah*), then to water, fire and even further<sup>18</sup>. Out of water come *tohu*, *bohu*, mud and clay, which are then used by God as material for building the world<sup>19</sup>. This passage thus links together water, *tohu* and *bohu*, as well as the concept of building.

In another verse of Sefer Yetzirah, God is said to have formed something real (*mamash*) out of *tohu*. It can be deduced from this that *tohu* itself is not anything real. In the Biblical usage there was hardly any difference in meaning between *tohu* and *bohu*. In the Middle ages, differentiation between unreal and real became a very characteristic differentiation between *tohu* and *bohu*<sup>20</sup>, like in the following excerpt from a medieval kabbalistic book *Bahir*<sup>21</sup>:

Rabbi Berachya said “and the earth was *tohu* and *bohu*”. What is the meaning of “was”? That it was already. And what is *tohu*? That which confounds<sup>22</sup> people. And what is *bohu*? It was *tohu* and then turned to *bohu*. And what is *bohu*? That which has *mamash* (something real) in it, as it is written “*bohu* means ‘something is in it’<sup>23</sup>”.

What does this tell us? *Tohu* and *bohu* are something that already existed at the time of creation. *Tohu* is something that is incomprehensible, whereas *bohu* is something real. *Tohu* is associated with astonishment and confusion; this concept is found also in Rashi’s commentary on the Torah. The real/unreal differentiation has its roots in Sefer Yetzirah, as we have seen. The ‘*bohu* = *bo hu*’ etymology is interesting. This explanation is held to be originated by Abraham bar Hiyya in the first half of 12th century, and it is mainly because of this evidence that Gershom Scholem dates the book Bahir to the second half of the 12th century<sup>24</sup>.

Abraham bar Hiyya (d. 1136) was a mathematician and astronomer who lived in Spain and wrote on many topics, ranging from ethical homilies to geography. The ‘*bo hu*’ etymology appears in the first part of his “Hegyon ha-Nefesh”. The book is primarily an ethical treatise, yet it begins with a long exposition of the philosophical<sup>25</sup> concepts of matter and form. In the course of the exposition, bar Hiyya identifies *tohu* with matter and *bohu* with form. In order to understand what he means with this it is necessary to understand what these concepts meant to an educated person of medieval times.

## MEDIEVAL CONCEPTS OF MATTER AND FORM

Matter and form are central concepts in the medieval scientific world-view. They have their origin in the Aristotelian philosophy, which was preserved by the Arabs and the Jews and by them transmitted to Western Europe. The concepts were originally conceived to explain how change happens in nature. Everything that exists consists of the two parts: matter and form. The matter is an undifferentiated, underlying substrate; form is the differentiating element, which makes the thing precisely what it is. Change is explained by a thing losing one form and acquiring another. This is easy to grasp if we think of the matter and form in everyday terms: in case of a spoon the matter is the metal out of which the spoon is made and the form is the shape which makes the thing a spoon rather than a fork or a knife. But the two-fold division goes deeper than this. The steel out of which the spoon is made is itself a thing, therefore it must consist of an underlying matter and a form which makes it steel and not something else.

If we continue this analysis towards the origin of things, we will arrive at abstractions that we have never seen but which can be posited to be at the root of all other things. The common feature for all things in this world is tri-dimensionality; therefore we can posit a common matter for all things, which is tri-dimensional but not anything else. Such a matter is usually called absolute body<sup>26</sup>. By receiving forms it has the power to become other things. In medieval times, the elements were believed to be four: earth, water, air and fire. Therefore, when receiving the form of water, the absolute body will become water. The form of water is said to inform the absolute body.

It is possible to proceed even further. One can posit a matter totally devoid of any qualities, even without any dimensionality. Such a matter is called with the Greek word *hyle*. For Aristotle, *hyle* is a purely hypothetical concept without actual existence. It is pure matter without any form, and for him matter and form never exist separately. Before anything can exist, *hyle* must be informed by the form of tri-dimensionality.

## BAR HIYYA'S EQUATION

Abraham bar Hiyya discusses the concepts of matter and form in the first part of his *Hegyon Ha-Nefesh*, and identifies them with the Biblical *tohu* and *bohu*. (*Hegyon Ha-Nefesh* 2b–3a):

If you compare the explanation of *hyle*, of which it has been said that it has no shape and no form and which cannot subsist by itself, to *tohu*, you will find that they are the same thing...<sup>27</sup>

Anything that has been said of *hyle* you can say about *tohu*.

It has been said about the form that it has power to inform<sup>28</sup> the *hyle* with shape and form. And the word *bohu* is divided into two things for this reason, because it is composed in meaning from two words, the first being *bo* and the second being *hu*...<sup>29</sup>

*Bohu* is the form that covers the *tohu* and sustains it. Proof for this is provided by the Scriptures; (Is. 34:11) "and he shall stretch over it line of *tohu* and stones of *bohu*". A line is only useful in balancing the building when being pulled by the weight of the stone which shows the correct way for building.

Therefore the Scripture pairs this [line] with *tohu*, as it is written 'line of *tohu*', and pairs the stone with *bohu* and says 'stones of *bohu*', because the stone indicates the correctness of the balance, as the form establishes the correct shape. And [the Scripture] says 'line of *tohu*' in singular, whereas the forms come to it in many shapes.<sup>30</sup>

Bar Hiyya is held to be the originator of this identification of *tohu* with *hyle* and *bohu* with the *form*<sup>31</sup>. He was also the first to write on philosophical matters in Hebrew: this work is written around 1133<sup>32</sup> in Spain. The main Jewish philosophers before him<sup>33</sup> had all been writing in Arabic. The wave of translations of their works into Hebrew by the Tibbonides was yet to begin at around 1160<sup>34</sup>. The Aristotelian works of Ibn Daud and Maimonides were not yet written<sup>35</sup>. Therefore the Hebrew usage of bar Hiyya is particularly interesting<sup>36</sup>. His terminology feels surprisingly complete and modern to be that of a pioneer, for instance he uses *tzurah* (צורה) for form and *homer* (חומר) for matter, which will become standard usage.

As a philosopher, bar Hiyya is Neoplatonist, not an Aristotelian. Aristotelianism was yet to be established in Jewish circles through the work of Maimonides some decades later. Anyway, by the twelfth century Aristotelianism had become mixed with Neoplatonism and vice versa<sup>37</sup>. For instance, Aristotle denied the existence of matter and form separate of each other. Plato, however, had taught that the forms (or as the Platonic forms are usually called, ideas) are the real existents. In medieval times, it was common to posit the existence of pure forms, these being the angels and other spiritual beings as required by religion.<sup>38</sup>

Bar Hiyya's Neoplatonism shines through his exposition of matter and form. According to him, there are two levels of each:

- 1 matter which is pure and clean
- 2 matter which is like filth and sediment
- a) form which is obscure and sealed
- b) form which is open and hollow

The obscure and sealed form is pure from any contact with the *hyle* and not violated by any association to it. It subsists on its own, and shines on the hollow form which again is suited to attach to *hyle* and be changed with it. Therefore the higher form so to say provides the lower form with the energy to inform the *hyle* with any forms that are needed to produce the material world. Also, the spiritual worlds are produced from the higher matter and form. Bar Hiyya may be dependent here on Ibn Gabirol, who had taught a doctrine that also the spiritual world consists of a kind of matter, in addition to form.

Bar Hiyya's theory of dual levels of matter and form is quite complex, and when the identification of *tohu* with *hyle* starts to gain popularity, it will be in a simpler form. The need to explain both the spiritual and the physical realities remains though, and the doctrine of dual levels will be revisited.

## THE IDEA MADE POPULAR

As regards the period of a hundred years after the appearance of bar Hiyya's book, a survey of the major works from that period would suggest that his idea was not well known<sup>39</sup>. Then suddenly Nahmanides' Commentary on the Torah, some 125 years after bar Hiyya, expounded creation using his equation, causing the idea to gain immense popularity.

[God] produced out of complete and absolute non-existence a very fine substance, lacking reality (*mamash!* ממש), but having power to produce, ready to receive form and to proceed from potentiality to actuality. This is the first matter that Greeks call *hyle*. After this He did not create anything, but formed and made, because from it [*hyle*] he produced everything by informing it with forms and repairing them...<sup>40</sup>

And this matter that is called *hyle*, is called in the Holy Tongue *tohu*, derived from '*betohē al harishonot*'<sup>41</sup>, because if a man is trying to decide its name, he becomes confused and calls it with another name, because it did not yet acquire form which would attach to it a name. And the form that informs this matter is called in the Holy Tongue *bohu*, and this is a compound word for '*bo hu*' (it is in it)...<sup>42</sup>

It is written (Is 34:11) 'He shall stretch over it line of *tohu* and stones of *bohu*', because the line is related to the thought of the building that the architect wishes to make,... and the stones are the form of the building<sup>43 44</sup> (Nahmanides' Commentary on the Torah, Gen. 1:2).

Nahmanides' aim here is to prove that on the one hand the Jewish tradition is not in conflict with the Greek science, and on the other hand to defend the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* against the Platonic concept of pre-existent, unformed matter.

Nahmanides' commentary, written about 1260, served to distribute bar Hiyya's analogy. Another popular commentary, written by Bahya ben Asher year 1291, relies on material from Nahmanides' commentary in the exegesis of *tohu* and *bohu*. Meir Aldabi's *Shevilei Emunah* from 1360 further reuses the same material to prove that the Greek science actually derives from Jewish sources.

Nahmanides belonged to the so-called Geronese school of Kabbalah. Those were the times when Kabbalah was growing and emerging in the course of just a couple of generations. Kabbalistic literary activities started to flourish in Gerona. The concepts of *tohu* and *bohu* play a prominent role in the Commentary of the Talmudic Aggadot of Azriel, an older representative of the Gerona school. However, he does not provide us with anything so clear than what Nahmanides does.



*Tohu* is the root of essences, it is the potential of air<sup>45</sup> and its appearance is *green*, which is made into a *line* to indicate the limits of a place where no essence is discernible. It is thin and lacking and incoherent like a broken and obliterated thing, whose trace cannot be discerned, and whose reality (*mamashuto*) cannot be grasped. There is nothing but a smell and the elements of cold and warm are mixed.

While the simplicity of the air expanded into water, it drew and clothed it with such pictures (*tziurim*) that could be drawn in it, because of the root of the Will from where its essence is from... (Commentary of Talmudic Aggadot 47a)

All the essences that were in *tohu* without limit and without form (*tzurah*) or matter (*golem*) became visible with limit, form and matter, and the refuse and dross were sifted to one side and the blameless silver was selected and remained visible and revealed... (Ibid. 53b)

And everything was revealed from the depth of *tohu*, and from darkness issued visible forms and appeared likenesses, and from there light came forth... (Ibid.)

*Tohu* is presented here, on the one hand, as an undifferentiated substance that contains the roots of all existents. On the other hand, *tohu* is the line which itself acts as the differentiating factor as it separates things to its two sides, and by doing so, generates the form. There is not much of Aristotle here; rather the feel is that of Plato's unformed, unlimited matter and perhaps Anaximander's *apeiron*.

Tishby however asserts in a footnote of his edition of Azriel's commentary (Ibid. 151) that Azriel's concept of *tohu* and *bohu* are based on bar Hiyya's work. Support for this can be found indirectly (Ibid. 144 n. 6–7). Azriel identifies *tohu* and *bohu* with the sefirot of *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, respectively. He does also explain *Hokhmah* and *Binah* as root (שרש) and form (צורה), respectively. If we understand the root as *hyle*, as there is reason to do, then Azriel considers *tohu* as *hyle* and *bohu* as form, but not in the Aristotelian sense. Azriel is namely describing the divine world here, not the physical world.

Another Geronese Kabbalist, Jacob ben Sheshet quotes the relevant parts of Hegyon Ha-Nefesh in his Meshiv Devarim Nekhohim<sup>46</sup>. Isaac the Blind, who was the master from whom the Kabbalah was transmitted to the Geronese Kabbalists, also describes *tohu* as "markings of essences without form"<sup>47</sup>. But the further back one goes in this tradition, the shorter and more obscure the writings get<sup>48</sup>.

The other Kabbalists did not adopt the idea instantaneously<sup>49</sup>. Joseph Gikatilla had much to say about matter and form in his Ginnat Egoz without identifying them with *tohu* and *bohu*. Neither does his Sha'arei Orah contain

this teaching. On the other hand the idea is found in a quite apparent form in the Zohar:

*Tohu* is a place without any color or any image, and is excluded from the secret of image. It is like it would have an image but when you look at it, it has none. To every thing there is a vestment to wear<sup>50</sup> except for it.

*Bohu*, it has a form and an image, [that is] stones sunk in the depth of *tohu*, and they come out of the depth in which they lie, and from there they draw benefit to the world, in the form of vestments, draw benefit to the world from upwards to downwards, and descend from up to down.<sup>51</sup>

Zohar, although composed at the end of the 13th century, was considered to be an ancient holy work and thus an authority, which gave additional credibility to the association of *tohu/bohu* with *hyle*/form. Of course, the Jews were never eager to admit that the Greek savants would have been more knowledgeable than their own ancient sages were. Simeon Labi's valuable commentary on the Zohar, Ketem Paz, explains how the theory of *hyle* and form was known to the Jewish Sages and then transmitted to the Greeks (Ketem Paz 42b; 48a–48b). However, the Greeks only received a part of the teaching, which is knowledge of the lower *tohu* that is *hyle*. Knowledge of the higher *tohu*, which is the sefirah of Binah, the Jewish Sages had kept to themselves. Some centuries after bar Hiyya, the idea of two-level matter and form resurfaces here<sup>52</sup>. In effect we have here a Neoplatonic construction in defense of the supremacy of Judaism over Greek philosophy!

## WHAT DID THE PHILOSOPHERS SAY?

Through *tohu* and *bohu*, the philosophical concepts of *hyle* and form became part of the religious exegesis both in kabbalistic circles and even in popular Biblical commentaries. But what did the actual philosophers say? Jewish philosophers were usually eager to quote Bible in support for philosophical concepts; therefore the *tohu*-matter/*bohu*-form identification should have had appeal for them as well.

Saadia Gaon explains<sup>53</sup> how the earth was originally totally covered by water. The earth was *bohu*, and the water, which covers the earth on all sides, was *tohu*. Thus he manages to give a physical explanation to both the green line of *tohu* encircling the world, which is water, and to the stones of *bohu* hidden in the water, which is the earth.

Judah Halevi refers to attempts to explain Gen. 1:2 in Aristotelian terms in his Kuzari, most likely written somewhat after bar Hiyya's work.

Some people have thought that the 'water' mentioned in the account of creation is an appellation for this *hyle*, and the spirit of God is the Divine Will which wholly penetrates the *hyle*, doing to it what it wills and when it wills. Lack of form was called 'darkness' and '*tohu wa-bohu*'.<sup>54</sup>

Thus there had been attempts to reconcile the hylomorphic theory with the elements provided in the second verse of Gen. 1. Water takes the role of *hyle* here. Form is not explicitly identified, unless we understand that the Spirit equals form. *Tohu* and *bohu* are equal to privation i.e. lack of form.

Halevi does not specify whose idea he is quoting. In Kuzari 4:25, which is a commentary on Sefer Yetzirah, he gives the same explanation as if his own. If he does not approve of the idea, which is what Kuzari 5:2 lets us understand, the idea probably originates from some other commentary of Sefer Yetzirah.

The first Jewish Aristotelians either did not know bar Hiyya's idea, or they rejected it so completely that they did not bother to mention it. Even if Abraham Ibn Daud (1100–1180?) handles the concepts of matter and form in his Exalted Faith, he does not refer to *tohu* and *bohu*. Ibn Daud wrote his book around 1160, just a couple of decades after bar Hiyya.

Maimonides (1135–1204) likewise is silent about the idea. This is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it is one of his main theses that the ancient Jewish secret doctrines of Ma'aseh Bereshit and Ma'aseh Merkabah are identical with the Aristotelian physics and metaphysics. Bar Hiyya's ideas would certainly have given support to this. Second, large parts of his Guide of the Perplexed are devoted to biblical exegesis, including the creation account. Yet he does not supply an explanation of what *tohu* and *bohu* mean.<sup>55</sup> Possibly he was unaware of the idea, or rejected it because of the Neoplatonian character of bar Hiyya's formulation.

At the end of 13th century the idea finally emerges within the Jewish-Aristotelian philosophy in the work of Isaac Albalag (Vajda 1960, 139–142). In his 'Tikkun De'ot' he presents the by then common identification of *tohu* as *hyle* and *bohu* as form, and explains this as follows. *Tohu* is a yellow (sic!)<sup>56</sup> line, because first of all a line is something which is in itself non-existent<sup>57</sup>, in the same way as *tohu* is something not really existent. Second, *tohu* is an intermediary between non-existence and existence; likewise yellow is an intermediary between white, which is really non-existence of any color, and all other colors<sup>58</sup>. The placement of yellow as an intermediate color may come from Aristotle.<sup>59</sup>

As regards form, Albalag differentiates between form that exists separate from matter, and form that is in matter, and here he makes use of interpreting water as form. In the creation account God makes a separation between the upper waters, which Albalag identifies with the separate forms, and the lower

waters which are the material forms. Albalag furthermore explains that a stone in general means a principle or the origin of something. As he goes on, he reveals that he considers rabbi Akiba as the source of the 'yellow line and slimy stones' dictum<sup>60</sup>. In another Talmudic story, rabbi Akiba has to do with water and stones of pure marble in a heavenly palace<sup>61</sup>. According to Albalag, the same Sage thus gives two specific teachings about stones and water, one of which is about the separate forms and the other about the material forms. The separate forms, of course, are the pure forms, being angels and other celestial beings, of medieval philosophy that we referred to earlier.

According to Albalag, it is logical that in Is. 34:11 as well as in the 'green line' dictum, the line is mentioned in singular, because the first matter is a single substance. The forms are many; therefore it is also logical that the stones are mentioned in plural form. This explanation, as we have mentioned, already appears in bar Hiyya.

The foremost Jewish Aristotelian alongside Maimonides, Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides; 1288–1344), is evidently to some extent dependent on Albalag<sup>62</sup> on this matter. However, Gersonides' theory has one important difference: the roles of *tohu* and *bohu* are reversed. *Tohu* is now the form, *bohu* is the matter. With this reversal, Gersonides is able to present a more logical analogy to line and stones: a builder must first draw the form of the house with lines, after that the stones–matter are needed for the house to exist. We have already referred to the difficulties with the earlier explanations: a line is more akin to form than to matter; a stone would be a good analogy for form having already informed matter, albeit not so for pure form. It is possible that Gersonides has simply reversed the roles to avoid this clumsiness.

Gersonides discusses *tohu* and *bohu* both in his major philosophical work Wars of the Lord (Milhamot Ha-Shem) and in his Commentary on the Torah. His exact term for *bohu* is 'the first matter' and for *tohu* 'the last form'. The latter expression is problematic. The procession from first matter and form through intermediary levels of matter and form towards all kinds of existent things and beings is complex, and it is not evident which level of form he calls the last form and why<sup>63</sup>. Anyway, in the context of building a house, the term fits quite well. Gersonides says<sup>64</sup> that the lines drawn on the ground to show the shape of the house are the last form of the house before the stones are laid. Before this, quite obviously, the builder has a plan of the house first in his mind, then on paper, before the construction is started. But this is an analogy only. It is quite impossible that Gersonides would mean that *tohu* is the last form in the meaning of a physical shape of a thing<sup>65</sup>.

Gersonides shares Albalag's explanation about the yellow color being the intermediary between the white color and all the other colors. This is not a coincidence: the concept of an intermediary is essential for medieval philoso-

phical theories about the generation of the world. These two philosophers' explanation of the color of the line as an intermediary contrasts clearly with the earlier, almost mythical explanation where the line is the origin of darkness, and green is the color of darkness.

As to the slimy stones, the original Hebrew expression is quite obscure<sup>66</sup>. The usual explanation to the word *mefulamot* was wet<sup>67</sup>. Gersonides gives a different explanation: the strange word is composed of two words *peloni* (פלוני; so and so) and *almoni* (אלמוני; unknown), thereby stressing the elusive nature of *hyle*.

Now although the philosophers and the Kabbalists would seem to have shared the same ideas, this is true only on surface and in the use of common terminology. A philosopher was trying to reconcile science and philosophy with the Bible. For him, the scientific truth was the only truth, which by definition must be identical with the true religion. For a Kabbalist, there was a deeper level of truth. Everything was a symbol for a deeper truth, everything here below corresponded to something in the higher world. *Tohu* and *bohu*, both in the Bible and in the world of science, had their counterparts in the Divine world. These higher *tohu* and *bohu* were identified with specific *sefirot*<sup>68</sup>.

## A SUMMARY

The biblical basis is given by Gen. 1:2 and Is. 34:11. To this is added a mythical statement, probably by a Babylonian Amora, Rav, about *tohu* as a green line encircling the world and *bohu* as wet stones immersed deep in water. During centuries, the Jews became exposed to philosophy and science which were built on the Greek heritage. On the one hand there was the Platonic view of the origin of the world: a Demiurge forms the world out of pre-existent, unformed matter<sup>69</sup>. On the other hand, there were the Aristotelian technical concepts of matter and form used to explain the physical nature of the world.

Almost a thousand years after Rav, Abraham bar Hiyya, a Spanish astronomer, presented *tohu* and *bohu* as identical to the Aristotelian matter and form. Bar Hiyya's construction as a whole was however throughout Neoplatonic.

According to Judah Halevi there had been attempts to explain the primordial elements in Genesis according to Aristotelian science. Somewhat later Maimonides declared the lost Jewish secret doctrines as identical to Aristotle's Physics and Metaphysics. The need to justify religion in the face of the scientific world-view therefore existed. Treatment of scientific concepts like matter and form even in writings of religious character was not uncommon<sup>70</sup>.

On the other hand, *tohu* and *bohu* were mysterious entities badly in need for annotation, therefore it was inevitable that somebody made the connection.

After bar Hiyya, the idea remained quite unknown, gaining momentum in the Kabbalistic circles like that of Gerona. Nahmanides advocated the idea in his commentary on the Torah, from where it started gaining popularity. Soon after that the idea reached the writings of Aristotelians, first in Albalag and then in Gersonides. And like the idea was first nurtured by Kabbalists, it remained popular among them and found its way to the Zohar itself. The idea was extremely common in the works from the end of the 13th century or from the 14th century. Later on it lived on<sup>71</sup>, but not accepted by all. Meir Ibn Gabbai, an opponent of philosophy, provided his explanation of *tohu* and *bohu* without referring to *hyle* and form. Many of the later biblical commentaries also kept silent of this idea.

It is very important to realize how the Jewish thinkers were sometimes discussing the physical reality, sometimes the divine reality, sometimes both. Bar Hiyya presented a dual level structure, Azriel concentrated on the divine world whereas Nahmanides' commentary was also concerned of the physical world. Philosophers mainly concentrated on the physical world although they included the spiritual world in their schemes. Simeon Labi again introduced the dual level structure in full scale to prove the supremacy of Jewish knowledge. *Tohu* and *bohu*, which in the beginning were empty, without value and next to nothing, had grown to be the roots of being, the secret of knowledge both physical and divine.

## NOTES

1. Gen 1:2, Deut 32:10, Sam I 12:21, Is 24:10, 29:21, 34:11, 40:17, 40:23, 41:29, 44:9, 45:18, 45:19, 49:4, 59:4, Jer 4:23, Ps 107:40, Job 6:18, 12:24, 26:7.
2. Targum Onkelos on Gen 1:2: צדיא וריקניא
3. Targum be Uzziel on Gen 1:2: תהייא ובהייא צדיא מבני נש וריקניא מן כל בעיר
4. ונשה עליה קו-תהו ואבני-בהו
5. Talmud Yerushalmi Hagigah 8b in the name of Judah ben Pazi, with many anonymous parallels in the rabbinical literature; See also Graetz, 30–33.
6. According to Aristotle, change can be explained so that each thing contains within itself everything that it can potentially become. As long as it is prevented by privation to become something, it does not change. When the privation is removed, the change is brought about.
7. Genesis Rabbah 1:9, Midrash Tanhuma Bereshit ch. 5
8. תנא: תהו - קו ירוק שמקיף את כל העולם כולו, שממנו יצא השך
9. בהו - אלו אבנים המפולמות המשוקעות בתהום, שמהן יוצאין מים
10. Urbach, 195, see also p. 774 note 46.
11. I.e. the element that is more fundamental than the others and thus the origin of other things. For instance, some believed that everything comes from water, another that everything comes from air.

12. Urbach, 194; Vajda 1989, 121
13. The Other Bible, 665–666
14. The Hebrew world 'olam' has both meanings 'world' and 'universe'.
15. Saadia's Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah 4:6
16. It was attributed by many to the patriarch Abraham, by others to rabbi Akivah; both would be earlier to Rav.
17. This would explain why the text in the standard editions of the Talmud does not attribute the passage to Rav, but gives it as an anonymous teaching.
18. Sefer Yetzirah 1:9..12
19. Sefer Yetzirah 1:11  
תהו ובהו רפש וטיט, חקקן כמין ערוגה, חציבן כמין חומה, סככס כמין מעויבה
20. That tohu is not *mamash* is also found in Donolo's commentary on Sefer Yetzirah, ed. Castelli, p.38.  
תהו דבר רק וחשך שאין בו ממש
21. Bahir 2 א"ר ברכיה מ"ד והארץ היתה תהו ובהו מאי משמע היתה שכבר היתה ומאי תהו דבר המתהא בני אדם ומאי בהו אלא תהו היתה וחזרה לבהו ומאי בהו דבר שיש בו ממש דכתיב בהו בו הוא
22. This is a play of words and a very common popular etymology for *tohu*.  
ומאי תהו, דבר המתהא בני אדם
23. This is also a play of words: *bohu* is equated with *bo hu* הוא בו
24. Scholem, 1987, 52–63; Dan, 1988, 130–131. According to Dan, Scholem also asserts that Bahir subscribes to bar Hiyya's *tohu/hyle* and *bohu*/form analogy. I couldn't find direct support for this in Scholem's book neither in Bahir itself. The question would need further study. In the Bahir, tohu is primarily interpreted as evil, which in Neoplatonism is associated with matter. See Dan, 1998, xx–xxxv, xlv–xlvi.
25. Considering medieval philosophy, it should be remembered that the scope of philosophy was the totality of scientific inquiry. Therefore we should read the meaning 'science' and 'scientific' in addition to 'philosophy' and 'philosophical' here.
26. See The Exalted Faith, 58, 61.
27. ואם אתה מקיש פי' שם ההיולי שאמרו עליו שאין לו לא דמות ולא צורה ואינו יכול להתקיים מעצמו אל טעם התהו, תמצאם יוצאים יחד אל ענין אחד
28. *lehalbish*, literally clothe. להלביש
29. וכל אשר אמרו בהיולי אתה יכול לומר על תהו ואמרו על הצורה שהוא דבר שיש לו גבורה להלביש את ההיולי דמות וצורה ומלת בודה מתפרדת על טעם הוה לשני ענינים, מפני שהיא בנויה למשמע הלשון מן שתי אותיות או מן שתי מילים האחד בו והשני הו ויהיה בהו הצורה המכסה את התהו והמקימת אותו ואתה מביא ראייה מן הכתוב ונטה עליה קו תהו ואבני בהו, והקו אין בו תעולת במשקולת הבנין כי אם למשוך את כובד האבן המראה את תיקון הבנין או עיותו, ומפני זה הלוח הכתוב את זה אל תוהו שנאמר קו תוהו והלוח האבן אל בודה ואמר ואבני בהו, מפני שהאבן מודיע יושר המשקל או קלקולו כאשר הצורה מתקנת דמות הנצור, ואמר קו תהו בלשון יחיד, מפני שהצורות באות על הלובש אותו על תמנות רבות
30. See Scholem 1987, 62; Dan, 1988, 130–131; Simon, 91.
31. Rappaport in his dissertation on bar Hiyya, printed in the Leipzig edition of Hegyon Ha-Nefesh (1860), p. xli
32. The most important being Saadia Gaon (882–942), Isaac Israeli (885?–955?), Solomon Ibn Gabirol (1020–1057), Judah Halevi (1075–1140) and Bahya Ibn Pakuda (11th century).
33. Judah Ibn Tibbon translated Bahya Ibn Pakudah's Duties of the Heart in 1160,

followed by Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* 1167 and Saadyah's *Opinions and Beliefs*. Ibn Gabirol's philosophical work was almost lost to Jewish readership.

35. Ibn Daud's and Maimonides' philosophical work was also originally written in Arabic.

36. I. Efron has published studies on philosophical terminology in bar Hiyya, see his *Studies in Medieval Jewish philosophy*, 171–252; these two articles form a kind of dictionary to bar Hiyya's terminology.

37. One special reason for this was that a work which circulated under the name of *Theology of Aristotle* and believed by many to be genuine was actually a partial paraphrase of *Enneads* by Plotinus, a prominent neo-Platonist of late antiquity.

38. Another important distinction was that for Aristotle the world was eternal. Plato, however, had given an account of how Demiurge, a Creator-God, forms the world out of unformed matter. Almost all Jewish thinkers, including Aristotelians, denied the eternity of the world.

39. The major exception is the *Bahir*, which has been shown by Scholem to be dependent on bar Hiyya. The book does not, however, openly display bar Hiyya's theory.

40. אבל הוציא מן האפס הנמור המוחלט יסוד דק מאד, אין בו ממש, אבל הוא כח ממציא, מוכן לקבל הצורה, ולצאת מן הכח אל הפועל, והוא החומר הראשון, נקרא ליונים היולי, ואחר ההיולי לא ברא דבר, אבל יצר ועשה מננו, כי ממנו המציא הכל והלביש הצורות ותקן אותם:

41. Kiddushin 40b, where the context is about a person repenting his earlier conduct.

42. והחומר הזה, שנקרא היולי, נקרא בלשון הקדש "תוהו", והמלה נגזרת מלשונם (קדושין מ): בתוהו על הראשונות, מפני שאם בא אדם לנגזר בו שם, תוהו ונמלך לקוראו בשם אחר, כי לא לבש צורה שיתפש בה השם כלל. והצורה הנלבשת לחומר הזה נקראת בלשון הקדש בהו, והמלה מורכבת, כלומר בו הוא

43. This analogy is not wholly apt from philosophical point of view. A line is like hyle only as far as both are lacking real existence. Otherwise an architect's vision of a building to be built is more analogous to form than to hyle. Stones are an ample analogy for hyle after being informed with form but not quite for pure form. The problem with this analogy may be the reason why Gersonides later modifies the *tobu/bobu/matter/form* equation.

44. וזהו שאמר הכתוב (ישעיה ל"ד יא) ונטה עליה קו תהו ואבני בהו, כי הוא [הקו] אשר בו יתייחס האומן מחשבת בנינו ומה שיקוה לעשות, נגזר מן קוה אל ה' (תהלים ב"ד), והאבנים הם צורות בבנין.

45. The text says '*avir koah*' but this reading is suggested by Tishby. *Koah* is a common medieval term to describe potential existence as opposed to actual existence, for example when something can possibly exist but has not yet received the appropriate form. *Avir* can, in addition to air, be read as meaning ether, a primordial, spiritual substance.

46. Vajda, 1962, 38–39, 64.

47. Isaac the Blind, *Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah*, in *Or Yakar on Sefer Yetzirah* p. 11  
וכן תהו רשימת ההוויות שאין בה צורה

48. Even Scholem (1987, 253) admits not having understood more than half of the material transmitted in the name of Isaac the Blind.

49. Other contemporaneous mystical schools do not seem to have either knowledge or interest in bar Hiyya's theory. Sodei Razayya by Eleazar of Worms gives a rather conventional explanation for *tobu* and *bobu*. As far as I have been able to check, *tobu* and *bobu* do not appear in the writings of the Iyyun circle, either. Their symbolism contains however interesting elements including circles and the green and blue colours.

50. In medieval Hebrew, the word '*lehalbish*', to clothe, is used in the technical sense of a form informing the matter.

51. Zohar I 16a

תה"ו אתר דלית ביה גוון ולא דיוקנא. ולא אתכליל ברזא דדיוקנא. השתא איהו בדיוקנא.



כד מסתכלן ביה לית ליה דיוקנא כלל.  
לכלא אית לבושא לאתלבשא בר האי. בה"ו להאי אית ליה ציורא ודיוקנא.  
אבנין משקעין גו גליפא דתהו. נפקי גו גליפא דמשקען תמן.  
ומתמן משכי תועלתא לעלמא. בציורא דלבושא משכי תועלתא מעילא לתתא.  
וסלקי מתתא לעילא.

52. Azriel of Gerona, as we have seen, was also thinking of the higher, divine *tohu* in his exposition in the Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot.

53. Commentary of Sefer Yetzirah 4:6

54. Kuzari 5:2. See also *ibid.* 4:25.

55. Klein-Braslavy, 1987, 149–151; Vajda, 1962, 28

56. The Hebrew *yarok* is green in modern Hebrew; however the dictionary of rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic by Jastrow gives the translation yellow. My description of Albalag follows Vajda's French translation, which says "le ligne jaune"

57. I.e. a line as a one-dimensional object is a mathematical abstraction which is not possible in reality, all real objects have three dimensions.

58. This explanation really calls for the reading 'yellow', because how would green be intermediary between white and other colours.

59. Both Staub (p. 213) and Touati (p. 271) refer this to Aristotle's Categories 10.12a17 ('ochron' is intermediary between white and black). Aristotle's text however states more broadly that gray, sallow *and all other colours* are intermediaries between white and black.

60. Obviously Albalag's copy of Sefer Yetzirah contained this dictum.

61. Hagigah 14b. Rabbi Akivah enters the celestial palace with three other sages and advises them: "When you come to the stones of pure marble, do not say 'Water! Water!'" Albalag combines the references to stones, water and the celestial palace and interprets the upper waters as separate, i.e. spiritual forms such as angels.

62. He does not however quote Albalag by name. See Vajda, 1960, 8 n. 3; Touati, 39–41. He does, however give credit to bar Hiyya in Milhamot Ha-Shem 6:2:4 but to a wrong work, see Staub, 211 n. 53.

63. For an extensive treatment of this problem, see Staub, 185–206.

64. Commentary on the Torah, Gen 1:2, p. 23.

65. In his commentary on the Torah, Gen 1:2, p. 23 he explains 'the last form' as 'the form which the matter receives first before receiving the rest of the forms'.

66. Jastrow gives 'smooth', 'viscous'. The word appears also in Betsah 24b about moist, fresh caught fish; Zeb 54a about stones. Urbach p. 775 derives the word from Greek  $\pi\eta\lambda\omega\mu\alpha$  'clay'. See also Kaplan's Sefer Yetzirah, p. 382 for a list of further references.

67. Rashi on Gen 1:2.

68. For Azriel *tohu* = Hokhmah and *bohu* = Binah.

69. Already in late antiquity the void of Gen. 1:2 had been explained as identical to the Platonic unformed matter out of which the world was formed. See May, p. 10–11 *et passim*. See also Augustine's Confessions, Book XII 3..9. For Augustine, however, Gen. 1:2 as a whole describes earth as unformed matter, a basically Platonic concept, which is then formed by God to produce the world. I.e. he does not differentiate between *tohu* and *bohu*, and in his scheme there is no room for form to be found in Gen. 1:2.

70. Cf. Ibn Tzaddik, Ha-Olam Ha-katan; Bahya Ibn Pakudah, Hovot Ha-Levavot; Joseph Gikatilla, Ginnet Egoz

71. See Ma'arekhet Ha-Elohut 55b, Shevilei Emunah 14b (28), Shnei Luhot ha-Brit part 2 6b–7b, Etz Hayim (printed in Sha'arei Kedushah p. 104)

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## SAMMANFATTNING

Den nästan mytiska bilden i Gen. 1:2 där världen beskrivs som öde och tom – *tohu wa-bohu* på hebreiska – gav upphov till varierande tolkningar i den efterbibliska judendomen. Den här artikeln följer utvecklingen av vissa tolkningar av *tohu* och *bohu* ända fram till medeltiden.

Inom Talmud och Midrash används orden *tohu* och *bohu* för det mesta i sin ursprungliga betydelse, men även märkligare förklaringar förekommer. Enligt Hagigah 12a är *tohu* den gröna strimman\* runt världen, därifrån mörkret kommer, och *bohu* de slemmiga stenarna i djupet, ur vilka vattnet strömmar ut. Denna kommentar, som baserar sig på Jesajas vers om *tohus* snöre\* och *bohuss* stenar (Jes 34:11), väcker ändå mera frågor än den ger svar på. Senare tolkades *tohu* och *bohu* som två skilda, med tiden mer och mer abstrakta begrepp. I Sefer Yetzirah inleddes tanken om, att *tohu* representerar det ännu överkliga, som först i *bohu* når en reell existens.

Abraham bar Hiyya, som levde under 1100-talets början i Spanien, var antagligen den första som identifierade *tohu* och *bohu* med två av den dåtida filosofins och vetenskapens kärnbegrepp, materien och formen. Denna upptäckt blev allmänt känd först mer än hundra år senare i och med Kabbalans uppkomst. Den största enskilda faktorn, som befördrade denna idéns spridning under 1200-talets slut och på 1300-talet, var att Nahmanides framställde den i sin bibelkommentar. Därifrån överfördes idén till andra bibelkommentarer samt såväl kabbalistiska och andra texter. Också inom filosofin accepterades bar Hiyyas tolkning från och med 1200-talets slut i verk av Albalag och Gersonides. Efteråt blev bar Hiyyas tolkning en ständigt upprepad del av den judiska exegesen, fast totalt accepterad blev den dock inte.

Identifieringen av *tohu* och *bohu* som materia och form ingick i en strävan att få den judiska traditionen i kongruens med den medeltida vetenskapen. Man bör ändå skilja mellan två olika sätt att bearbeta bar Hiyyas tolkning. Å ena sidan fanns det lärda, som behandlade detta ämne ur naturvetenskaplig synpunkt och betraktade materien och formen som den synliga världens beståndsdelar. Å andra sidan fanns det kabbalister, som ansåg att *tohu*-materien och *bohu*-formen representerade den andliga eller gudomliga världens hemligheter. Men redan bar Hiyya kombinerade de båda aspekterna i sin framställning, liksom många andra efter honom. I dessa tolkningar hade *tohu* och *bohu*, som ursprungligen var kaos och tomhet, blivit till kärnbegrepp i all existens.

\* I båda fallen är det hebreiska ordet *kav*.