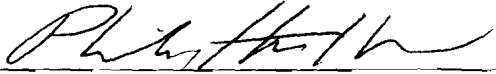


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Elzbieta Domanska for the Master of Arts in English presented on August 3, 2000

Title: Influence of Cabala on the Adult Short Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer

Abstract approved:  _____

Isaac Bashevis Singer's Hassidic upbringing allowed him to become familiar with Cabalistic lore. The influence of Cabala is visible in his literary creativity, especially in his short stories for adults. Cabalistic impact is noticeable either in the composition, narration and language of these stories or in the Cabalistic philosophical concepts that shaped their reality and plots.

Following the idea that the earthly world is full of confusion, Singer shapes his narration to challenge the reader by using a variety of voices, changes of viewpoints, and supernatural narrators. A Cabalistic belief about the special role of language and the magic of words influences Singer's use of a variety of discourses and an apocalyptic tone. His short stories also display a Cabalistic fascination with numbers. Furthermore, the doctrines of *Tzimtzum* and *Shu'ir Komah* constitute a philosophical grounding; they explain the act of creation, which determined the limits of God's presence and intervention in the world, and the problem of evil. The remoteness of God gives characters the possibility of belief and disbelief simultaneously, giving rise to their erratic behavior and persistent searches for truth.

Several other Cabalistic doctrines also influenced Singer's stories for adults to a lesser extent. Such doctrines counterweigh the pessimistic ideas of *Tzimtzum* and *Shu'ir Komah* to suggest that the world contains some order. The doctrines of soul, *Gilgul*, and

Tikkun describe man as the central being in the universe suggesting that the fate of the world hinges on the performance of a man. The doctrine of *Devekuth* shows that a deep religious insight can lead to spiritual contentment. And, the doctrine of *Shekhinah* demonstrates a belief in the balance and compatibility of feminine and masculine components in the universe, and the importance of marriage ties.

**INFLUENCE OF CABALA ON THE ADULT SHORT STORIES
OF ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER**

A Thesis

Presented to

Department of English

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

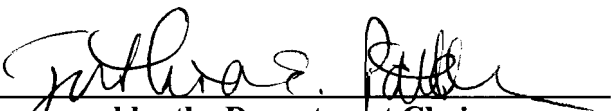
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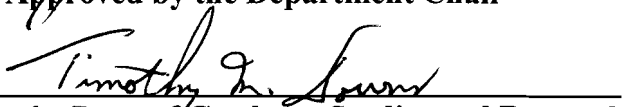
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Thesis
2001
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Approved by the Department Chair


Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

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Introduction

The long history of Jewish thought has been characterized by two trends: rational and mystical. The first stream has been represented in the Talmud and its studies, and the other has been embodied by a number of writings popularly referred to as Cabala. In Cabalistic writings, three have been the most influential: the Sefer Yezirah (Book of Creation), the Bahir (Brilliance), and the Zohar (Splendor) (Ausubel, The Book of Jewish 66). The fact that Cabala is perceived as mystical does not mean that it is altogether deprived of reason. The Cabalists tried to reach the same objectives as rationalists, in understanding God and achieving wisdom and righteousness, yet they believed that magic and the individual religious effort could be equally important as theories.

Despite the popular belief that Cabala was created in Europe's Middle Ages, Cabalistic lore has an ancient tradition, and its origins reached pre-historic times. It is known that Babylonian and Persian demonology, Hellenic Egyptian gnosis and the Chaldean system of astrology influenced Cabala (68). Jewish mysticism flourished in Egypt under Greek impact, where the fusion of Greek, Persian, Egyptian, Hindu and Jewish religions took place in the sixth century B.C.

Cabala became popular during periods of great instability within Jewish communities; its first renaissance occurred in Europe during the Middle Ages when Jews were persecuted and expelled from their homes. In the twelfth century, Cabala was practiced in Provence, France, and then spread to Germany and to Spain, where it began to be known to a larger fraction of the public. In the seventeenth century, just after a mass genocide performed on Jews by Cossacks, Cabala reached Poland.

The sudden interest in Cabala rose in 1665, when Sabbatai Zevi, a student of Cabalism, proclaimed his Messianic mission. Sabbatai Zevi, the best known of all the Jewish pseudo-Messiahs, won a large following among the Jews and made efforts to restore the Jewish kingdom. The next year the sultan of Turkey imprisoned Sabbatai Zevi, and the false Messiah converted to Islam. The Sabbatian movement continued for a few centuries, and Jacob Frank restored it in the eighteenth century; however, it never gained such strength, influence and popularity, as in 1665 and 1666. The false Messianism negatively affected a plethora of Jewish communities, who, believing in the magic number of 1666, accepted nihilistic teaching without doubt (Scholem, Major Trends 287-324). Many Jews abandoned their earthly activities while waiting for the end of the world, although others indulged in morally ambiguous practices. Singer writes about Sabbatai Zevi in his book called The Hasidim:

The adherents of the two false Messiahs and the early Hasidim were all believers in the Cabala, but with one fundamental difference. The followers of Sabbatai Zevi and the Frankist were so enamored of the Cabala that they rejected many laws and precepts of the Bible and the Talmud. They believed that the Cabala had superceded the law of Moses. (Singer and Moskowitz, The Hasidim 17)

Baal Shem Tov consolidated the Jewish masses again. Baal Shem Tov, a founder of Hassidism, considered the Cabala only an addition to the Torah, but he also believed that strict submission to Jewish law is insufficient to attain spiritual fulfillment. Prayer and meditation, according to Baal Shem Tov, are also important in religious experience (20).

Cabala in one of its theoretical assumptions claims that every word, sign, number and even accent is an endless mystery (“Cabala” The Oxford Dictionary). The Cabalistic practice embraces the preparation of various amulets that protect a person from the influence of evil forces, the study of astrology and the performance of infinite magical practices. Some schools of Cabala even developed a complex set of practice such as a deep concentration on divine names in order to be enlightened (Ausubel, The Book of Jewish 69).

In the Hassidic practice, Cabala lost its elite character. Males over thirty could study Cabala; however, its magical practices were restricted to those who were more spiritually developed such as religious leaders called Zaddikim. The Zaddikim taught the doctrines of Cabala to assist the crowds of Hassidic Jews affected by horrid genocides performed by Cossacks in the seventeenth century to understand their role and position in the world.

The main book that Hassidim used for their Cabalistic studies was Zohar. However the study of Zohar was potentially available for every Jew in his thirties and older; Jews were conscious the book contained mystical secrets of which full comprehension could lead to insanity. Zohar means in Hebrew “illumination” or “brightness,” which refers to the nature of metaphorical images that are the record of divine revelation (“Zohar” 750). These revelations concern the creation of the world, meaning of life, and the nature of reality. One should never interpret the book’s content.

Such Cabalistic spiritualism influenced Isaac Bashevis Singer. Singer was a son of a Hassidic Rabbi and witness to the work of the rabbinical court, which considered serious life and religious problems. His early spiritual and religious interests resulted in his own studies: despite his father’s prohibition, he read the Cabala as an adolescent (Singer, A

Little Boy 20). His Hassidic education and the studies of Cabala strongly influenced his fiction.

Nonetheless Singer's critics often ascribe to him different religious views. Some critics, such as Arnold Rosenfeld, frequently classify Singer as an adherent of Spinozism (Rosenfeld 10). However, a closer analysis of his prose and then of his implied values shows that Spinozism is a relatively weak influence on Singer. Samuel Mintz states that Baruch Spinoza's philosophy has a limited impact on Singer's stories (Mintz 217). It only helps to create the contrast between philosophical rationality and Hassidic emotion. For Spinoza, the supernatural world of demons had not existed in reality; Singer, like every Cabalist, was persuaded of the devils' real existence. In the world of Singer's prose, there is the unpredictability of events and the belief that the miraculous is possible. This cannot be related to Spinozian rationalistic pantheism: Spinoza disbelieved in devils and the supernatural. In one of his interviews, Singer confesses that Spinoza was interesting for him as a philosopher close to Cabala (Farrell, Isaac Bashevis Singer 93). Spinozian worldview is attractive to Singer only in its resemblances to Cabalist thought:

After I read David Hume, Kant, and others, I felt that something was wrong with Spinoza's belief in reality, because to him what we see is real. And then there is his rationalism and his idea that God has no will and no purpose. As I became older I became more inclined to mysticism and to religion, and I felt that to say that the universe is nothing but a huge machine with no will or no purpose is minimizing creation. [...] The Cabala has both sides: it has all the good sides of Spinoza and all the good sides of Plato. This is the reason I admire so much the Cabala. (93)

Another critic, J. A. Eisenberg, perceives Singer as an orthodox, pious Puritan. Eisenberg generally admits that Singer uses “a Cabalistic mode of explanation, including mysterious, mystical and mythological elements,” but the writer does it “to damn pseudo-pious Cabalistic sensualism as being very prone to corruption by evil forces” (Eisenberg 64). No matter how much this statement seems possible, Singer was not skeptical of nor ever condemned Hassidic philosophy and Cabala. Moreover, in the introduction to his autobiographical book, A Little Boy in Search of God, Singer states, “[T]his essay will try to relate the experiences of the one who considers himself a bit of a mystic in his life and his literary creations”(xi). Then he explains his Hassidic background, interest in Cabalistic lore, and psychic research.

Another argument for Singer’s puritanism is the frequent failures of Cabalists in his prose. In the same book, A Little Boy in Search of God, Singer sheds some light on why religious Jews are sometimes easily corrupted by earthly pleasures: “My personal definition of religion is a mysticism that has been transformed into a discipline, a mass experience, and thus grown partially diluted and often worldly. [...] The more successful a religion is, the stronger its influence, the further it recedes from its mythical origin. Dogma and magic take the place of spiritual experience”(viii). Singer implies that a major part of humankind practices organized, dogmatic religion. The Cabalists who fail in Singer’s stories are not simply mystics but only religious individuals; their unfruitful searches became the reasons for their failures. Cabala frequently warns that the way of spiritual development may be dangerous for human minds (20). Second, Singer is also conscious of the problematic nature of religious studies. The practitioners of religion can easily get lost. In one interview, Singers mentions to Grace Farrell that even though man knows that God is a

Creator, seeing all the world's injustice, he often protests against God. This protest is not anti-religious; it is rather a questioning of God's indifference. Finally, man is exposed to all the evil forces acting upon him (Farrell, Isaac Bashevis Singer 93). The devils often tempt man to protest against God.

Not only in his memoir A Little Boy in Search of God, but also in numerous interviews, Singer declares his religious beliefs:

Like the Cabalists I say that this is a terrible planet. I call this world hell or death. Here we were sent not to completely enjoy but to suffer and reason for this. [...] I'm an optimist as far as the kingdom of heaven is concerned, but as far as these kingdoms here are concerned, I'm a pessimist. (Farrell, Isaac Bashevis Singer 135)

This citation is an allusion to the Cabalistic conception of the Universe. For Cabalists mankind occupies the lowest and furthest place from God, where the divine light dimly shines and evil is ubiquitous. If one compares Singer's statements in his interviews with the appropriate spots in Cabala, he may realize that there are actually almost no differences and that the writer believes in the Cabalistic conception of the world.

Singer's deep concern about Cabala and Hassidism is also seen in his writings. Besides numerous interviews, where Singer often spoke about his philosophical and religious views, he also wrote a book on Hassidism, the history of the life of Baal Shem Tov, and his spiritual memoir A Little Boy in Search of God, in which he explains his religious background and development. Hassidic and Cabalist characters are abundant in many novels and short stories, and the messianic idea taken out of Lurianic Cabala is a basis of his study of false prophets conducted in Satan in Goray and several other short stories.

Apart from thematic influences, Cabala has an impact on almost all the instances of Singer's creation. In the following study, I will trace the impact Cabala has on Singer's short stories. First, Cabala affects the author's decisions on the form of the stories with regard to composition, language, narration, descriptions, and the "beliefs" of narrator and characters; second, the dialogues of characters along with the comments of the narrator and the depiction of settings comply with particular Cabalistic doctrines. The impact of the Cabala on the compositional decisions of the author will be the topic of chapter one. In chapter two, I will present the most important concepts in Singer's stories: Cabalistic doctrines and how they influence setting and the views of the narrator and characters. The doctrines discussed in chapter two contribute to the final shape of settings and the nature of Singer's world. Finally, in chapter three, the secondary doctrinal influences will be discussed. These influences are still crucial for Singer's reality.

The Hassidic and Cabalistic influence on Singer's prose has been mentioned by a number of scholars and critics; however, just a few studies provide any deeper analysis of the issue. Irving Howe writes about Singer's being close "to Jewish religious traditions, especially their more esoteric and Cabalistic elements" (Howe 105). Samuel Mintz and Ben Siegel notice that supernatural forces draw on a mystical Cabalist tradition well known to Hassidic lore (Mintz 215, Siegel 17). Alexander Bezanker sees the source of the ubiquity of evil forces in Singer's prose as an impact of Cabalistic and Hassidic beliefs (Beaker 85). Finally, Sanford Pinsker claims that the concept of evil as a common subconsciousness is of Cabalistic and Freudian origin (Pinsker 31).

Some researchers do not mention Cabala as an influence on Singer's fiction but unintentionally find some associations with Cabalistic concepts. Thus, Irving Buchen discusses the revival of Satan and the Messianic crisis in Singer's prose; Melvin J.

Friedman analyzes the magic of numbers as a composition source for novels, and J. S. Wolkenfeld states that the theme of faith and waiting for the Messiah is the key to understanding Singer's literary creativity (Wolkenfeld 86-99). Finally, Linda Nielson Eppich writes about the mystical nature of marriage; however, she does not point to the source of it is Cabalistic conception of *Shekhinah* (Eppich 357).

J. A. Eisenberg perceives Singer as a pious Puritan and treats Cabalistic philosophy as the one driving Jews to indulge their lusts. Eisenberg confuses Cabala with Sabbatianism, the same mistake Singer feared, and does not attempt to determine what is Cabala for Singer. Furthermore, surprisingly enough, Eisenberg concludes, "The way in which he [Singer] does this [conveys his vision] is very effective. To begin with, he uses a Cabalistic mode of explanation, including mysterious, mystical and mythological elements to damn pseudo-pious Cabalistic sensualism as being very prone to corruption by evil forces" (Eisenberg 64).

Another group of critics notices the profound impact of Cabala on Singer's prose; however, those researchers study only individual influences without any greater attempt to synthesize them into a general study. In this category of critics, one can rank Baruch Hochman with his theory of Cabalist thought as a framework for Singer's stories, especially for problems of good and evil in the doctrine of *Tzimtzum* (Hochman 125). Nancy Berkowitz Bate and her remarks about Cabala as a subtext of Singer's work and the Cabalistic influences on the shape of the female character are developed later by Sarah Balcher Cohen and Shirene McIntyre with her study of reincarnation. Finally, Michael Fixler notices, "the crucial role played by some obscure psychic forces that seem to have to do with what the Cabala terms *Kawwanah*, the force of an intention independent of the limitations of action, but ultimately controlling it" (Fixler 378).

Only two scholars, Israel Biletzky and Grace Farrell, have researched the influence of Cabala on Singer's literary creativity. Unfortunately, there has been no study on Cabalistic influences in Singer prose exclusively. The valuable analysis of Singer's Yiddish style, information about a revolution in Jewish consciousness that Cabala brought about, and the explanation for witchcraft and miracles of Cabala are the subjects of Biletzky's book. In the same study, Biletzky also analyzes the Cabalistic role of a writer and the influence of the Cabalistic doctrine of *Gilgul* (reincarnation). Grace Farrell's analysis of Cabalistic impact on Singer is most profound and creative. Farrell's study, containing in its title an allusion to the Cabalistic concept of Godhead, delivers much valuable information on the topic. One of her chapters in the aforementioned book analyzes the possibility for belief and disbelief, which Cabala gives to its readers; Farrell also considers the worth of language, especially the value of prayer. Finally, Farrell discusses demons, their appearance described in the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*, and their role in Singer's fiction.

This study will focus on these and the other aspects of Cabalistic influence such as composition, language, the magic of numbers, and the inspired by Cabala vividness of description. Furthermore, the study will present the impact of the Cabalistic doctrines of *Shu'ir Komah*, *Tzimtzum*, soul, reincarnation, *Shekhinah*, and *Kawwanah* on Singer's short stories.

Chapter 1

The Cabalistic impact on Singer's short stories is visible in the shape of his fiction. Singer's narration, language and composition have each been particularly influenced by the Cabalistic worldview, however, each of them differently. The basic trait of Singer's narration is its confusing effect. Singer produces confusion by the use of the supernatural, a changing point of view, and limiting the knowledge and perception of the narrator. Furthermore, the application of an apocalyptic tone makes the reality told in Singer's stories static and irreversible but difficult to comprehend by a reader because it is closed in prophetic vision. As far as his language is concerned, Singer shares a Cabalistic belief in the mystical nature of words. Hebrew, the holy tongue, is not simply a means of expressing certain thoughts. Speech comes from God and reflects the fundamental spiritual nature of the world (Scholem, Major Trends 17). There exists a bearing of the linguistic act of Creation on the philosophical approach to the language sphere. In the Bible, there is an account of Creation in which God originated the universe by uttering the word. The conception of a special role of language along with the idea of writing as a creative act repeating creation are very close to Singer. Singer's respect for language is visible in the diversity of his styles, belief in the magic of words and writing as a mission. Finally, also from Cabala comes the composition of his stories, which hinges Singer's use of words to create an atmosphere of mystery.

The process of creation, especially the concept of God and the belief that the earth is the lowest of the worlds, has influenced Singer's narrations. According to Cabalistic myth of the cosmogonical processes, God has always existed: His existence is timeless. Since one of God's attributes is Creation, there came a moment when He decided to create

the world. Then the absolute and transcendent Creator expanded from Himself to create multiplicity. The first entity that spread from God was Intelligence. The quality of Intelligence created the soul of the world, the link joining spirit and matter (“Emanation” 227). In Zohar, there are references to four worlds, each beneath the other. The World of Emanation is the highest dominion in the nearness to God. The lower, the World of Creation, evolved from the World of Emanation. The World of Formation is the heaven where the angels live. The lowest, the World of Action is the earthly, material sphere (“Worlds, Four” 599). In other Cabalistic readings, the lowest world is only the spiritual counterpart of the material world, so our world has a source in it (Scholem, Major Trends 25).

In Cabalistic view, the lowest world is the farthest from God. When God represents the source of light, His brightness can hardly reach distant places, which contain less of His energy. The earth is likewise distant from its Creator and overwhelmed by confusion and by demonic sources. God’s remoteness and incomprehensibility are the reason for the limitation in cognition and access to knowledge about reality. The creatures of this world experience much illusion about the real nature, purpose and sense of their existence. They also do not know who God is and whether He exists. Singer often quoted Cabalistic thought when talking about the evil nature of the lowest world: “The Cabalists say this world is the worst of all possible worlds. They believe there are millions of worlds, but the worst is this one. Here is the very darkness itself. How can you expect that in the blackest darkness, in the deepest abyss of all, everything should turn out nice and proper?” (Farrell, Isaac Bashevis Singer 25). In the lowest of worlds, the truth about the reality cannot be reached and accepted; it cannot be given directly either.

The best metaphor for the Cabalistic lowest world is a search for epiphany; the same metaphor can be used for Singer's fiction. Singer tries to create prose permeated by a form of religious experience. For him, most important is not exactly communicating the existence or the lack of divine existence but passing on to the reader the impression that this fundamental question and the search for the answers are the basic problems for all his fiction. To extend this constant inquiry on his prose, Singer shapes his narration in such a way as to confuse and challenge the reader. For Singer, anything can occur; the world is, just as in Cabala, miraculous and permeated by supernatural forces. Narration's changeable points of view, tone, and mixing the reality with illusion expressed the confusion intended by the author and, consequently, its narrators.

The characteristic feature of Singer's narration is his narrators' belief in the supernatural. These narrators refer to the most bizarre, mysterious, and mystical stories such as coming to life after death, the existence of magic, the encounters with devils and the departed people, or the transmigration of souls. Singer's narrators display a belief in demonic forces governing the world. Some critics, for instance, Susan Sontag, consider the problem of Singer's demons' existence as a product of the characters' psyches (Sontag 460-63). Even though it can be an interesting point for the analysis of characters' motivations, Singer confirms a demonic existence ("Demons by Choice" 69). Likewise the narrators tell the story of the lowest of the worlds and do it with a deep, almost fanatic conviction that this reality is true and with a fearful respect to its magic forces. For example, in the story "The Briefcase," the first person narrator speaks about malicious imps without the slightest doubt in their existence:

I was numb. I stared at them for a long time. The imps had played a new trick on me—they didn't intend me to have repose. Rosalie's eyes were

laughing. Reizl looked at me with a sort of mocking compassion. Was this my final downfall? Or come on in. *Mazel tov*. This is a night of miracles.

(“The Briefcase” 134)

To make the reader convinced that demons, *dybbuks*¹, imps, and devils abide on earth, Singer lets various speakers convey the same worldview. Although stories are often told not only by the narrator who can be identified with the author and with various individuals such as old people, especially women, and the representatives of different professions, the belief in supernatural and magic remains the same (Shmeruk 109). Furthermore, Singer establishes an instance of storytellers in his short stories by mentioning in the text that the story is being told to a certain audience. As a result of constructing the situation of storytelling, the conviction about the nature of the world is additionally backed up by the textual audience’s belief in it (99).²

The diversity of narration also produces the impression of a great complexity of the world and its incomprehensible, chaotic nature. The reader may be simply confused by the diversity. His perception can follow various points of view, so his reception will be changing a little in every story. This technique significantly contributes to his limited knowledge. An example of such an implied confusion can be “A Tale of Two Liars.” The story begins with the ordinary statement of a third person narrator: “A lie can only thrive on truth; lies, heaped one upon another lack substance. Let me tell you how I manipulated two liars by pulling the strings, making them dance to my tune” (“A Tale of Two Liars” 36). Suddenly, in the middle of the story the narrator introduces himself as Sammael, Satan. This move undoubtedly changes the attitude of a reader to the whole story being told. “In The Poorhouse” displays another narrative strategy. Here the voice of the narrator

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is limited, and the characters' dialogues flow without any introduction to who is speaking; the reader has to tell part of the story himself.

In several stories, such as "The Unseen," "Zeidlus the Pope," "Last Demon," and "A Tale of Two Liars," demons are the narrators. They almost always tell the story of their evil actions and their successes with weak humans. The demons' power and omnipotence give the impression that they are actually the spiritus movendi of the whole world: they can condition the majority of human decisions and actions. "Supernatural narrators, on the other hand, are endowed by their very nature with the quality of omniscience which enables them to enter into a man's mind and discover secrets" (Shmeruk 106). They can observe the subjects of their actions everywhere, are able to anticipate human reactions and can exert the full control over them in every situation. In "The Lantuch," Aunt Yentl claims that lantuchs, or household imps, control all human activities. In many other stories, such as in "The Unseen," the Evil Spirit, the narrator, confesses that he knows how to instigate and manipulate the characters into sinning:

THEY SAY THAT I, THE EVIL SPIRIT, AFTER DESCENDING TO earth in order to induce people to sin, will then ascend to heaven to accuse them. As a matter of fact, I am also the one to give the sinner the first push, but I do this so cleverly that the sin appears to be an act of virtue; thus, other infidels, unable to learn from the example, continue to sink into the abyss.
(“The Unseen”171)

Characteristically, supernatural narrators are often more conscious of the affairs in the kingdom of Heaven and the hell of Gehenna: evil narrators are able to see the fortune of their victims in a wider perspective than people themselves. In the story "Zeidlus the Pope," Satan confesses: "In Ancient times there always lived a few men in every

generation whom I, the evil One, could not corrupt in the usual manner. It was impossible to tempt them to murder, lechery, and robbery. In only way could the inner passions of these righteous souls be reached was through their vanity” (“Zeidlus the Pope” 177).

The devils’ stories also convey a message about a structure of the world. Their concepts comply with the Cabalistic beliefs that the evil and good forces are in constant fluctuation, and the worlds between the highest Heaven and Gehenna are the subject of their constant struggle. They also confirm that there is an existence beyond the earthly life, which is not so obvious for many human characters. In the stories “The Unseen,” “Zeidlus the Pope,” “The Destruction of Kreshev,” “The Last Demon,” and others, devilish narrators, as representatives of the world of evil, know more about God than people. For instance, Satan knows that his inducing people to sin eventually results in heavenly judgment. His victim does not have such knowledge (“The Unseen” 171). The sad demon from the story “The Last Demon” possesses mystical knowledge of holy books and can hear the voices incomprehensible for humans such as the Talmudic songs of a spider. Generally, demons are conscious of dichotomy between their domain and God’s world, so they know the truth about the nature of the world.

The Cabalistic vision of the world is also conspicuous in the way Singer shapes human narrators and misleads readers. As members of the lowest of possible worlds, people are exposed to so many distracting emotions and addictions of their minds that the gift of clear perception of reality is almost unattainable to them. People are subjected by their instinctual drives such as haughtiness (“Zeidlus the Pope”), sexual lust (“The Unseen”), greed (“The Tale of Two Liars”), and anger (“Fire”). For the human narrators, the nature of the world they talk about is less obvious since they often experience hallucinations or perceive reality in a dreamlike manner. In “Alone,” the narrator reports

his strange visions without any explanations about what may be the reasons his reality is this way: “I had visited Havana once and, there, found the forces of darkness still in possession of their ancient powers. Not even the dead were left in peace—their bones were dug up. At night I had heard the screams of cannibals and the cries of maidens whose blood was sprinkled on the altars of idolaters” (“Alone” 57). Sometimes dream and reality become indistinguishable. The rabbi from the story “Slaughterer” feels the horror of his slaughtering of animals not only in his daily existence but also in his dreams.

The blurred picture of reality along with the majority of different voices speaking as narrators reinforces the delusion of man. This kind of vision is, however, intended by the author. In the fallen world, the truth is secretly hidden and invisible. According to Farrell, the narrators’ disorientation and befuddlement are also consequences of Cabalistic belief in the lowest of the worlds:

The psychological and the illusory are metaphors of his [narrator’s] cosmic dilemma, rather than, as many critics would have it, the other way around. And the narrator’s disorientation amid the polyphony of illusion created by the imps is a metaphor not only of a befuddled psyche, but also of a collapsed cosmos. (Farrell, “The Hidden God” 83)

Not only the narrators should experience illusion: the reader should also be exposed to the labyrinths of Singer’s phenomenology. The reader’s ability to perceive ought to be limited. The limits of the possibility to acquire knowledge in the world when God is invisible are communicated in the language of Singer’s narration. Singer’s stories are non-dramatic. Action never rises to a pitch because the narrator does not intend to create a tension and suspense. “For Singer nothing significant is possible in the ill-defined present (or future) except the act of telling; everything significant is possible in the cultural-

historical-psychological past” (Gittleman 249). The narrator relates the events without regard to the reader, telling details of the names and circumstances from the pre-war Poland that are not understandable for a modern reader.

In Singer’s stories, narration is a prevalent power in relation to the plot. The narrators treat characters as if they were checkers on the chessboard: they lack psychological depth and their motivations are so unclear that one may see them as mentally distorted. The circumstances and events the characters encounter and the relations between the people in short stories do not create the cause and effect relations based on common logic; as a result, the narration determines the direction the story will take and determines the actions of characters freely. The example of such a situation can be the protagonist of the story “The Beggar Said So.” In this story, the narrator does not explain the events to the virtual readers. The protagonist, Moshe, engages in many unfortunate enterprises because he follows the advice of the beggar to attain happiness. Certainly, Moshe fails because his efforts are deprived of common sense, yet he treats his every failure with such an enthusiasm as if it was another challenge leading to inevitable satisfaction. Why does Moshe act this way? Is he just stupid or is there any method in his insanity? By relating stories without giving any motivations for characters, the narrator confuses a reader but also gains another philosophical meaning. The same applies to the conversations of the characters: the narrator does not pay any attention to their consistency. The narrator relates the characters’ conversations in unemotional way, as if they were overheard and insignificant for the course of a story. Nonetheless, the dialogues’ content must be censored by the narrator’s consciousness. As a result, the narrator’s voice strikes with its distinction and ominous pervasiveness. “The narrative voice aggressively invades the consciousness of

the reader and struggles to control it. [...] The reader, while reading it is—without understanding it at the time—possessed by *dybbuk*” (Gittleman 258).

This possessed reader shares the problem of being deluded with the characters in Singer’s prose. For Singer, the problem of possession is a basic experience of man in the Fallen World. In the worst of the worlds, the human senses can be easily exposed to temptations and illusions and man does not have control over them. A strategy of Singer’s writing is to make a reader aware of his own delusions and limitations.

Another trait pointing to the close affiliation between Singer’s fiction and Cabala is the occurrence of the apocalyptic tone in many passages. The theme of Apocalypse is so frequent in Singer’s stories that Edward Alexander distinguishes even a special category of apocalyptic tales (Alexander 126-30). In these types of short stories, the narrator builds a vision resembling the end of the world. The ominous, threatening tone, the expressionistic coloring, solemn, lofty style, and prophetic mode sound like the Apocalypse or the forthcoming Day of Judgment:

The setting sun, remarkably large, stared down angrily like a heavenly eye upon Frampol market place. Never before had Frampol seen such a sunset. Like rivers of burning sulphur, fiery clouds streamed across the heavens, assuming the shapes of elephants, lions, snakes and monsters. They seemed to be waging a battle in the sky, devouring one another, spitting, breathing fire. It almost seemed to be the River of fire they watched, where demons tortured the evildoers amidst glowing coals and heaps of ashes. The moon swelled, became vast, blood-red, spotted, scarred, and gave off little light. (“The Gentleman From Cracow” 35)

The term apocalyptic, however, can be used for the short stories' visions only in a metaphoric way. Singer paints the pictures of doom and imminent destruction, but he does not prophesize the coming of the Messiah; at most, his is only a false Messiah so his apocalyptic stories are not apocalyptic in the literary sense. What is characteristic of Singer's portrayals of destruction is their resemblance to Cabalistic worldview: there is a belief in two opposing cosmic powers and in two distinct ages (eons) of the world. Typically, the authors of apocalyptic literature believe that the present age of the world is irredeemably evil, ruled by a Satan figure that personifies evil (Alexander 127). These authors reveal, however, that the evil age is soon to be ended, destroyed by God, who is good. In a subsequent age, the kingdom of God will be ruled by God, and it will be perfect and will last forever; only the good, formerly oppressed, will enjoy it (129). In Singer's stories the truth about God's kingdom on earth is not given directly to people; it exists only in their intuitions.

Apocalyptic language of some short stories leads us to the area of Hebrew religious fascination with linguistics. The implications of the religious beliefs in the power of language are another result of his Cabalistic worldview. Singer, having received a Hassidic upbringing, believed in the magic of a word. He writes about it in his memoir:

I had learned in Gemara, that God understands all languages and that you could pray to him in your own tongue, but the angles resorted only to Hebrew. Well, but this wasn't the same Hebrew that I knew. Holy names spurted from their fiery mouths, secrets of the Torah, mysteries upon mysteries... Every word, every letter, every curlicue, contained hints of divine wisdom (Singer and Moskowitz, The Hassidim 21-25).

The proper use of language, especially apt pronunciation, could have a magic power. As it is widely known, Jews paid special attention to the acts of language. The act of Creation was primarily a linguistic act: according to the Holy Bible, the Word was in the beginning. Cabalists build the whole system of practical Cabala, where they play with words:

As devotees of “the hidden wisdom,” mystics frantically searched the biblical texts for hints and Signs, for symbolic allusions and “secret” meanings. They even took a magical view of the aleph-bet (the Hebrew alphabet), considering it potent with a divine fire. The cabalists claimed that by means of the twenty-two Hebrew letters had god created the world—had his sacred commandments been formulated and revealed to Moses for Israel’s salvation. The Cabalists were convinced that if the letters of the Hebrew alphabet could be combined in the right manner and then added up according to the numerical values the Cabalists gave them, the awesome creative powers with which the Hebrew letters were endowed could be released by the ‘elect,’ and the most stupendous of miracles accomplished.

(Ausubel, The Book of Jewish 69)

Singer trusts the power of language and puts to it the same emphasis as artist to his material. Singer uses several literary styles simultaneously: one is for the rational, the other for emotional, and the next for the supernatural. According to Biletzky, who provides this distinction, every experience results in the different style. Depending on emotionality, each “speech” presents various intervals and stops, along with the movements of hands that followed and dominated the voice (Biletzky 24). Biletzky also points that Yiddish spoken by in various regions, even parts of towns, and by different profession differed

significantly, what is masterly portrayed in Singer's styles. The burden of time and historical circumstances also influenced Yiddish.

Bashevis's prose is blessed with a language, which encompasses the Jewish wealth of feelings and world of the rational. The fate of the Yiddish language included wanderings, uprootings and re-rootings, and these entailed continuous fresh observations of mores and manners. The Jewish body and soul changed with the wanderings, and so did their language. Every place was a laboratory of life and language. Every letter and sign of the Jewish "body language" can be found in Isaac Bashevis' prose. (Biletzky 25).

In English translation, much of such stylistic wealth is lost because Singer's translators could not find the appropriate jargons and styles in English. Among all those dialects and languages, more emotional fragments coined undoubtedly on Peretz and Romantic movement discourse bore certain traits of Cabala: this sort of language is even named the cabal-language (25).

In one of his interviews, Singer confesses that his father was against secular literary professions and perceived them as iconoclastic (Burgin and Singer 123). He himself, however, at least subconsciously, attributes a religious meaning to his activities. Since the writer is dealing with the sacred area of language, he imitates the Holy Act of Creation:

The most important fact about a novelist is the kind of creation he commands, for he's the true god there, brooding, in the beginning, above a blank and dismal page. His books in this sense are sacred. He must be taken at his Word. Construction counts. It forms the world in the work we see. In

the better novels, construction counts for everything, since everything is construction, and there are no “details.” (Gass 2)

By telling his stories, the writer brings the world to existence and enters the sacred area of Cabala. In one of the interviews, Singer explains: “I will say that to me God is an artist. I say that his attribute is creativity. Creativity is also the attribute of the artist. So we can call him the great artist, the almighty artist, or something like this” (Farrell, Isaac Bashevis Singer 145). Since God is an artist, artists are even more similar to God than ordinary people. They understand the linguistic complexities better than others.

Storytelling becomes then a significant action: the Cabalistic book Sefer Yezirah emphasizes the image of God as primal writer. The initial sentence of Sefer Yezirah suggests that the Creator works in thirty-two mysterious paths of wisdom (Farrell, From Exile to Redemption 19). The universe is essentially linguistic sphere created by the endless repetition of the Hebrew alphabet. The Cabalists combined the letters in all possible ways to attain the ability to perform miracles. Singer intends the same. The writer wants not only to challenge the perception of the reader by a constant challenging of his perception in various hallucinations, but also to give the reader the possibility for epiphany.

Another sign of Singer’s fascination by the language, also of Cabalistic origin, is a dramatism and vividness of descriptions. Isaac Biletzky states that the aspects of Singer’s fantastic world, especially his fascination with small details of human anatomy can be borrowed from Cabala (30). Singer’s description of people also include an element of mystery and eeriness: “Dr. Fischelson was short, hunched man with a grayish beard, and was quite bald except for a few wisps of hair remaining at the nape of the neck. His nose was as crooked as a beak and his eyes were large, dark and fluttering like those of some huge bird” (“The Spinoza of the Market Street” 3).

The same Cabalistic origin and significance appear in Singer's fiction numbers. The only difference between their function is of a kind: words are the essence of literature and numbers play only additional, compositional function. Numbers were treated in Cabala as an essence of Creation. Number three, as one of the primary numbers, had a special sacred origin and function. According to Cabala, three was the number present in the act of creation. The first three sefirot emerged earlier and gave birth to the others called the sixth dimensions of providence (Matt 41). When one looks at the scheme of sefirot and their mutual connections sketched in Cabala, he can see that the process of emanation from the highest sefirot "Crown" or "Keter" to the lowest sefirots can lead through three different ways. Cabalists often group sefirots into a triangle (with exclusion of the highest one). Then, there exists a polarization between each two sefirots balanced by a particular third sefirot (43). Once again the group of three depicts harmony.

On his enthusiasm for numbers, it was quite obvious that the number three was Singer's favorite. During many of Singer's lectures, he expressed more than just a fleeting fascination with it (Friedman 192). Melvin Friedman notices Singer's use of three for composition purposes. Friedman analyzes some of Singer's major novels by dividing their plots into three thematic parts: transplantation, prophecy and return. Friedman believes that the number three as a source for composition is a sign of Singer's fascination with numbers. In the first part, distinguished by Friedman, the incidents are usually realistic and the story has a steady pace and linear construction. The prophecy part is usually more grotesque, hectic, and full of dramatic effects. The tone often changes abruptly: the story is told with an expressionistic mode or with an apocalyptic pathos. The distinction between reality and illusion often becomes unclear. The third part, the least defined by Friedman, always conveys a resolution. The first and second parts are almost equal in length with the

third part being very short. The third part plays the function of a coda in music: it offers a resolution and a kind of vision (183).

The same division into three can be applied to the short stories. Certainly, in short stories it functions differently. While the first and the second part display the traits described by Friedman, the third part only at times delivers a resolution; sometimes the ends are blurred by a certain lack of clarity. If someone looks for common characteristics that embrace the major part of short stories the common trait could be a catastrophe or a transformation of a hero. Anyway, in Singer's short stories the Cabalistic pattern of three functions similarly with the only difference being that supernatural sometimes is displayed throughout the story, namely in all three parts. What is characteristic of the stories is that the catastrophe does not mean a sudden cessation of the supernatural forces' presence; they are often a determining factor in the narratives. "Gimpel The Fool" is a story of a husband being cheated by his wife. At first, he displays the natural hesitation of someone who has doubts whether he is being betrayed or not. For the reader these considerations seem to be perfectly natural and justified. After a while, the same thoughts become a sign of naivety—the incidents having place in the story should confirm the worst expectations of the hero; Gimpel remains grotesquely uncertain about his wife's conduct and takes her every explanation for granted. The end, part three, when his wife confesses all her guilt and then dies leaving Gimpel sorrowful and conscious of his infamous foolishness, is the coming to truth. Gimpel, an old and abandon homeless beggar, is then in contact with the world of magic powers: he communicates with his late wife in dreams and discovers the real sense of his existence. "When the time comes I will go joyfully. Whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived," says Gimpel at the end of the story ("Gimpel the Fool")

21). Also, in “Crown of Feathers,” an educated and wise woman Akhsa objects to the traditions she does not understand. The first part of the story relates Akhsa life, her struggles with the necessity of getting married and her unsuccessful marriage. In the second part the supernatural comes on stage: Akhsa hears two voices of her late grandfathers, giving her contrary advise. After a while, Akhsa begins trusting her grandmother advice, all the more she finds in the pillow the beautiful supernatural looking crown. Then the tempo of the story becomes more hectic: the protagonist follows all her grandmother advice, not noticing that she is actually tempted by the devil in human form. When she realizes her mistakes, in part three, she tries to redeem all her sins and abandon herself in religious studies and ascetic life. This leads her to death: while dying she discovers that the truth she looked for all her life ^{does} not exist. The same division into three thematic parts can be traced in each story. The regularity of this division exceeds the supposition that this is an accidental composition means.

The fact that Cabala influenced the narration, language and composition of the stories is Singer’s intended effect. He chose consciously to create his fiction in this Cabalistic mode. Even if, in indifferent periods of his life, Singer’s Cabalistic interests were changing their intensity, Cabala has always been a source of his artistic reflection and self-identity as a religious person. Cabala reappears as a similar inspiration in portraying the setting and the characters. Singer will once again sustain his deep conviction about mystical origins of reality.

Chapter 2

Various Cabalistic concepts impressed Singer's imagination. Although Singer's literary creativity reflects his interest in Cabala, the Cabalistic impact on his short fiction varies significantly. This chapter will display the two Cabalistic doctrines *Shi'ur Komah* and *Tzimtzum* that have played a basic role in the construction of Singer's settings and have become the philosophical framework for their plots. The doctrines also influence the stories' conceptions of reality. The *Shi'ur Komah*, the doctrine of the Godhead, explains the existence or rather absence of God in the short stories and its consequence on the performance of characters. The *Tzimtzum* is the Cabalistic conception of Creation, elaborated by Isaac Luria, which develops the philosophical complexity of God's presence and intervention in the world and sheds light on the everlasting problem of evil.

Since the human condition in the world is affected by its limited knowledge and understanding of its role, which the two doctrines explain, people often seek transcendence and salvation. Salvation is certainly associated with the forthcoming of a Messiah. In Singer's fiction the highest purpose of Jewish religion—to encounter and follow the Messiah—often acquires negative overtones. The characters, confused, befuddled, and broken by their lack of spiritual consciousness and unhappy life incidents, tend to believe in everything and everybody who offers hope. The Cabalistic Messianic concept in Singer's work has then an adverse effect on human minds: instead of being a means for their religious zeal and spiritual development, it often misleads, brainwashes and deprives the Jewish masses of their national and religious identity. It also exposes them to the risk of God's condemnation. Since the problem of Messianism, a search for religious fulfillment in the form of a new faith, occupies the central position in the plot and the world of Singer's short stories, the concept of Messianism naturally follows the

two philosophical conceptions in this chapter. Generally speaking, the Cabalistic doctrines of *Shu'ir Komah* and *Tzimtzum* describe the Fallen World and its corruption. They also place a human being in a condition of a constant doubt, spiritual starvation and living in suspense; the characters often look for a refuge in religious beliefs. Singer questions the Cabalistic doctrine of the Messiah and uses it as a warning against religious gullibility for Jews.

The theory of *Shi'ur Komah*, the mystical shape of the Godhead, often conflicts with the doctrine of official Judaism. The image of God in Judaism is coined on the literary understanding of the Pentateuch, so it is distinctly anthropomorphous. Cabalists could not accept the traditional depiction of a Creator; according to them, God's figure is incomprehensible to a man, if overall portrayable (Scholem, On The Mystical 15-16). The terminology of the Bible uses two different words in naming God that refer to opposing meanings: the first has its source in the words: "kind" and "species," the other alludes to a three dimensional form (16-17). The human being cannot grasp the concept of God in one moment; a mystic is able to comprehend part of Divine nature and only in one of His manifestations:

We may therefore assume that Deity has a mystical form that manifests itself in two different aspects: to the visionary, it manifests itself in the tangible shape of a human being seated on the throne of glory, constituting the supreme primal image in which man was created; aurally, at least in principle, it is manifested as God's name, broken into its component elements, whose structure anticipates that of all being. According to this doctrine, God's shape is conceived of, not as a concept or idea, but as names. (28)

Although the visual concept of God is acceptable for the masses, a highly theoretical and mystic Cabalistic concept of God as names or pronounced letters of the Jewish alphabet is undoubtedly incomprehensible for simple minds. To most ordinary people, God has to be approachable and anthropomorphic. He needs to answer their prayers and play a function of their fatherly conscience. The Cabalistic concept of God is often too abstract and unreal. According to Singer, the incomprehensibility of God is, however, necessary for people because it causes them to face a dilemma of moral choice. As Singer said in one of his interviews, “If He [God] showed Himself we would be lost, we would disappear. [...] Our individuality would disappear because then we would become clearly united with the Godhead. There must be this blindness or this evil so that we should exist as free people” (Farrell, Isaac Bashevis Singer 139). Cabala presents then a characteristic contradiction: it speaks about the real nature of God and denies the possibility to know this nature.

Following Cabala, Singer characters’ behavior expresses their religious and spiritual yearning and the confusion imposed by the Kabalistic notion of the Godhead. “They tend to be men whom vex questions of faith and reason, and confront the abstruse theological implication of the troubles that beleaguer them” (Hochman 123). Always thinking compulsively about God, the short stories’ characters sin and act against God because they have no conception of how to act and whom to obey. Their disbelief or doubt in God drives them to the extreme reactions: some of them are pious ascetics, some hedonists indulging their slightest whims, and some doubters, living in suspense by their constant attempts to solve God’s nature dilemma (Zatlin 41). All of them cannot solve this insolvable problem of whom God is and whether He exists but they consider this problem constantly.

An example of the confusion Singer's characters face can be the story "Witch." The protagonist, the high school teacher, is blind in lust, but the theme of faith still sticks somewhere in his subconsciousness. Just after the death of his wife, Mark is involved in a love affair with his underage student. He listens calmly to the story told by his lover that she prayed for his wife's death. Outraged and fascinated by Bella's lascivious charm and apparition, he indulges in sex, even though he suspects that black magic is involved in the incident. Still, while sinning, Mark directs his thoughts to God:

He took her around and stumbled back to the bedroom, past the living room. The sun had risen and it cast a red glow through the windows. Bella's face seemed to be bathed in blood. Clusters of fire ignited within her eyes. He stood by her, half naked, and they stared into a mirror. He said, "If there is such a thing as black magic, maybe there is a God, too." ("Passions" 132)

Surprisingly enough, Singer's characters also consider the concept of the Godhead as if they were familiar with it. As it was already mentioned in Chapter One, all the worlds in the cosmic universe are emanations of the Godhead. According to Cabalists and Singer himself, God created the worlds from His own essence and either all the living creatures or inanimate objects come from the divine substance (The Hassidim 17). So the reality still represents the mind and the intelligence of the Demiurge. On the highest level of Creation the natural phenomena and human experience appear to have no ontological status. Singer explains in his interview, "In the higher worlds, says the Cabala, there is no free will because they [spirits] are so near God. The difference between them and God is not great enough that there should be temptations or desire for sin" (Farrell, Isaac Bashevis Singer 129). In several fragments of Singer's stories, the characters express the same thoughts as Cabala: "There is no death. How can there be death if everything is part

of Godhead? The soul never dies and the body is never alive,” confesses Meir in “Stories Behind the Stove” (“Stories Behind The Stove” 71). Similarly Professor Eisenschutz, conscious of God’s ubiquity, expresses his doubts:

There was a plan in nature even though it often appeared to us as total chaos. All of us were needed: Jews, Christians, Moslems, an Alexander the Great, a Charlemagne, a Napoleon, even Hitler. What can Godhead achieve by letting cat eat mouse, hawks kill rabbits, and Polish fraternity students attack Jews? (“Pigeons” 116)

Another consequence caused by the Cabalistic concept of the Godhead is the characters’ persistent search for truth. Pious Jews know the passages about the creation of the world from the Bible and try to obey the biblical precepts. However, the incapacity of understanding and encountering God causes never-ending religious and philosophical disputes. As a consequence of ideological discrepancies in the understanding of God, the characters, even those often sinning, become truth-seekers. Faith as a choice, goal and dilemma is the basic grounds for the stories. As Farrell notices, “The existence in each story of the character’s struggle to keep or to find faith forms the framework, the narration, the underlying conflict, or the atmosphere” (Farrell, “The Hidden God” 12). Likewise Zatlín states, “Singer predicates his fiction on the idea that the presence or absence of human faith in God is an eternal, omnipresent dilemma which the individual must resolve for himself, and he consistently shows that man’s fate after death, to be in Heaven or Hell, is directly correlated with his degree of faith in God” (Zatlín 40). Those people who choose the quest for truth are the strong-minded individuals, ready to risk their stable life and good fame to face the truth. At least several short stories display their pursuit for knowledge. The story “Zeidlus The Pope” shows the fall of Zeidlus whose

haughtiness makes him susceptible to the devil's temptations. Haughtiness is, however, not the only factor that contributes to Zeidlus's going astray from the right path; the Evil One reinforces Zeidlus's doubt concerning the nature of the world. Chazkele's persistent search for truth makes him crossed with community and drives him to blasphemy and insanity ("The Blasphemer"). The protagonists of the story "Zeitl and Rickel" kill themselves because of their curiosity of the life after death; and since suicide is a misdemeanor according to Jewish law, they cannot enjoy heavenly rest and wander restlessly on the earth. For those characters, knowledge, however, seems to be of more importance than the salvation promised by traditional Judaism.

Truth becomes for the narrator and for the characters the most important value. The word "truth" is frequent in narration and dialogues. The majority of stories contain in their conclusion a succinct mention or an allusion on the subject of the true nature of reality and man. Examples of such statements are numerous throughout the stories. "There is no death, there isn't any. We live forever, and we love forever. This is pure truth"—says Mrs. Kopitzky in "The Séance" ("The Séance" 15). "Heaven and earth have sworn that the truth shall remain forever hidden," admits the narrator of "The Dead Fiddler" ("The Dead Fiddler" 63). "What will chickens not do to avoid the truth?" asks ironically the roster alluding to the world of human beings too ("Cock-a-doodle-doo" 94). In the conclusion of "The New Year Party," one of the characters says, "only God knows the whole truth" ("The New Year Party" 180).

Not only do Singer and the narrator change opinions about world and life frequently, but the characters change their beliefs and are seduced by the different experiences of truth as well. For instance, Akhsa from "A Crown of Feathers" wants the knowledge about the real nature of world, so she listens to the voices of her departed

grandfathers and finds in her pillow the Crown of Feathers, a sign of truth for her. Akhsa discovers a small cross attached to the crown, which is a clue the Catholic faith is a true religion. She baptizes herself and eventually marries a gentile. Several years later, having realized that she committed a mortal sin by converting to Christianity, Akhsa immerses herself in extreme ascetism to redeem her sins and, eventually, she dies. In her last hours Akhsa tries to rip another pillow in search for the Crown of Feathers. Eventually, the town people cannot understand this and wonder why Akhsa did such a thing. At the end of the story the narrator concludes, “if there is such a thing as truth it is as intricate and hidden as a crown of feathers” (“Crown of Feathers” 30). Singer comments to this statement by saying that the truth not always exists, and, even when someone sees it, the truth already dissolves after a moment (Farrell, Isaac Bashevis Singer 140).

The inability to meet God and truth in the world is not only the consequence of God’s lack of image but also comes from the ambiguity of creation. The process of the beginning of the world is described in the Cabalistic theory of *Tzimtzum* or contraction. Singer describes the process of *Tzimtzum*:

The Cabala says how could He have created the world if He [God] filled the world Himself. So according to the Cabala He had to create a vacuum in Himself. Then there could be space for creation. And He sent out a beam of his own light and this beam went through a process of evolution....The nearer this beam of light was to God the greater it was. Then it became cooler and lower and the very last process of creation is the material world, the stars, the earth, the sun and man. Here in this world God has become matter. (136)

In such a theory, God emanates through sefirot and does not act Himself, so He does not control the process of emanation and does not create the lower worlds directly. During the process of emanation, the sefirot enters a vessel in order to take form. The vessels cannot contain light, so they break and the light disperses all directions uncontrollably (Farrell, From Exile to Redemption 14). God then does not participate in the act of Creation completely; part of this process occurs itself. Therefore, matter originated in the Demiurge's act is and simultaneously is not His product. Moreover, as Farrell notices, either the contraction or the dispersion of light causes the appearance of evil forces (31). Creation, as coming to existence of something other than God, must contain an element of imbalance, defectiveness and darkness (Scholem, On the Mystical 83). Evil exists potentially in God, as Singer mentions it in one of his interviews: "Actually God does not have to fight Satan. If God would want, Satan would disappear in a second. The only thing is Satan must be here, because without Satan the material world could not exist. [. . .] Since God wanted us to have free will this means that Satan, in other words the principle of Evil, must exist" (Farrell, Isaac Bashevis Singer 139). Consequently, in Singer's short stories the world follows the Cabalistic description of the universe: "Somewhere above the World of Deeds, above the constellations, angels were flying, and Seraphim, and Holy Wheels, and holy Beasts. In Paradise, the mysteries of the Torah were revealed to souls. [. . .] The nearer to the throne of Glory, the brighter the light, the purer the radiance, the fewer the unholy host ("The Slaughterer" 21).

The existence of Evil in the world, and in Singer's settings, is a consequence of *Tzimtzum*. The Cabalistic conception of evil differs considerably depending on the school

of Cabala. The various Cabalistic schools have in common the definition of evil as a special ontological domain, often described as being subordinate to the world of the Godhead and sometimes even as part of it. “Within the framework of the theory of the sefirot, the Cabalists see the root of evil, sometimes even the world of evil itself, as being rooted in the Godhead. [...] The view of evil as a system of powers paralleling those of the Divine world and as being engaged in a struggle with it, is to be found in the ZOHAR” (“Good and Evil” 243-44). The demonic world of evil that forms the dark side of everything living and threatens it from within creates the so-called the “other” or “the left side” (Scholem, Major Trends 239).

The Cabalistic notion of the ubiquity of evil forces, expressed in the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*, enters the imagery of Singer’s fiction. As Farrell notices, Singer purposefully uses the mythological or customary attributes of sacrum, especially of Christian provenience, to show them in adverse order.

Throughout his works Singer subverts Christian images, using them as icons of messianic delusion. Here the birth at Betleem is transmuted into a macabre eruption of evil. Mary’s vision, which revealed that she would become the mother of the Messiah by the Holy Spirit, becomes a dream of rape by a fiendish monster. In a malefic inversion of the conception and birth of Christ, “Satan enters into the body of a daughter of the Jews,” and amid an account, which parodies the language of the New Testament, a dybbuk, instead of Messiah, is born. Singer’s devils invade the world, and with a power co-extensive with that of the Creator of

order they recreate the cosmos in their own diabolical image and likeness. (Farrell, “The Hidden God” 78)

The display of perverted, devilish events creates an impression of instability and dread. Someone can have an impression that the events have already taken place in Gehenna. The pictures of horrors are, however, intertwined with everydayness, and this fact also misleads the characters and readers, giving them inconsistent perceptions of reality. In “The Black Wedding,” the reality is double; Hindele can see both the ordinary world and the evil hidden behind it:

Although she saw herself sitting in her mother’s living room, she knew she was really in a forest. It appeared to be light, but she knew it was dark. She was surrounded by Chassidim with fur hats and satin gabardines, as well as by women who wore silk bonnets and velvet capes, but she knew it was all imaginary and that the fancy garments his heads grown with elf-locks, goose-feet, inhuman navels, long snouts. (“Black Wedding” 30)

The reception of the reality is ambiguous: one can see an ordinary wedding scene, while another person is able to notice the black wedding. The intertwining motifs of normality and hellish scenes cause greater confusion and oblivion in some stories and their plots. This reflects not only the incomprehensibility of truth but also its ambiguity.

Following the Cabalistic depictions of the world, evil dominates the good in the short stories; The Cabalistic doctrine of *Tzimtzum* gives rise in Singer’s short fiction to various devils, as transmitters and embodiments of evil forces. Cabala is certainly a source for their pictures in Singer’s stories. Singer mentions at least several categories of devils, beginning from imps to Satan³. In Singer’s fiction, Satan is the personification of both demonic forces and an internal temptation inside man (“Satan” 443). In theoretical

and practical Cabala Satan is conjured up as the supernatural figure that hates and harms Jews. In Singer's stories, just like for some Cabalists, Satan is identified with Sammael, the most popular devil in Cabala and the husband of Lilith, the queen of demons. Satan-Sammael has the ability to fly, so he can control the otherworld and the earth at the same time. It is believed that Sammael has one long hair in his navel, and as long as his hair remains intact, his reign will be continued ("Sammael" 721). According to Zohar, has crossed eyes, horns and dark hair. He is often portrayed as riding on Lilith in the sexual intercourse. Some sources relate that Sammael and Lilith govern some sefirot of the left, evil side of emanation (721). The name Sammael is often used in practical Cabala.

In Singer's fiction, Satan plays several functions. According to Buchen, Satan creates a possibility of God and of belief (132). The same thought, of evil as a confirmation of God's existence, is announced by one of Singer's characters, Zeidlus ("Zeidlus the Pope" 189). Another function of Satan is to manipulate people and motivate them to commit bad deeds. Satan narrates a few stories that can lead to the conclusion that Satan's (Sammael's) foreknowledge and omnipotence are superior in comparison to other devils. According to his stories, he assisted two liars in their mutual slanders and mean actions ("A Tale of Two Liars"); Sammael also tempted the protagonist from "The Unseen."

In Singer's stories Satan is mentioned in various contexts, yet his primary functions, aside from the habit of imposing temptations on people, are aimed at marriages. The example of the Satanic action against marriage in Singer's fiction can be "The Black Wedding." Hindele, while being wed to the devil, remembers the story of the famous Cabalist Joseph De La Rinah who fell because he felt compassion for Satan and gave him a pinch of tobacco. Hindele attempts not to utter any kind word to Satan, since

it is “equivalent to sacrificing idols” (“The Black Wedding” 31). Satan embodied by Reb Simon of Yampol imitates humans in all manners and performs all the acts of a groom. He even put a knife and a Book of Creation under the pillow on his marriage bed, yet his purpose is to cause Hindele to give birth to the next devil. In “The Unseen,” Satan corrupts a long lasting marriage. In “The Destruction of Kreshev” the Evil One does the same, and finally he confesses that the majority of his actions are intended at the destruction of marriages, so Satan appears on every wedding ceremony (181).

From other stories, it is further possible to infer that Sammael is a kind of executor of bad deeds people committed in their earthly existence. Sometimes the narrator mentions, “Sammael does what is required of him (“The Riddle” 137). The other statements show it is Sammael that can be even an assistant of God; in the story “The Destruction of Kreshev,” Sammael confesses, “I, evil spirit, tried to tempt grief-stricken father from the path of righteousness and to fill his spirit with melancholy, for that is the purpose for which the Creator sent me down to earth” (“The Destruction of Kreshev” 213). This phenomenon complies with the Hassidic and Cabalistic notion that evil is only a part of good and it does not exist itself.

Singer similarly reinforces the notion that Satan is necessary, “Actually God does not have to fight Satan. If God would want, Satan would disappear in a second. Without Satan the material world could not exist. [. . .] And since God wanted us to have free will this means that Satan, in other words the principle of evil, must exist” (Farrell, Isaac Bashevis Singer 139). Furthermore, according to the quotation from “Shidah and Kuziba,” Satan, Asmodeus, Lilith and all the other evil powers maintain creation. They constitute the left, dark side of reality without which the world could not exist (“Shidah and Kuziba” 95).

Asmodeus⁴ or Asmedai is the main devil in Singer's short stories. Asmodeus is frequently spoken about in Singer's short stories. According to the narrator of "The Black Wedding," Asmodeus lives together with Namach, Machlath and Hurmizah in his own castle in the middle of the earth. Asmodeus is oftentimes referred to by minor devils. When someone, just like Hindele from "The Black Wedding", commits the highest crime, he/she falls to the lowest Gehenna in Asmodeus's kingdom. For the people who inhabit Asmodeus's kingdom, either the earthly world or the future life in Paradise is lost forever. Asmodeus is oftentimes referred to by minor devils. He is an uncle of one of them, the other, actually a human being acting as a devil, mentions that his mother had the honor of being his servant ("The Mirror," "Taibele and Her Demon"). Characteristically, the devils speak about Asmodeus while seducing women; it seems as if they were trying to recall the one who is famous for his sexual abilities. Generally, Asmodeus plays a similar function to Satan; however, his abilities and knowledge are inferior to Satan. On the other hand, Asmodeus seems to be more popular devil in Singer's fiction.

Lilith is a female demon designated as a main feminine evil force in Jewish demonology.⁵ In Singer's stories, Lilith also plays a prominent role. First, Lilith is a queen of demons. Lilith seems to be a female foil to Satan in her motivating people to sin. Satan, however, acts in manly way, and Lilith performs more female duties. Second, the traits attributed to Lilith, point to her femininity and sexual promiscuity; however, officially she is a wife of either Sammael or sometimes Asmodeus. Third, Lilith, similarly to Sammael, is connected to God. For His love of Lilith, God created the last of the worlds ("Shidah and Kuziba" 90). Singer frequently mentions that Lilith is a mistress of lesser devils. She teaches them their skills and disposes rewards for their good work.

In the story “Taibele and Her Demon,” Alchanon, while pretending to be a devil, tells his lover the greatest honor he experienced, for his attainments Lilith chose him as a dancer.

The middle category of devils is a group of those who are not the sovereigns, yet are well known and dangerous in the Cabalistic lore. They usually can be found in mythology and inhabit abodes in the underworld. Among the most frequently used by Singer are Namach and Machlath, who are thought to be the mothers of demons along with Lilith. Machlath is a famous dancer and mother of Agrath. They live in strife with Lilith. “Lilith is accompanied by four hundred and eighty hosts of evil spirits and destroying angles, and she is constantly howling. Machlath is accompanied by four hundred and seventy-eight hosts of evil spirits” (Rappaport 77). Each she-devil has her paramount during a certain time of year or a day of a week. In the category of middle devil spirits, archfiends or arch-devils can be rated, however, this name is always a synonym used for Sammael by the narrator. The prefix “arch” indicates that these words refer to the fallen angels who, after having been expelled from Heaven, joined Sammael as devils (Rappaport 56 and “Demons” 1527). Another Cabalistic character mentioned by Singer is Ketev Mriri. This demon is actually a lesser devil, mostly dangerous during the period of mourning from the 17th of Tammuz to the ninth of Av (1528). His presence in Singer’s stories could be a result of local customs from the Bilgoray region in Poland, where Singer had lived and visited his family. Singer also lists several other names, without indication to the sources of their origin. Nonetheless, they seem to be accepted from Cabalistic books (Siegel 17).

The third group of devils resembles the traditional image of evil creatures. They do not inhabit the netherworld but fill the space of the sky between heaven and earth and around the moon (“Demons” 1530). They act on the earth mainly before midnight. Their

main purpose is to make fun of people or to tell humans lies about the future, sometimes with the help of dreams and illusions (1530). Such is their role in Singer's fiction. For example, in the story "The Mirror," the devil appears to Zirel in a mirror. Apparently, Zirel is confused as to she sees a reflection and finally she thinks the incident may have been a daydream. The devil is successful in seducing Zirel because he tells her good future and acts on her oblivious need to love.

In Singer's fiction, just like in traditional images, all the evil creatures have strong sexual urges. "At times, they gather on a particular mountain near the mountains of Darkness, where they have sexual intercourse with Sammael. This is reminiscent of the Witches' Sabbath in Christian demonology. Male and female witches also gather at this place, devote themselves to similar deeds, and learn the art of witchcraft from the arch-devils" (1530-1531). The extensive sexual lust is a distinctive trait of all categories of devils in Singer's fiction.

The lower class of devils has a lesser consciousness than the main demons. Singer shows them as the ones who have undergo a special training to be able to perform their duties. In the story "From The Diary of One Not Born," the protagonist, a little demon, causes the banknote of five thousand gulden owned by a pair of poor Jews to be cast into the fire. Asmodeus praises him for this act and Lilith foretells him a good future. Over time, one who was not born becomes a mature devil that can fly, just like devils in the Cabalistic perception, and he acquires the figure of man. Then he decides to corrupt a woman. He marries her, mocks her during the wedding night, announces to the whole community that she was not a virgin, takes all her money from her as a reparation for her alleged misconduct and leaves the poor woman forever. The woman commits suicide. For this action, the devil is rewarded and promoted for further training by Machlath.

The lowest category of evil forces includes hobgoblins, werewolves, imps, giants, ghosts, phantoms, and lantuchs. In majority of cases they do not come directly from Cabala, yet they are the product of Hassidic mind. These creatures are often local residents and usually support the higher devils in their actions. For instance, in “The Black Wedding,” the little devilish creatures help Sammael conduct the ceremony: imps held candles, hobgoblins perform the wedding rites, the evil spirit in the likeness of Reb Simon steps on the bride’s foot with his hoof, so that he may rule her, and a witch dances towards the bride carrying a braided bread (“The Black Wedding” 31-32).

In contrast to devilish forces, angels are almost absent in Singer’s fiction. Apparently, in the lowest of the worlds, the good forces do not act as effectively as the evil ones. Cabalistic angelology is underrepresented in Singer’s fiction. Apart from some funny angelic characters, showed more as caricatures than real angels, the only angels mentioned in the stories are Gabriel and the angel of forgetfulness Dumah, yet they actually do not take any action; the only angel that performs his traditional duties such as seeing off the deceased to Paradise or to Hell is the Angel of Death. In fact, in either popular or Cabalistic tradition, he is more often associated with Sammael than with God (“Angel of Death” 953). Thus, the Angel’s of Death actions are more support for devils and demons than an actual angelic task. It seems to be true that in the lowest and the worst of worlds angels cannot act because evil forces suppress them.

The doctrine of the Godhead and *Tzimtzum* causes Singer’s setting to be an insecure and hellish place in which the good forces cannot fight the ubiquitous evil. Another one of Singer’s signs of decadence implied by *Tzimtzum* and the metaphor of Cabalistic Fallen World is also a slaughtering of animals (Farrell, From Exile to Redemption 53). Singer, a vegetarian and animal lover, compares the slaughtering of

animals to Holocaust (Farrell, Isaac Bashevis Singer 167). The traditional Judaism advises treating animals with respect and mercy. For instance, it is forbidden to kill animals from the same family on one day. The Sefer Chasidim (The Book of Pious) states, “Be kind and compassionate to all creatures that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in this world. Never beat or inflict pain on any animal, beast, bird, or insect. Do not throw stones at a dog or a cat, nor kill flies or wasps” (qtd. Ausubel The Book of Jewish 6). The reason for this was the fact that God created animals and they possess certain spirituality. Developed by Cabalists, the doctrine of transmigration emphasizes this precept. Jewish tradition reports that several animals achieved immortality in Paradise without death (“Angel of Death” 953). In a few stories, for instance in “The Parrot,” “The Slaughterer,” and “The Phantom,” Singer admits that animals have souls. Singer also notices that the souls of saints often transmigrate into the bodies of cows, fowl, and fish to do penance for some offense (“The Slaughterer” 18). In the story “Cock-a-doodle-doo,” the rooster gives a terrible account of human ruthlessness. The animal is the next reincarnation of the rooster, who sat on King Solomon’s chair, can speak several languages and is spiritually more advanced than barbaric people. The rooster knows Cabalistic magic. In his linguistic act of uttering “cock-a-doodle-doo,” he finds the resolution of all existential secrets and questions. His scream is just like a repetition of God’s creation. “The rooster may die but not the cock-a-doodle-doo. We were crowing long before Adam and, God willing, we’ll go on crowing long after all slaughterers and chicken-gluttons have been laid down.... No butcher in the world can destroy us” (“Cock-a-doodle-doo” 86-87). Secret knowledge is and unclear for people but can be accessible for animals: the rooster knows the magical name of his own cock-a-doodle-doo, which contains all the wisdom of the Cabala. Finally, one day the comprehension of

universe is given to him. He becomes a chosen one who understands the oneness of the world and crossed the border of life and death:

Everything I know I learned that night. I can't reveal the secrets—
my tongue is tied—but there is a cock-a-doodle-doo, which rights
every wrong, forgives every sin, and straightens all crookedness.
Everything is cock-a-doodle-doo: butcher and fowl; knife and
throat; feathers and plucker; the blood in the veins and the blood in
the ditch. (93) ⁵

The utmost manifestation of evil forces is the appearance of a false Messiah for Singer. The doctrine of the Messiah has been the hope of the Jewish masses for centuries. Along with the appearance of the Messiah, eternal peace will govern on the earth, and all the people will be accepted to paradise. This doctrine inspired a great messianic outburst and produced a religious stirring and confusion in a form of Sabbatianism (Scholem, On the Mystical 242). Singer, horrified by the psychological trauma and moral bearing the false Messiah, Sabbatai Zevi, had on the Eastern European Jewry, often puts all the historical cataclysms in a perspective of a mass delusion. Singer's stories demonstrate that Singer has a fear of seduction by the devil in a form of a false prophet or of the religious blindness caused by the acceptance of a phony cult. Thousands of Jews experience the extreme disaster and distress due to the false prophecies of Sabbatai Zevi. Many pious followers of the false Messiah died.

Satan, in a body of a Messiah, appears also in Singer's short stories. In "The Gentleman from Cracow," the impoverished Jewish community becomes blind to the acts of Gentleman from Cracow who seemingly solves all their material problems. The pious Jews forget about the Torah precepts and organize a ball to help the gentile Gentleman

from Cracow to marry one of their daughters. The inhabitants of Frampol become so hypnotized by the sudden vision of improving their existence that they cease to respect the advice of their Rabbi Ozer. Nobody suspects the newcomer to be evil because people are befuddled by money. Finally, nobody protests when the Gentleman from Cracow organizes the devilish orgy.

After each drawing, the newly engaged couple, hand in hand, approached the doctor to collect the dowry and wedding gift. As he had promised, the gentleman from Cracow gave each the stipulated sum of ducats, and on the neck of each bride he hung a strand of pearls. Now the mothers, unable to restrain their joy, began to dance and shout. The fathers stood by, bewildered. When the girls lifted their dresses to catch the gold coins given by the doctor, their legs and underclothing were exposed, which sent the men into paroxysm of lust. Fiddles screeched, drums pounded, trumpets blared. The uproar was deafening. Twelve-year-old boys were mated with “spinsters” of nineteen. The sons of substantial citizens took the daughters of paupers as brides; midgets were coupled with giants, beauties with cripples. (“The Gentleman from Cracow” 37)

The description of Satan’s party fits the doctrine of Judaism. “According to tradition, God, not man, decides when the Messiah will come and his decision is motivated either by his sense of justice or compassion. Man in turn is free to create the conditions for God’s action. The Messiah will come either when the world is so righteous that it deserves redemption and God grants it out of his justice, or when the world becomes so evil and is suffering so intense that it needs redemption and God grants it out

of his compassion” (Buchen 135). Therefore, Rabbi Ozer, perceiving the Satanist party as the extreme sinful act and hearing “a clamor of shouts and songs that resembled the howling of wild beasts,” believes that the Messiah is close: “Has the world come to an end? Or have I failed to hear the ram’s horn heralding the Messiah? Has He arrived?” (“Gentleman From Cracow” 40).

The apocalyptic quality of Singer’s vision is emphasized by the descriptions of the sudden influx of the supernatural, devilish creatures such as witches, werewolves, imps, demons, hobgoblins and the Cabalistic devils. The picture of devastating fire completes the vision of mass destruction. Singer’s moral message is simple: the worst thing that can happen to man is his adherence to heresy.

For example, Sabbatai Zevi, the great historical false Messiah, is for Singer almost a synonym for evil forces and a black magic. His name is for Singer a synonym of Satan. Throughout Singer’s fiction, Sabbatai Zevi’s name is always mentioned in the meaning of the highest evil and deception. In “The Crown of Feathers,” it is the ghost of grandmother, the student of Sabbatai Zevi, who befuddles Akhsa. Sabbatai Zevi can possess someone just as *dybbuk* (“A Tale of Two Liars”). Finally, Sabbatai Zevi’s name, as the one who encouraged Jews to sin by a way of spreading impurity, is pronounced with a care similar to Satan. In “Errors” one of the characters says, “I forgot to mention that in some of his [Sabbatai Zevi follower’s] phylacteries he had written the names of demons as well as the name of the false Messiah, Sabbatai Zevi-may it be blotted out” (“Errors” 49). Even many hundred years after his death, the false Messiah still is a danger for the Jewish community. This situation has a place in the story “The Destruction of Kreshev.” Beautiful, young, intelligent, educated and wealthy Lise decides to marry poor and unattractive scholar in hope that he resolves her existential problems. With the help

of Satan, the narrator of the story, Lise falls in love with her husband Shloimele, loses critical reception of reality and indulges in pervert sexual practices, seemingly taken out of Cabala. Finally, it becomes obvious that Shloimele is a student of Sabbatai Zevi:

For even though the False Messiah was long dead, secret cults of his followers remained in many lands. They met at fairs and markets, recognized each other through secret signs and thus remained safe from the wrath of the other Jews who would excommunicate them. Many rabbis, teachers, ritual slaughterers and other ostensibly respectable folk were included in this sect. Some of them posed as miracle workers, wandering from town to town passing out amulets into which they had introduced not the sacred name of God but unclean names of dogs and evil spirits, Lilith and Asmodeus as well as the name of Sabbatai Zevi himself. (“The Destruction of Kreshev” 188)

For Singer, the students of Sabbatai Zevi also tend to cause disgrace to the communities. They believed that the way to redeem the world is to tend to the extreme purity or corruption (“Errors” 50-51). They tortured themselves in never-ending “religious practices,” and corrupted the precept of the Torah and Cabala by a wrong application or misinterpretation of them (“The Destruction of Kreshev” 189). Shloimele uses his scholarly background to weaken, confuse and corrupt Lise; finally, Lise convinced about her past life destiny begins the affair with Mendel the Coachman. Their sinning causes Kreshev to experience God’s rage in the form of constant disasters attacking the town. To cease God’s punishment, Shloimele confesses his sins and his partaking in the sins of others. Shloimele also admits that his actions are caused by his faith in the false messiah

and the Sabbatian belief that “an excess in degradation meant greater sanctity” and that “the more heinous the wickedness the closer the day of redemption” (201).

The story of Kreshev displays Singer’s conviction about the greatest danger for human minds, namely their naïve following of a faith and ideology. According to Irving Buchen, Satan always-s tries to persuade man to accept any extremism. The simplicity of extreme beliefs absolves man from a danger of free will (Gittleman 209). Being subordinated to any form of cult or ideology indicates for Singer the relationship with evil forces.

Following the false messiahs happens repeatedly in the fallen world. The affliction of the human mind in heresy can be of different type. As Buchen puts it, “times may change and Messiahs may alter; the Messianic impulse may assume different and even more respectable utopian forms—Marxism, Zionism, scientific perfectibility. But to Singer these are merely variations on a eternal formula” (Buchen 141). The stories set in Poland usually display the picture of Jews converting to Christianity and their pitiful end, as in the stories such “The Crown of Feathers” or “Zeidlus the Pope.” Another example, the story “The Bishop’s Robe” tells how two Jews are driven to suicide because of their involvement in a phony cult. Two lonely, old and sick people put their trust in the new Gospel delivered by their neighbor. After having been cheated and deprived of all their money, they discover that death becomes the only their means to sustain their good reputation.

The doctrines of *Shu’ir Komah* and *Tzimtzum* have a primary and basic influence on the setting of Singer’s stories. They explain all the processes that have shaped reality in Singer’s fiction and set the major concerns of his stories. *Shu’ir Komah* explains the problem of inapproachability of God and any truth concerning the nature of Demiurge

and the world. This doctrine also tells why the search for truth and epiphany has become the main purpose for people in the fallen world. *Tzimtzum* develops the philosophical ambiguity of *Shu'ir Komah* in Singer's fiction. *Tzimtzum* further explains the possibility and impossibility to believe in God and sanctions the existence of the evil forces. Thanks to the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*, one can understand that evil, according to the Cabalists and just as in Singer's fiction, is a necessary component of the world and constitutes the other side of the good. Finally, knowing of difficulties in learning the truth about reality, Singer warns against easy solutions in the form of phony cults or belief in various "messiahs." The Cabalistic idea of Messiah undergoes a deep revision in Singer's fiction.

Chapter 3

As the two doctrines of *Shu'ir Komah* and *Tzimtzum* help create the philosophical and ideological basis for the construction of Singer's stories, they also determine the stories' artistic shape and the course of their plots. Other Cabalistic doctrines have less of an influence on Singer's short stories, yet they play significant functions in their settings. Ideologically, these minor doctrines provide some explanation and structure for the events and the actions of characters in the stories and counterweigh the main doctrines of *Shu'ir Mahon* and *Tzimtzum*. Singer intends the ideological controversy, or rather the diversity of the stories. Doctrines of soul, reincarnation, and *Kawwanah* are in a certain opposition to ambiguity, chaos and befuddlement. They make the world rather orderly and consistent rather than chaotic and erratic. These doctrines explain the process of retribution and rewards for humans along with the causality of incidents in the plots of Singer's stories.

The fact that these four doctrines oppose the first two doctrines, since they move the fiction toward order, not a disorder, make the short stories appear even more complex. These doctrines are often expressed indirectly and denied immediately after being expressed, influencing the setting in an indirect way. Simultaneously, the doctrines are hidden behind confusion implied by the *Tzimtzum* and *Shu'ir Komah*. It is possible that, as in Cabalistic interpretation, the truth about reality in the fallen world has to be concealed. Finally, the doctrine of the *Shekhinah* is more complex. It not only gives an explanation for the status quo in Singer's setting, but also sheds some light on another component of his settings: the union of the feminine and masculine as an essence of reality. The Cabalistic theory of *Shekhinah* elucidates the ubiquity of sexual lust as a motivation for human actions. *Shekhinah* is a theory of a female element as a counterpart

of the male element in the universe, a mystical union of feminine and masculine through which the birth of matter occurs. *Shekhinah* elucidates the ubiquity of sexual lust as a motivation for human actions. *Shekhinah* is a theory of a female element as a component of a male element in the universe. Thanks to the mystical union of feminine and masculine the birth of a matter occurs.

First, as the element that elevates and acculturates an individual man is the soul, Cabalism prescribes a great importance to the occult development of soul. The belief in the existence of soul is noticeable in Singer's prose and underpins a number of Cabalistic theories. The soul originates on the plan higher than angels and can lead man to liberation. Soul evolves downward and enters the body of a man to enable a man to fulfill special tasks and ease his spiritual development ("Kabbalah" Encyclopedia Judaica). Soul is immortal and contains five different, principal elements. The elements the soul consists of are life, spirit and psyche and two higher instances which only a spiritually advanced individual can have.

Singer's short stories mention the concept of soul frequently. Singer also seems to discern the particular components of soul. For example, in the story, "Something Is There," the Rabbi listens to the thanksgiving hymn Jews sing to God:

"Oh, my God, the soul which you gavest me is pure; Thou didst create it, Thou didst form it, though breathe it into me; Thou preservest it within me; and Thou wilt take it from me but wilt restore it unto me hereafter..." "A lie, brazen lie," something in the rabbi exclaimed. "All have the same spirit—a man, an animal".

("Something is There" 292)

Rabbi Nechemia does not believe that animals have souls; he means the lower part of a soul—spirit, which is common for a man and a beast. The rabbi lost his faith in human exceptionality and any purposefulness of human life.

Also, in “The Chimney Sweep,” the narrator states, “the brain is full of all sorts of little doors and chambers. Sometimes a knock on the head upsets the whole business. Still, all of it has to do with the soul. Without the soul, the head would be no wiser than the foot” (“The Chimney Sweep” 132). Here the narrator alludes to the notion of soul as psyche. It is soul that makes a human being a conscious individual, without a soul man, for Singer, would be only biological organism driven by its instincts.

Finally, in numerous stories the soul departs the body after death, so it can be classified as an entity giving life to the body. The moment of death is a separation of soul and body:

You should know that when a person dies his soul does not go up to heaven at once. It flutters at the nostrils and longs to enter the body again, it’s so used to being there. If someone screams and carries on, it may take fright and fly back in, but it seldom remains long, because it cannot stay inside a body ruined by disease. (“The Man Who Came Back” 125)

The existence of soul is so important that it can be used as a metaphor for all short stories. According to Zatlin, Singer’s characters can be viewed as allegorical figures, working towards a resolution of the dilemma of faith. Their necessity of choice between good and evil accounts for their lack of psychological probing (Zatlin 41). Since they are missing psychological motivation, such characters’ inner conflicts are displayed in a

perspective of moral values, so there is a greater focus on ethics and soul than on feelings and motivations. Zatlin calls these stories soul dramas rather than psyche dramas (41).

The belief in the soul's development becomes a basis for the Cabalistic doctrines of reincarnation. Singer believed in reincarnation himself (Cranston and Williams 180). The doctrine of *Gilgul*, the concept of the soul's reappearing after the death in new incarnation, is of Cabalistic origin and was found in the texts from the twelfth century ("Reincarnation" 546). The doctrine of reincarnation can explain Singer's complex causality; in some cases when the actions of evil forces affect righteous people, reincarnation may suggest that these are the results of previous bad deeds.

In the initial stage of the development of *Gilgul*, the Cabalists believed that only the souls of diabolical people reincarnate in new bodies as a punishment for their sins. In Isaac Luria's theory, animals can also transmigrate. Luria's student, R. Hayyim Vital, elaborated his doctrine into a more systematic dogma. According to Vital, each soul contains five parts migrating from body to body independently in search of its improvement called *Tikkun* (547). Every soul is then a combination of different souls that lived somewhere in the past. In earlier theories a human being was to incarnate into a man or higher level of hierarchy of being; Luria's school claims that a human soul can also reappear in animals.

Singer seems to be a follower of Luria's theory. In the story "Jechid and Jechidah," Singer draws a picture of the fate the soul encounters in its existence. The protagonist Jechidah falls into a lower world of earthly existence to purify her soul; too strong an attachment to her lover, to jealousy, and to an acceptance of her lover's faulty, skeptic, modernist views, causes Jechidah to have to purify her wrongdoings. After the redemption she can come back to the world of her origin.

Another similarity is the fact that in Singer's setting, just like in Luria's doctrine, people can transmigrate into animals' bodies. This is illustrated in the story "The Warehouse," which is full of humor and irony in its description of the otherworld, in which the characters speculate about their future incarnations:

"If I become a man, I won't stint my wife. I'll give her anything she wants. If you ever become a woman, you'll find out what pleases women"... "What do you want to be?" The whore asked. "I don't want to be anyone," the miser answered. "Perhaps they will make you a woman." "For all I care, they can make me a flea." ("The Warehouse" 129)

Being reincarnated into an animal does not mean a fall to the lower world. The ritual slaughterer realizes that some of the animals killed by him can be the souls of the holy men, who just redeem their misdemeanors:

When you slaughter an animal with a pure knife and with piety, you liberate the soul that resides in it. For it is well known that the souls of saints often transmigrate into the bodies of cows, fowl, and fish to do penance for some offense. ("The Slaughterer"18)

In Singer's stories there are also the cases when a part of someone's body transmigrates to another person. The painter in "The Captive" copies the works and paints the new pictures under his late friend's name in order to survive in the harsh economical conditions. He feels to be an incarnation of his friend and, therefore, does not believe the transgression occurs with his signing the friend's pictures. ("The Captive" 51-52). The opportunity to be in part of someone else suggests that one can have only the fifth part, or more, of the other person's soul to develop his traits. The same occurs in "A

Tale of Two Sisters:” The sisters resemble each other more than their ties of blood indicate. “One thing both sisters shared is a complete lack of common sense. Actually, they shared many traits. At times it even seemed to me that they were two bodies with one soul,” says the narrator of the story (“A Tale of Two Sisters” 187). Two siblings can have parts of their souls taken from the other person.

Since a soul can enter an individual with his own soul, it sometimes happens that the souls of the dead look for other bodies. This type of possession of the living man by the soul of a wicked person who died is called *dybbuk*. According to Cabalists, the soul of the righteous person can join the body of another person to strengthen its good qualities. In a later period, however, the entering of a wicked soul happens more often and the fact facilitating such a possession is the sin committed by the object of *dybbuk's* action (“Dybbuk”).

In Singer’s fiction, the possessed person is usually a woman, and the *dybbuk* is a soul of someone whose sins or a great attachment keep him in the material world (McIntyre 230). A few stories developed on the theme of possession by a *dybbuk* display the motif of young, unmarried girls who by their spiritual alienation and hidden suffering become an easy goal for *dybbuks*. “The Dead Fiddler” gives an account of the traits and habits of *dybbuks*. *Dybbuks* cause a split in personality of the possessed: Yentl, the female character from the story, sometimes speaks her own voice; the other time she articulates the *dybbuks* words. The bodies inhabited by *dybbuks* are immersed in lethargy and tend to be physically exhausted. They can be susceptible to the possession by another soul; thus another, female *dybbuk* enters Yentl and cohabitates with the first *dybbuk* of the dead fiddler in Yentl’s body. The *dybbuks* cause the unhappy girl to scream and vehemently demand alcohol. Being dangerous for people hinges however on their

omniscience. The *dybbuk* of the dead fiddler recites the sins of the whole community endangering the community's unity. The female *dybbuk*, Bente Tslove, also knows her previous incarnations. "She said she had wandered for eighty years in waste places. She had been reincarnated as a cat, a turkey, a snake, and a locust. For a long time her soul resided in a turtle" ("The Dead Fiddler" 42). *Dybbuks* keep all the community in a constant tension by calling them names and performing devilish acts, such as black weddings, which expose the people to the danger of mortal sin.

The story "Esther Kreindel the Second" is an example of the first type of possession, when a virtuous individual wants to disseminate his good actions by extending his /her life into another existence. A pious and beloved community matron enters the body of a young girl, Simmele, not to harm her but to take care of the deceased earthly affairs and to continue the activities for the good of others. The possession happens with the acceptance of Simmele: "having heard Esther Kriedel spoken of all her life as the wealthy, satisfied, and adored mater familias of a large clan, she [Simmele] wakes up the morning after the older woman's death and announces that she is now Esther Kriedel, returned to comfort her grieving husband and children" (Penn 77).

In numerous other stories the term, *dybbuk*, is used as a metaphor for bizarre phenomena such as strange voices, obsessions, and lusts. In "The Admirer," a woman who visits her favorite writer feels like a "*dybbuk* entered her" because she has such a good contact with the man she knows only from his books; in "The Yearning Heifer," the heifer gives a talk resembling a *dybbuk's* voice. In "The Witch," Mark is obsessed with sexual desire driven by compulsion, or, as it might be described in Jewish terms, possessed by a *dybbuk* ("The Witch" 120).

The Cabala also propagates the theory of various sins punished by particular incarnations. A man acquires a body and personality according to previous merits or misdemeanors (“Reincarnation” 418). The next life gives one the opportunity to purify the soul and develop spiritually or to indulge in sin and to contribute by it to future redemption. Singer often refers to the cleansing mission of the soul in the earthly existence. For example, in the humorous and ironic story “The Warehouse,” the adulterous woman learns that she has to be punished for her immoral conduct prior to her next incarnation:

Take your card and leave. You were a wanton for eighteen years; you’ll be chaste now for exactly the same amount of time. If not, you will return again, a double hunchback, one in the front and one in the rear. ... Since you must correct the errors you made in your former existence, you will not be exactly a beauty. The body you receive will make your task easier. (“The Warehouse 130”)

Finally, another doctrine that has an influence on Singer’s fiction is called *Shekhinah*. The term contains various meanings often determined by the historical development of Cabalistic thought. Generally, *Shekhinah* names the feminine element in the Divinity; however, it sometimes refers to one of the sefirot. Singer explains the notion and influence of Shekhinah on the earthly existence in one of his stories.

According to the Cabala, the virtues of men bring about the union of god and the Shechinah as well as the copulation of angels, cherubim, seraphim, and sacred souls in Heaven. Full union on high will take place only after the redemption, the coming of the Messiah. (“Two” 33)

The influence of the doctrine of *Shekhinah* can be traced in three aspects of Singer's writing: the importance of sex, the significance of marital ties, and the ambiguous role of woman.

The sexual possessions and obsessions in short stories have their origin in the Cabalistic beliefs of the sacred union of male and female in Cabala.

Singer remembers Cabalistic readings that engaged the thoughts of the boy in his puberty. At that time he read secretly the Cabalistic scriptures.

Leafing through the Cabala books, I discovered that even as they studied the Torah in the Heavens, so did they indulge in fiery loves. In fact, in heaven Torah and love were two sides of the same coin. God coupled with the divine Presence, which was actually God's wife, and the people of Israel were their children. ... Not only God and the Divine Presence but also all the male and female saints in the heavens loved one another and coupled both face to face and front to back. ... I realized now that even in the heaven the principle of male and female prevailed. I myself began to long for the mysteries of the girls in our street and courtyard. (Singer, A Little Boy 27)

Oftenmost the Cabalistic doctrine of *Shekhinah* is understood as a feminine quality and a female partner in the sacred union by which the unity of divine potencies is carried about. The male is portrayed as the sixth and central sefirot *Tif'ereth* or as the ninth sefirot *Yesod* (Scholem, On The Mystical 183). All the highest sefirots flow to *Tif'ereth* and *Yesod* constitute the phallus of the supernal man. The union of *Tif'ereth* and the tenth sefirot *Malkuth* is described by a metaphor of the marriage of the Holy Queen and King, while the union of *Yesod* and *Malkuth* is portrayed as the supernatural

archetype of earthly sexual union (183). Contrary to other mystical systems that propagated ascetism, Cabalism rejected sexual temperance, certainly within marriage, and transferred eroticism into the relation of man to God (Scholem, Major Trends 235). This, in turn, influenced the perception of sexuality by the masses.

However, in the fallen world sex in the unclean mind leads to obsession and to delusion. Singer's characters are obsessed by sexual lust. Their sexual, uncontrolled urges often drive them to insanity and fall. Sex in Singer's stories is an animal instinct that denies the higher, human values and that makes a beast of man. Sex is also a magical, supernatural power, dimming the common sense.

A witch, a witch! Mark said to himself. He wouldn't have believed that this young girl, and a virgin besides, could fall into such frenzy. She had clawed at his flesh, bitten his shoulders, spoke strange words, and cried in such a wild voice that he was afraid it might rouse his neighbors. He had sworn to marry her. "How could this happen? Have I lost my mind? Can there really be such a thing as black magic?" ("The Witch" 129).

The same occurs to Nathan, the protagonist of the story "The Unseen:" He suspects his strong sexual impulses to be a devilish joke but cannot abstain from them and repeatedly betrays his wife by having an affair with their servant. Finally, Nathan Josephower gets divorced to marry his lover. Robbed by his new wife of money, Nathan becomes a beggar.

Oftentimes the sexual lust becomes more destructive for women. In the beginning of the story "Blood" the narrator states that "according to Cabala, the urge for blood and sex are of the same origin" ("Blood" 26) and tells the story of Risha whose sexual desire

drives her to immorality and insanity and becomes destructive for the Jewish community. Risha betrays her aging husband with the ritual slaughterer Reuben, and then she discovers that sex and death are connected and that lovemaking at the presence of slaughtered animals gives her extreme pleasure. “She is fascinated by what Reuben does for a living as she is by him, and “killing” is her metaphor for having an orgasm (Penn 88). “In their amorous play, she asked him to slaughter her. Taking her head, he bent it back and fiddled with his finger across her throat. When Risha finally arose, she said to Reuben: You certainly murdered me that time”(“Blood” 28). Over the time, Risha’s perversion rises, and she enjoys watching dying animals and later she begins to kill. In her sexual delusion, she loses sense of reality and ruthlessly violates Jewish kosher laws. Risha’s mental condition deteriorates systematically, and she becomes a bloody demon.

In a few stories devils seduce women and cause them to fall into the nether world. Unhappy Hindele from “The Black Wedding” is wed to the devil. The poor girl realizes at first sight that her bridegroom is a demon but cannot protest against the pressure of custom and community exerted on her. She desperately remembers the precepts concerning dealing with unclean forces: one word or sound can cause her to be lost forever.

Hindele tolerates to the suffering of the first night and tortures performed on her. She silently submits to the attacks of all the possible devils. Finally, while ripped out in giving birth to demon, Hindele screams and falls down to the castle of the netherworld.

The stories of women’s fall and condemnation along with portraying them as intellectually and morally inferior to men were a basis to accuse Singer of misogyny (Spilka 4). Singer denies this tendency and answers that the “liberated woman who suspects every almost every man of being an anti-feminist is like the Jew who calls every

gentile an anti-Semite” (Qtd. in Mucke 76). However, when one thumbs Springer’s books, one may realize that men sometimes end up well, while women are always losers. The only activities meant for women are housekeeping and childrearing. Singer mentions that women who didn’t give birth to sons could be whipped (“In The Poorhouse” 147).

Singer portrays men as pious scholars and philosophers whereas knowledge and piety always lead women to destruction. The mentioned earlier Akhsa from “The Crown of Feathers” sacrifices her comfortable and secure life to learn the truth about the nature of reality and, eventually, dies from exhaustion while striving for ascetic perfection. Until her last breath, she believes that her crown of feathers is a supernatural thing, the evidence of truth. As Akhsa decided to look for the truth, so did Lise from “The Destruction of Kreshev.” Beautiful and wealthy, she rejected the more auspicious marriage proposals to marry the scholar in order to have an access to knowledge. Schloimele deceived her and she trusted him out of her pervasive will for spiritual development.

Hunger for knowledge and understanding is not necessarily a sign of Singer’s misogyny. It is rather his realistic mode: that situation reflected a reality of Jewish life in Poland. The traditional role of woman restrained the possibility for education and scholarly disputes. Also, in Cabalism women were not involved in spiritual meditations. Scholem describes women’s absence in Cabalism:

Both historically and metaphysically it [Cabala] is a masculine doctrine, made for men and by men. The long history of Jewish mysticism shows no trace of feminine influence. ... This exclusively masculine character of Cabalism was by no means the result of the social position of Jewish women or their exclusion

from Talmudic learning. [...] [The] exclusively masculinity for which Cabalism has paid a high price, appears rather to be connected with an inherent tendency to lay stress on the demonic nature of woman and the feminine element of the cosmos.

(Scholem, Major Trends 37)

According to some critics, the discrepancy in Singer's attitude towards women and men's relationships with women is underscored in Cabala. Traditionally, women's roles in Cabalistic scriptures were twofold: as *Shekhinah-Matronit*, woman is the embodiment of good traits, and as Lilith-like demon, the woman becomes an evil temptress (Bate 213; Cohen 78 and 80). *Shekhinah –Matronit* is the goddess of the Cabala who remains chaste and is victorious over sexuality and promiscuity. The Goddess symbolizes the all –protective mother and is a manifestation of peace and piety. Lilith, the wife of Satan, embodies chaos and the fall of morality (Bate 213 and Cohen 80).

According to Alexander, Bate and Cohen, negative female characters become temptresses and seducers, while good women, *Shekhinah-Matronits*, assist men in their actions and help them rise from fall. Singer's stories are abundant in both types of characters. In the mentioned earlier story "The Unseen," the daughter of Lilith Shifra Zirel seduces, robs and abandons Nathan. His ex-wife Roise Temerl, *Shekhinah*, forgives and helps her former husband Nathan. On the last night of his life, Nathan discovers that the two loves of his life were exactly the same woman: "Nathan dreamed that Roise Temerl and Shifra Zirel were one woman with two faces. He was overjoyed at her appearance. "Why have I not noticed this before?" he wondered, "Why did I have to go through this trouble and anxiety?" ("The Unseen" 205). Nathan dreamed about symbolic

femininity, which is ethically ambiguous: sometimes devilish and sometimes generous. In "The Spinoza of The Market Street," a sick and lonely Dr. Margolis is taken care of by Black Dobbe, whose maternal care is a reflection of Shekhinah. Bella from the story "The Witch" resembles Lilith by her causing death of the teacher's wife and then seducing him. Risha from "Blood" acts just like Lilith in performing sexual perversities and harming the community by serving it unkosher meat.

Even though women were excluded from Jewish scholarly life, it does not mean Jewish culture disregarded women completely. The Cabalistic, symbolical marriage of God and His Shekhinah are passed around in various customs and interpretations. "The wide range of meaning contained in the symbol of the Shekhinah thus enabled the masses of the people to identify this sacred marriage with the marriage between God and Israel. For the Cabalists this was merely the outward aspect of a process that takes place within the secret inwardness of God himself" (On The Cabala 138). There are also some yearly celebrations of the sacred marriage feasts and weekly sabbatical customs. The embodiment of mystical union, widely celebrated with the special rituals, is a marriage ceremony. Marriage ties as a symbol of an ideal union between man and woman plays an important function in Singer's fiction. The most important aspect of this holy union is that its basis is founded in so deep emotional and spiritual ties that they almost exceed the probability of earthly, unchaste phenomena of the lowest of worlds. The explanation for this ideal union can be also found in the Cabala. Eppich explains, "a marital relationship ... survives mortality" in Singer's fiction (360). Again, the mysticism of the Cabala suggests an influence on Singer, particularly that Adam and Eve were at one time androgynous—two souls in one body in the Garden of Eden. This union dissolved when Eve was removed from Adam's side but can again be created in Paradise (357). R. K.

Harrison contends that the Hebrew word traditionally translated as “rib” actually has a number of meanings. He believes that the word indicates an organic and spiritual unity of the subdivided species: neither the man nor the woman is whole without the other. Harrison points to the play in the words “man” and “woman.” (qtd. in Eppich 361). According to his interpretation, the personality of any one individual reaches the full measure of its creation only when “complemented in proper and compatible marital unity by that of another individual of the opposite sex” (357).

Singer thinks of marriage as one of the most important aspects of a happy, earthly existence. He sustains the Cabalistic idea that an earthly marriage is a copy of the ideal heavenly union between souls, what he puts into the mouth of a rabbi wife’s comforting unhappy, infertile Altele: “True marriage was found only in the next world, when the sack of bones had been cast off and only the soul remained. True love between man and woman begins only in Paradise, when...both are initiated in the mysteries of Torah” (“Altele” 158). In the story “Shidah and Kuziba” the mystery of the holy union is Cabalistic as well: “He who has reached the final point, last degree of silence, knows nothing of time and space, of death and lust. There male and female are forever united; will and deed are the same. This last silence is God” (“Shiddah And Kuziba” 93).

In addition to the ideas of soul and ideal union, Singer is also conscious that family life and a clan consciousness have helped Jews to maintain their national, cultural and religious identity for centuries. Singer treats a betrayal of a spouse equally with an act of conversion to another religion: both are the crimes affecting the stability of community. The union between man and woman builds a basis for Jewish national ideological and national survival:

Very often Singer’s narrative is concerned with the relations of two

people, most likely a man and a woman (matched or mismatched) in marriage; as in the *Zohar* and other Cabalistic writing, a wedding is his preferred symbol of fusion of divergences, of ritual affirmation of faith in the order of the world and the community. (Golden 27)

None of the characters who left his/her spouse is successful: all these people usually end up bad. Nathan from “The Unseen,” Akhsa from “The Crown of Feather,” “Lisa from “The Destruction of Kreshev,” and Risha from “Blood” finish miserably, either with the exclusion from community or, more often, as souls wandering in space. Even the gentile Dr. Yaretsky, who abandoned Helena, cannot find peace after death (“The Shadow of a Crib”).

Consistently, Singer displays often the picture of protagonists who find their spiritual fulfillment in their marriages. The protagonist of the story “Something Is There,” gains back his faith and peace of mind after he comes back home and meets his wife. Dr. Nachum Fischelson from “The Spinoza of the Market Street,” loses his last hope for a decent life and falls into spiritual stirring up, when Black Dobbe arranges their marriage and takes care of him. Fischelson regains faith and discovers real happiness. The marriage takes place in a higher heaven between the souls of those two (“The Spinoza of The Market Street” 23). In the story “The Son From America” a rich, young Jew, returning from the United States with a large sum of money finds his old parents living together pious, happy life without financial prosperity (“The Son From America” 102-30).

Singer points that the real marriage is not based on an attachment of bodies but on the union of souls. Joel Yablener, “The Cabalist From East Broadway,” knows the secret of mystical ties between man and woman, even though he only studied together.

Joel Yablone and Deborah Soltis saw each other over a period of twenty years, indulging themselves in long conversations, often discussing Hebrew literature, the fine points of grammar, Maimonides, and Rabbi Judah ha-Levi, but the pair never went so far as to kiss. [...] Once the two lovers exchanged reading glasses, but he couldn't read with hers and she couldn't read with his. So they replaced their own glasses on their own noses—and that was the most intimate contact the two ever achieved. (“The Cabalist From East Broadway” 137)

The relationship between a man and woman must be complex because it hinges on the coexistence of two divergent elements. Feminine and masculine are intentionally opposite and complementary components of every single unity. Therefore, marriage appears a contest and trial of characters, which is extending to the spiritual plane, because not only characters are proven: above the earthly existence the soul becomes a subject of judgment in higher spheres. The extension of action above the material reality manifests in the encounter of the supernatural in the stories, especially when it comes to wedding ceremonies.

Another Cabalistic concept present in Singer's fiction is the concept of *Kawwanah*. *Kawwanah* is a continuation of the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*, *Shekhinah* and soul. The term relates to spiritual development of the soul and its spiritual union with *Ein Sof*. *Kawwanah* is a name for the mystical intention of man, whose task is to restore the original harmony destroyed by the Breaking of Vessels. As a result of it, the *Shekhinah* fell as the last sefirot when the vessels were broken. The situation was able to be rescued because the good intention (*tikkun*) and “the last sefirah [sefirot] was reorganized as

‘Rachel’ the celestial bride. But with the lessening of the moon, she lost some of her substance causing another fall (Scholem, On the Mystical Shape 275). Then, the earthly Adam was created, and if he had not fallen on the sixth day the world would have been redeemed and the Shekhinah would not have gone into exile again (275). The only way to carry out the mystical union to lead the *Shekhinah* back and to cause another union of male and female can be human action.

Michael Fixler describes this concept in his article “The Redeemers: Themes in The Fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer:”

In parts of the Kabbala there is the suggestion to a seminal flow in the process of reaction—the process when by divinity reduced itself to a material imperfection. The Jews by perfecting themselves may redeem evil, not by fleeing from it but by submitting to its necessities. For that end have the Jews been chosen (Fixler 377-378).

According to Cabala, the mystical intention of man can restore the original harmony of the universe, which was destroyed at the moment of breaking the vessels (Scholem, Major Trends 275). Prayer and meditation lead to *Devekuth*—a mystical union with God.

The belief in the power of prayer is an important component of the ideology of Singer’s stories. The doctrine of *Kawwanah* implies that not only prayer is important. The work of the mind should be complemented by the special effort in a real life. Many stories display the conviction that prayer has a special role in Singer’s world. For example, in the story “The Destruction of Kreshev, ” Evil Spirit complains that his temptations do not work when someone is engrossed in the study of Torah and prayer:

Instead of disputing with me, he [Reb Bunim] ignored me and prayed, and soon after the Day of Atonement began to construct a Sukkoth booth,

and thus occupied his time with torah and holy deeds. It is known that I have power only over those who question the ways of god, not those who do holy deeds. (“The Destruction of Kreshev” 213)

Even though some acts cannot be successful, the intention is still important. Good intention leads to righteousness and moral purity. In the story, “A Piece of Advice,” the role of intention is emphasized: “For whose sake are you lying? For your Father in Heaven. His holy Name, blessed be He, knows the intention and the intention behind the intention, and it is this the main thing”(“A Piece of Advice” 142).

As Edith Mucke mentions, in “I. B. Singer and Hassidic Philosophy,” Hassidic interpretation of Cabala perceived joy as a condition that can lead to *Devekuth*. In several stories such as “The Son From America,” “Joy,” “A Piece of Advise,” “The Blizzard” and many others, Singer gives an account that piety and simple life, especially in marriage, leads to joy. In one particular act, man experiences joy and mystical union with God: this happens when he watches the sky. The motif of the protagonist fascinated by the depth of the sky recurs in Singer’s stories. For example, Dr. Fischelson looks at the sky in this way:

The myriads of fixed stars continued to travel their destined courses in unbounded space. The comets, planets, satellites, asteroids kept circling these shining centers. Worlds were born and died in cosmic upheavals. In chaos of nebulae, primeval matter was being formed. Now and again a star tore loose, and swept across the sky, leaving behind it a fiery streak. It was the month of August when there are showers of meteors. Yes, the divine substance was extended and had neither beginning nor end. (“The Spinoza of The Market Street” 24)

The Cabalistic doctrines that have a minor influence on Singer's stories give new possibilities for interpretation. First, they counterweigh the pessimistic ideas of *Tzimtzum* and *Shu'ir Komah* by suggesting that the word contains some order. Consequently, they make the short stories' reality more complex than it was believed to be. Second, the doctrine of soul, *Gilgul*, and *Tikkun*, make a man the central being in the universe: the fate of the world hinges on the performance of a man. Third, the doctrine of *Devekuth* proves that a deep religious insight can lead to spiritual contentment, what is source of hope in Singer's world. Finally, contrary to the widespread belief that Singer was a misogynist, the doctrine of *Shekhinah* and the importance of marriage ties implied by it allows for a new interpretation of a role and a position of woman in Singer's stories.

Conclusion

The influence of Cabala on Singer's short stories is visible in the author's literary decisions such as composition, style, narration, and descriptions. Cabalistic impact also extends on the content of the stories. The doctrines *Shi'ur Komah* and *Tzimtzum* give a shape to the reality, settings and plots of Singer's stories and set the philosophical basis for the picture of the world in Singer's fiction.

The closer analysis of short stories shows that the other Cabalistic doctrines contribute to the display of the world. The belief in soul, transgression and the balance of feminine and masculine elements in the universe make Singer's writing almost an exposition of Cabalistic views. As mentioned earlier, the minor Cabalistic doctrines counterweigh the main concepts of *Tzimtzum* and *Shu'ir Komah*, changing the narrow perception of the world as only a playground of evil forces. This observation can be a starting point for the further research on and revision of a nature of Singer's settings.

Although the influence of Cabala seems to be obvious for everybody who knows at least superficially Singer's prose, the closer reading of it, especially short stories and stories for children, shows the impact of Cabala is much profound than suspected. This has been also my impression after having done research for the present work. Unfortunately, the problem of Cabala in Singer is almost forgotten by critics. The studies of Farrell and, partially, Zatin are the only exceptions in this aspect, but they are, by the force of events, in a certain vacuum, since not continued by further research.

The research on the impact of Cabalistic philosophy on Singer should, at first, gather all the factors that have been already discussed, then research and elaborate them in depth. The next step is to determine the area of further research. As Scholem and almost everybody who is familiar with Hassidic Cabala notices doctrine of *Kawwanah*

contributed to the development of magic ((Scholem, Major Trends 237). Singer's works displays many characteristics of the magic brought to life by Cabala. First, superstitions such as evil eye, casting spells, and exorcising *dybbuks* need more attention and analysis. Second, the belief in magic, as a power of invisible forces, can be also traced in the motifs of mystic mirrors, dreams and shadows. Third, Singer writes about miracles and wonders; some of them seem to come from Hassidic fairy tales. Not only stories for children are influenced by Hassidic stories, the same can apply to short stories for adults, and this problem is another possible subject for research.

As Chapter 3 implies, the problem of the balance of feminine and masculine elements deserve a separate, in depth study, which can actually challenge the current reception of Singer. The accusations of misogyny and a biased treatment of female characters is solely a portrayal of social status quo and has been dictated by an absence of women in Cabalistic spiritualism; ideologically Cabala treats feminine elements as necessary part of reality, parallel to masculine counterpart in either the world of nature or in otherworld.

In his Nobel lecture, Singer presented his message to the world. The writer spoke about the mystical value of the word and writing profession, invariably taken from Cabala. Nowadays people cannot see a power of religion as they used before. Singer hoped to reinstate a role of a writer in modern world.

The pessimism of the creative person is not decadence, but a mighty passion for the redemption of man. While the poet entertains he continues to search for eternal truths, for the essence of being. [...] Strange as these words may sound, I often play with the idea that when all the social theories collapse and wars and revolutions leave humanity in utter gloom,

the poet, whom Plato banned from his Republic, may rise up to save us all.

(Singer, Nobel Lecture 3)

Writing for Singer is not only a social role, but also a mission. A writer should be a mystic who wants to save the world by a power of his words. Literature without a mission, even if still entertains, is empty and worthless. Challenging the minds by the magic power of word is a real purpose of literary creativity.

NOTES

¹ Dybbuk is a spirit who inhabits the body of a living person and controls his/her actions.

² Unfortunately, as Shmeruk reports, the plethora of different voices and various styles is lost in English translation. English is not able to copy the different modes of Yiddish discourse used by translators. In Yiddish, an additional reinforcement comes from the variety of discourses used by narrators, namely by their slang and jargon (Shmeruk 109).

⁴ The linguistic source of his name is unidentified; some see the origins of that name in Persian Ashma-Dawa, Ashma meaning God and Dawa meaning anger (“Asmodeus” Encyclopedia Judaica 36). According to Talmud, Asmodeus is a king of demons; however, he acts usually rather as prankster not as devil (36). It is possible that ancient mystic Judaism and the later Hebrew tradition, appearing in the Book of Tobit in the Old Testament apocrypha, absorbed the name, as an evil spirit possessed of great lust. Asmodeus loved Sarah, the daughter of Rachel and slain seven men who were successively married to Sarah, succeeded with the help of the angel Raphael in exorcising the demon. In Talmudic legends, Asmodeus is associated with King Solomon, whom he helped in Building the temple. He is also regarded as the cause of the excesses ascribed to Solomon.

⁵ The origin of belief in Lilith can be traced to Babylonian and Sumerian mythology. Evil deeds attributed to Lilith have varied throughout ages. The most known are strangling little children, endangering women in childbirth, seizing people in sleep (“Lilith” 246). According to the tradition, Lilith was created from the earth at the same time as Adam and, due to her union with Adam, she bore devils and demons. Lilith left Adam after he did not accept the imposed by her conditions concerning their relationship. God sent three

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⁶ The topic of cruelty to animals is so frequent in Singer’s stories that Edward Alexander distinguishes a separate category of vegetarian tales. According to Edward Alexander Singer uses the vegetarian theme to reveal the human’s cruelty towards animals and the profound injustice that happens every day in the world. Interestingly, some characters are driven to insanity by their compassion for animals. So, Alexander concludes,

“Singer’s vegetarian heroes, like his religious mystics, can usually resolve their quandaries only in the next world” (69).

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