

**The Fluidity of Identity:
Evidence from Kabbalah & Medieval Jewish Philosophy**



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Our postmodern era has long been attentive to the different streams of influence that combine to shape a person's identity, with varying degrees of determinism and agency. More recent attention to gender identity and gender fluidity, bio-technology, as well as the ways in which social media personae have all served to intensify questions about the boundaries of personal human identity. In this course, we will look at medieval philosophical and kabbalistic approaches to angelification, devequt (merging with God), and reincarnation as examples of premodern wrestling with these issues.

Outline

Session 1. Becoming an Angel

Session 2. Devequt—Becoming God

Session 3. Reincarnation—Becoming Another Person

Session 4. Reincarnation—Becoming Other Creatures & Inanimate Objects

Source Sheet—Session 1. Becoming an Angel

1. Enoch (Genesis 5:22–24)

וַיְהִי חַגְוֹף חֲמִשׁ וְשָׁשִׁים שָׁנָה וַיֻּלְּד אֶת־מֶתוּשֶׁלַח:

When Enoch had lived 65 years, he begot Methuselah.

וַיְהִי־לֶחֶד חַגְוֹף אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים אַחֲרַי הוֹלִידוּ אֶת־מֶתוּשֶׁלַח שָׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה וַיֻּלְּדוּ בָנִים וּבָנוֹת:

After the birth of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years; and he begot sons and daughters.

וַיְהִי כָּל־יְמֵי חַגְוֹף חֲמִשׁ וְשָׁשִׁים שָׁנָה וַיִּשָׁלַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־חַגְוֹף:

All the days of Enoch came to 365 years.

וַיְהִי־לֶחֶד חַגְוֹף אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַאֲיָנֹכּוּ כִּי־לָקַח אֹתוֹ אֱלֹהִים:

Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him.

2. 3 Enoch (ca. 900 c.e.)

Chapter 3: Metatron has 70 names, but God calls him 'Youth'

R. Ishmael said:

(1) In that hour I asked Metatron, the angel, the Prince of the Presence: "What is thy name?"

(2) He answered me: "I have seventy names, corresponding to the seventy tongues of the world and all of them are based upon the name Metatron, angel of the Presence; but my King calls me Youth' (*Na'ar*)"

Chapter 4

R. Ishmael said :

(1) I asked Metatron and said to him: "Why art thou called by the name of thy Creator, by seventy names? Thou art greater than all the princes, higher than

all the angels, beloved more than all the servants, honored above all the mighty ones in kingship, greatness and glory : why do they call thee ' Youth ' in the high heavens ?"

(2) He answered and said to me: " Because I am Enoch, the son of Jared.

(3) For when the generation of the flood sinned and were confounded in their deeds, saying unto God: 'Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways' (Job xxi. 14), then the Holy One, blessed be He, removed me from their midst to be a witness against them in the high heavens to all the inhabitants of the world, that they may not say: 'The Merciful One is cruel.'

(4) What sinned all those multitudes, their wives, their sons and their daughters, their horses, their mules and their cattle and their property, and all the birds of the world, all of which the Holy One, blessed be He, destroyed from the world together with them in the waters of the flood?

(5) Hence the Holy One, blessed be He, lifted me up in their lifetime before their eyes to be a witness against them to the future world. And the Holy One, blessed be He, assigned me for a prince and a ruler among the ministering angels.

(6) In that hour three of the ministering angels, 'UZZA, 'AZZA and 'AZZAEL came forth and brought charges against me in the high heavens, saying before the Holy One, blessed be He:

"Said not the Ancient Ones (First Ones) rightly before Thee: "Do not create man! ' " The Holy One, blessed be He, answered and said unto them: "I have made, and I will bear, yea, I will carry and will deliver". (Isaiah 46:4)

(7) As soon as they saw me, they said before Him: "Lord of the Universe ! What is this one that he should ascend to the height of heights? Is not he one from among the sons of [the sons of] those who perished in the days of the Flood? "What doeth he in the *Raqia'*?"

(8) Again, the Holy One, blessed be He, answered and said to them: "What are ye, that ye enter and speak in my presence? I delight in this one more than in all of you, and hence he shall be a prince and a ruler over you in the high heavens."

(9) Forthwith all stood up and went out to meet me, prostrated themselves before me and said: "Happy art thou and happy is thy father for thy Creator doth favor thee".

(10) And because I am small and a youth among them in days, months and years, therefore they call me "Youth" (*Na'ar*).

Chapter 6 : Enoch lifted up to heaven together with the *Shekhinah*; Angels protests answered by God

R. Ishmael said: Metatron, the Angel, the Prince of the Presence, said to me :

(1) When the Holy One, blessed be He, desired to lift me up on high, He first sent 'Anaphiel H (H = Tetragrammaton) the Prince, and he took me from their midst in their sight and carried me in great glory upon a fiery chariot with fiery horses, servants of glory. And he lifted me up to the high heavens together with the Shekina.

(2) As soon as I reached the high heavens, the Holy hayyoth, the 'Ophanim, the Seraphim, the Keruvim, the Wheels of the Merkavah (the Galgalim), and the ministers of the consuming fire, perceiving my smell from a distance of 365,000

myriads of parasangs, said: "What smell of one born of woman and what taste of a white drop (is this) that ascends on high, and (lo, he is merely) a gnat among those who 'divide flames (of fire)'?"

(3) The Holy One, blessed be He, answered and spoke unto them: "My servants, my hosts, my Kerubim, my 'Ophannim, my Seraphim! Be ye not displeased on account of this! Since all the children of men have denied me and my great Kingdom and are gone worshipping idols, I have removed my Shekina from among them and have lifted it up on high. But this one whom I have taken from among them is an ELECT ONE among (the inhabitants of) the world and he is equal to all of them in faith, righteousness and perfection of deed and I have taken him for (as) a tribute from my world under all the heavens".

(From Ch. 8)

(2) In that hour the Holy One, blessed be He, added in me wisdom unto wisdom, understanding unto understanding, subtlety unto subtlety, knowledge unto knowledge, mercy unto mercy, instruction unto instruction, love unto love, loving-kindness unto loving-kindness, goodness unto goodness, meekness unto meekness, power unto power, strength unto strength, might unto might, brilliance unto brilliance, beauty unto beauty, splendor unto splendor, and I was honored and adorned with all these good and praiseworthy things more than all the children of heaven. (like the Springsteen song)

Chapter 9: Enoch receives blessings from the Most High and is adorned with angelic attributes

R. Ishmael said : Metatron, the Prince of the Presence, said to me :

(1) After all these things the Holy One, blessed be He, put His hand upon me and blessed me with
5360 blessings.

(2) And I was raised and enlarged to the size of the length and width of the world.

(3) And He caused 72 wings to grow on me, 36 on each side. And each wing was as the whole world.

(4) And He fixed on me 365 eyes : each eye was as the great luminary.

(5) And He left no kind of splendor, brilliance, radiance, beauty in (of) all the lights of the universe that He did not fix on me.

Chapter 15—Metatron Transformed into Fire

R. Ishmael said : Metatron, the angel, the Prince of the Presence, the Glory of all heavens, said to me :

(1) As soon as the Holy One, blessed be He, took me in (His) service to attend the Throne of Glory and the Wheels (Galgallim) of the Merkaba and the needs of Shekina, forthwith my flesh was changed into flames, my sinews into flaming fire, my bones into coals of burning juniper, the light of my eyelids into splendor of lightnings, my eye-balls into fire-brands, the hair of my head into dot flames, all my limbs into wings of burning fire and the whole of my body into glowing fire.

(2) And on my right were divisions 6 of fiery flames, on my left fire-brands were burning, round about me storm-wind and tempest were blowing and in front of me and behind me was roaring of thunder with earthquake.

3. The Name Metatron

- Greek *Metathronos*: beside or behind the divine throne
- Latin: *Metator*, term for a Roman officer who is a forerunner

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (4th–14th century)

וּפְלַח חֲנוּךְ בְּקוֹשֵׁטָא קְדָם יְיָ וְהָא לִיתְהוּי עִם דְּיִירֵי אַרְעָא אַרוּם אֲתַנְגִּיד וְסָלִיק לְרִקִיעָא בְּמִימְרֵי קְדָם יְיָ וְקָרָא שְׁמִיהּ
מִיטְטָרוֹן סְפָרָא רַבָּא

And Enoch served in the truth before the Lord; and, behold, he was not with the sojourners of the earth; for he was withdrawn, and he ascended to the firmament by the Word before the Lord, and his name was called Metatron the Great Scribe.

4. BT *Sanhedrin* 38b

A certain heretic said to Rav Idit: It **is written** in the verse concerning God: **“And to Moses He said: Come up to the Lord”**(Exodus 24:1). The heretic raised a question: **It should have** stated: **Come up to Me.** Rav Idit **said to him: This** term, “the Lord,” in that verse **is** referring to the angel **Metatron, whose name is like the name of his Master, as it is written:** “Behold I send an angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Take heed of him and obey his voice; do not defy him; for he will not pardon your transgression, **for My name is in him”**(Exodus 23:20–21).

BT *Hagigah* 15a

The Gemara stated earlier that **Aher** **chopped down the saplings,** becoming a heretic. **With regard to him, the verse states: “Do not let your mouth bring your flesh into guilt”** (Ecclesiastes 5:5). The Gemara poses a question: **What was** it that led him to heresy? **He saw** the angel **Mitatron, who was granted permission to sit and write the merits** of Israel. **He said:** There is **a tradition** that in the world **above there is no sitting; no competition; no**

turning one's **back before Him**, i.e., all face the Divine Presence; **and no lethargy**. Seeing that someone other than God was seated above, **he said: Perhaps**, the Gemara here interjects, **Heaven forbid, there are two authorities**, and there is another source of power in control of the world in addition to God. Such thoughts led *Aher* to heresy.

The Gemara relates: **They removed Mitatron** from his place in heaven **and smote him** with **sixty rods of fire**, so that others would not make mistake that *Aher* made. **They said** to the angel: **What is the reason** that **when you saw** Elisha ben Avuya **you did not stand before him?** Despite this conduct, since Mitatron was personally involved, he **was granted permission to erase the merits of Aher** and cause him to stumble in any manner. **A Divine Voice went forth saying: "Return, rebellious children"** (Jeremiah 3:22), **apart from Aher**.