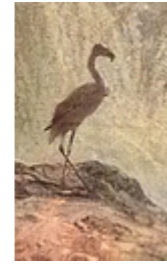


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LEO THE HEBREW AND A KABBALISTIC READING OF PLATO'S *TIMAEUS*

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to consider the specific excerpts in which Plato's *Timaeus* was interpreted by the philosopher and Kabbalist Judah Abravanel, also known as Leo the Hebrew in his major work, the Dialogues of Love. From his experience of solitude lived while in exile in Italy, the Portuguese Jew composes a work written in a structure of double meanings, esoteric and exoteric, through which he interacts with the Neoplatonic Renaissance community of his time while communicating with the Kabbalistic tradition from which he descended as a Sephardic. Interpreting *Timaeus* in the light of his ancestral cosmogony, Leo the Hebrew wants to prove that Plato was initiated into the teachings of Moses and, therefore, must be included as a Kabbalist.

KEYWORDS: Plato, *Timaeus*, Leo the Hebrew (aka Judah Abravanel), Kabbalah.

RESUMO: Este artigo pretende considerar os excertos específicos nos quais o *Timeu*, de Platão, foi interpretado pelo filósofo e cabalista Judá Abravanel, também conhecido como Leão Hebreu, em sua obra magna: os *Diálogos de Amor*. A partir de sua experiência de solitude, vivida quando de seu exílio na Itália, o judeu português compõe uma obra escrita em uma estrutura com duplo significado, esotérico e exotérico, através do qual ele interage com a comunidade Neoplatônica Renascentista de sua época, enquanto comunicava-se com a tradição cabalística na qual inseria-se e que herdara enquanto judeu Sefardita. Ao interpretar o *Timeu* à luz de sua cosmogonia ancestral, Leão Hebreu pretende também provar que Platão era um iniciado nos ensinamentos Mosaicos e, portanto, deveria ser incluído no hall dos Cabalistas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Platão, *Timeu*, Lão Hebreu (aka Judá Abravanel), Cabala.

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of 1492, the Italian port of Naples received a huge number of ships from the Iberian Peninsula. Sephardic Jews expelled from their properties under the Spanish Royal Edict seek peace in exile to live according to the rites of their faith. Among them, Judah Abravanel, later known as the Leo the Hebrew, accompanied by his father Isaac and his younger brother Samuel.³

Philosopher and physician, Leo the Hebrew served the kings and nobles of the courts of Lisbon and Castile. But his greatest distinction lay in the ancestral knowledge of Kabbalah, learned from his father, a leader of the Iberian Synagogues and respected exegete, and also in the highest philosophical knowledge of his time, in which he had been instructed. João Vila-Chã, introducer of Leo the Hebrew's most famous work, indicates that the arrival of the Abravanel family in Italy provided an encounter with an environment eager for "everything that had to do with either the method or the interpretive tradition of Kabbalah." (VILA-CHÃ, 2001, p. 20)

Arriving in Naples and then residing in Genoa, Judah Abravanel came into contact with Renaissance influences that got to him in cultural exchanges with Christian thinkers eager to discover the Jewish wisdom of Kabbalah and the learning of the Hebrew text, whose interpretation they intended to use for mystical initiations and knowledge coming from hermetic works (IDEL, 2015, p.457-518). There was at this time an effusive syncretism of a speculative method that wanted to include "in addition to the Hebrew Bible and the great Talmudic Commentaries [...] the most significant works of authors such as Maimonides or Averroes, in addition to the writings of Aristotle and his older commentators." (VILA-CHÃ, 2001, p.12).⁴ Without forgetting the influence received from Jochanan Alemanno⁵ and, through him, the teachings of Aristotle and Averrois.⁶

PLATO IN DIALOGUES ON LOVE

³For more detailed information on the historical, political, and religious contexts that forced the Abravanel family into exile in Italy, cf. GOMES (2017, p. 10-27).

⁴Moshe Idel analyzes how "some of the main creators of this [Jewish intellectual] culture dialogued with the most influential representatives of Renaissance thought" (IDEL, 2015, p.457).

⁵Alemanno (c. 1435c.1508) was an Italian Jewish philosopher. A student of the works of Aristotle, Averroes, and Neoplatonism, he taught the Hebrew language to Pico della Mirandola. Also known for his investigations into Kabbalah.

⁶Leo Hebrew's arguments in the Dialogues of Love include several other ancient authors: Euripides, Pythagoras, Ovid, Anaxagoras, Ptolemy, Empedocles, Homer, Pronapides.

It is taken for granted that Leo the Hebrew wrote a piece called *De caeli harmonia*, although it has not been preserved, and then produced his *magnum opus* for which he was renowned, the *Dialogues of Love*. Distributed in three chapters, the piece uses dialogic language and its main theme is love. In a style characteristic of the Renaissance, two characters are presented, both of which have suggestive names, Philo and Sophia,⁷ who will act as philosophical interpreters of Judah Abravanel. In an intense dialogue, Philo falls in love with Sophia, who refuses him by dodging herself. In defense of the love he devotes to Sophia, Philo decides to clarify the nature of that love. Here, then, are the intentions of the arguments distributed throughout the work: *Dialogue One: On Love and Desire*; *Dialogue Two: On the Universality of Love*; *Dialogue Three: On the Origin of Love*.

Based on the model of the Ficino work, Leo the Hebrew weaves a text in the light of Plato's *Symposium* and elaborates a refined Theory of Love, built on a textual structure with double⁸ meanings, esoteric and exoteric, implicit and explicit, as Philo expresses his feelings for Sophia in a Renaissance language dialogue common to its time, Leo the Hebrew talks about philosophical themes that are dear to his ancestral tradition, sensitized by his current condition of being-in-exile.⁹ His reflections on identity, enhanced by the experience of solitude in exile, lead him to preserve his historical-religious conscience¹⁰ in an intense dialogue with the Renaissance environment immersed in the newly discovered Platonic philosophy in the translations of Marsilio Ficino.

But his reflections are not reduced to this. The philosophical nuances expressed by Leo the Hebrew are diverse; all of them, being considered in the light of their Jewish philosophy, with a Kabbalistic perspective. His Neoplatonism understands love as a universal principle, which unites the superior to the inferior, the creation to its creator,¹¹ this creation being an aprioristic fact, for this reason, "it surrenders to the refutation of the Aristotelian thesis of the eternity of the world." (CALAFATE, 2000) and, like Philo of Alexandria, Leo the

⁷The assumptions for choosing these names are curious. It can be a tribute to Philo of Alexandria (25 BC - 50 AD), as well as a comparative critique between Jewish wisdom and Hellenic knowledge, as Philo is the male figure, sober and assertive, while Sophia is the female expression, rushed to conclusions and lacking the answers with which her partner helps her in the dialogues. This, then, would be a way of exalting Jewish knowledge as a true Philosophy, compared to Greek knowledge, which depended on it to elucidate the enigmas of existence.

⁸According to the German philosopher Leo Strauss (1899-1973), the qualified author uses the method of writing in double textual structure to express concepts in a hostile environment, without the risk of being stigmatized as subversive and condemned to death (STRAUSS, 2015, p. 35-46). So did Judah Abravanel.

⁹For the scholar of Abravanel's work, his condition of being-in-exile is "the deepest experience that affects him, [...] that is, the experience of the human condition in terms of passion and pain" (VILA- CHÃ, 2001, p. 25).

¹⁰The concept of historical-religious consciousness motivating the work of Leo the Hebrew will be better understood in the research by SILVA (2011, p. 228).

¹¹As he builds his arguments, Leo the Hebrew goes on implicitly describing the Tree of Life, marked by the ten sephirotic emanations, divided into triads that are equivalent to the intelligible, sensible, and natural worlds.

Hebrew contests those who understand God as inactive in the act of the creation of the world and of time (PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA, 2015a, p. 60). Also in Philo, Judah Abravanel found a strong reference to Jewish claims of rabbinic superiority over Hellenic knowledge.¹²

The path that leads Leo the Hebrew to direct contact with Plato is not clearly established. The most likely path is that the Jew came to know Greek in Italy, through the Latin text by Marsilio Ficino,¹³ translated by the sponsorship of Cosimo de' Medici. But Abravanel's philosophical proposal goes beyond mere Platonic investigation, as Calafate highlighted:

[Leo the Hebrew] sought to merge the Bible with Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Arabs (Averroes and Avicenna above all). Therefore, one of his greatest concerns was to reveal the agreement of Plato and Aristotle with the Bible, explaining the divergence between the two ancient philosophers based on a diversity of information about the *Scriptures*. He developed the theme of the relationship between reason and revelation to defend the thesis of its supremacy, moving away from the Averroist theme of the double truth, but not without emphasizing the rational origin of the particular sciences. Tribute of a Neoplatonic cosmology in which all beings are ranked according to a descending order (from God to the first matter) and ascending (from the first matter to God). (CALAFATE, 2000, n.p.)

Plato is mentioned 42 times in the Dialogues on Love, the *Symposium* is mentioned 7 times, and *Timaeus* is remembered 3 times. On these occasions, the author's concern is to show that the Jewish philosophical reading extracted from the *Torah* prevails over the Greek interpretation, serving as a parameter to render the creation of the world and of time (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 284-288). More than that, Leo the Hebrew understands that the Platonic philosophy is the result of a misunderstood reading of the teaching professed by the Jewish sages — i.e. Kabbalah — and transmitted in¹⁴ the course of the generations.

Not only did Leo the Hebrew favor the Kabbalah as an interpretive method superior to the Greek reading, but Abravanel is convinced of "making Plato a Mosaic and the number of Kabbalists." (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 289).¹⁵ While Leo the Hebrew put Neoplatonic

¹²As a Hellenistic Jew, Philo produced several commentaries on the Pentateuch, uniting in his interpretations Mosaic teaching and Greek philosophy. He hypothesized that the Mosaic tradition and the teaching of Torah influenced Plato's philosophy.

¹³For Ficino, Plato was the "father of philosophers" (FICINO, 1996, p. 33) and in his honor, he wrote *The Book of Love*, a commentary on the *Symposium*.

¹⁴The Hebrew term 'Kabbalah' can be translated as reception or transmission, emphasizing that the Kabbalistic reading of reality is the result of ancient knowledge accumulated and transmitted to new generations. Importantly: "Kabbalah is not primarily philosophy, but Jewish mysticism that proposes to assimilate knowledge about the relationship of God and his creation, without distorting divine transcendence." (GOMES, 2017, p. 67).

¹⁵On the possible relationship between Plato and Moses, there is a range of authors such as Philo of Alexandria, Clement of Alexandria, Aurelius Ambrose, Aurelius Augustine, who sustain the religious influence on the founder of the Academy during his travels to Egypt. On the subject see: McEvoy, J. *Platon et la sagesse de l'Égypte*. Kernos Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque antique, 1993. Available: <https://kernos.revues.org/pdf/550>.

teachings forward in Renaissance dialogical language, the Kabbalist Judah Abravanel implicitly presented the doctrine of the Jewish sages, going beyond Plato and Aristotle, without despising them, rather, making them converse harmoniously, according to the exposition of the *Torah*, and under the wise instruction of Moses.

In the *Dialogues of Love*, Plato is a Kabbalist who rereads the [his]story of Adam and Eve interpreting it as the myth of the Androgyne at the *Symposium* (189d-e): "Plato took it from him [Moses], enlarged it, and decorated it according to Hellenic oratory, making in it a confused jumble of Hebrew things." (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 326). It is with a desire to 'unshuffle' Plato's argument that Leo the Hebrew reinterprets it. Despite some differences in the exhibition, "Plato, in this, intends to explain the Sacred History rather than contradict it." (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 329). And it is under this assumption that Leo the Hebrew interprets *Timaeus* in the *Dialogues of Love*.

TIMAEUS INTERPRETED BY LEO THE HEBREW

References to the Platonic text of *Timaeus* in the *Dialogues on Love* appear in *Dialogue Two* (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 159), and *Dialogue Three* (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 275 and 283). Leo the Hebrew does not textually quote *Timaeus*, but interprets Plato in his emphases, referring to the work.

In *Dialogue Two*, concerned with discussing the Universality of Love, Leo the Hebrew presents his cosmology and aims to show how the communication of divine love to creatures takes place. It does so through four emphases: 1) in how the superior love is perceived in the inferior forms, as spread by the soul of the world in the natural elements (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 115-129); 2) in the knowledge of the heavenly world in union with the inferior world, in the examples of the union between Heaven and Earth, husband and wife, head and body, with Humankind being a microcosm of the universe (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 130-157); 3) in myths of Antiquity that emphasize the consummation of erotic love present in mythology, in the zodiac and the constellations, making these narratives a simulacrum of reality (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 158-199); and 4) Again, the presence of love in corporeal creatures and its presence in the intelligible world is highlighted (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 200-211). The first reference to the *Timaeus* is in the third emphasis of this Dialogue.

Arguing from the Demogorgon in the *Protocosmos* piece, by Pronapides, Philo tries to respond to Sophia as it happens, in a mythological interpretation, "the universal foundation in the love of the gods" (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 158). Starting with Pronapides and

contrasting his teachings with Homer, in the *Iliad*, and Ovid, about Chaos, Philo explains the common myth and reinterprets it. Where the ancients referred to Demogorgon in the company of Eternity and Chaos, the Jewish reading of Leo the Hebrew emphasizes that there is no other principle or cause of all things but God, the Supreme Creator; and he also stresses the referred eternity pointed to the eternal attribute of the unbegotten Creator, taken as a father, and who saw in Chaos the maternal attribute of generated things, from which everything proceeds. In support of this reading, Philo turns to Plato, interpreting him in the *Timaeus*:

However, they recognized the father as the main cause and Chaos as an accessory and concomitant cause; and it seems that Plato thought in the same way, in the *Timaeus*, of the new generation of things created by the high God of the eternal and confused matter: In this, they could be rebuked, because, being God the producer of all things, he must also have created the matter from which they are generated; but it must be understood that the poets mean that, having Chaos been in the company of God for all eternity, it was created by Him *ab aeterno*, and that from Chaos itself God created *ex novo* all other things at the beginning of time, according to the Platonic opinion; and they call it a *partner*, despite having been produced, because Chaos was created *ab aeterno* and found itself always in the company of God. (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 159)

In the claim that the ancients gave for the emergence of all things, assuming Chaos as a common, confused, and mixed matter, and attributing to it the characteristic of a divine partner since it is coeternal with God (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 159), Leo the Hebrew values Plato's approach in his reading of the *Timaeus*, using the Greek philosopher as an intermediary point that allows him to present his Jewish interpretation.

Considering this reading, Philo clarifies to Sophia that, although the ancients saw Chaos as the Creator's partner in the production of matter, it still "has been produced *ab aeterno*, as Eve, that although had been produced from Adam, was his companion and consort, and the same must be said of all men born of both." (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 159).

Some peculiarities of this approach adopted by Leo the Hebrew must be highlighted: a) he manages to dialogue with the Renaissance culture that values the Classics, from which myths come, b) it brings Plato to contribute to mythological hermeneutics, suggesting that the Greek philosopher had an initiation capable of being recognized ahead as someone instructed in the teachings of Moses, and c) presents through Philo's mouth the interpretation that he considers most lucid, not perceived by the ancients, communicating with the historical-cultural tradition of which he is the heir.

The remaining mentions of *Timaeus* in Leo the Hebrew's text are found in the *Dialogue Three*, which aims to expose *The Origin of Love*. As the largest portion of the

Dialogues on Love, this stage is subdivided into ten thematic emphases, namely: 1) the importance of the senses as channels of intellectual interpretation of the world, relating the natural world with a spiritual perception, from an illumination provided by the divine intellect (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 215-235); 2) the participation of the intellect in the human soul; reflections on intellectual love (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p.236-238); 3) the concerns of the soul in the face of unrequited love; a prelude to the effects of love on lovers, a theme that would be expanded into a probable fourth dialogue (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 239-245); 4) a debate begins on the definition of the essence of love and what its nature is, which will lead to related aesthetic and metaphysical issues: the sense of the good and the beautiful in the delight of love (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 246-267); 5) the birth of love is questioned IF it had an origin (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 268-273); 6) it is asked WHEN love was born, and it is defined that the first love is from the first lover to the first loved one, all united in God (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 274-296); 7) it is answered WHERE love was born (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 297-385); 8) we want to know FROM WHOM love was born (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 386-395); 9) there is a double questioning about why and FOR WHAT END love was born (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p.396-413); 10) finally, the consummation of natural love is postponed once again, given the distrust that is established about sincerity and willingness in the interests of this love (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 414-417). The final references to *Timaeus* that are of interest here occur in the sixth and seventh emphases of *Dialogue Three*.

In this Dialogue, the proposal of Leo the Hebrew to unite Platonic and Aristotelian arguments in defense of his interpretation of love as the cause of the world is more noticeable. According to Leo the Hebrew, Plato and Aristotle agreed that, although the eternal parents were "Ideas and Chaos", the world, the result of this union of love, has a temporal principle, that is, it was created *ex novo*. (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 289,290). For this reason, his argumentation leads him to question *if/ when/ where/ from whom/ for what purpose* love was created (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 246). To answer these questions about the origin of love, Leo the Hebrew resorts to Aristotelian causes and the Platonic worlds, building an intricate philosophical system, according to the following model:¹⁶

	On the Origin of Love				
5 questions	If	When	Where	From whom	For what purpose

¹⁶We elaborated this synoptic framework and the implications arising from it in reflections after GOMES (2017), serving as an epistemic script to expand analyzes of the third and denser chapter of the *Dialogues on Love*.

4 Causes	Formal	Material	Efficient	Final
3 Worlds	Intelligible	Sensitive	Natural	

To exemplify this approach, Leo the Hebrew once again resorts to the *Timaeus*. And through Philo, he seeks to answer Sophia's questions about WHEN and WHERE love originated. His answer imposes a temporal principle, exemplifying with the material cause the presence of love in the sensible world.

Resorting to Aristotelian causes to explain the intentions of the Godhead, Leo the Hebrew recalls that the Supreme God, having been an EFFICIENT CAUSE of the world in producing it, and a FORMAL CAUSE in preserving it, also shows itself as "FINAL CAUSE in bringing it back to itself, as to the ultimate perfection and finality, through the perfective acts of the universe itself" (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 399). (GOMES, 2017, p. 95)

Once again, the question revolves around the *ab aeterno* existence of the world. Disagreeing with Aristotle, for whom the world never had a temporal principle, such as God (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 275), Philo demonstrates to Sophia that, even if God is *ab aeterno* producer, the world would necessarily continue to be *ab aeterno* produced, the effect such as its cause. Unsatisfied with the logic of this reasoning, Leo the Hebrew brings Plato to reaffirm the Jewish principles he interprets through the *Timaeus*:

But the faithful, and all those who believe in the holy law of Moses, opine that the world does not exist *ab aeterno*, but was created out of nothing in a temporal principle; and some of the philosophers seem to be of this opinion as well: one of them is the divine Plato, who in the *Timaeus* argues that the world was made and begotten of God, produced from Chaos, which is the formless matter from which all things are generated. And although Plotinus, his follower, wants him to turn to the view of the eternity of the world, asserting that that Platonic generation and the making of the world must be understood to have been *ab aeterno*, yet Plato's words seem to admit a temporal principle, and it is thus that other distinguished Platonists understood it. (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 275)

In the last quote to the *Timaeus* that Leo the Hebrew brings to the Dialogues on Love, the topic under discussion is the corruption of bodies in the face of divine eternity. Still defending that the world is the child of God and Chaos, as the common father and mother of its parts, Leo the Hebrew disputes the understanding of some Platonists who attribute to angels and other spiritual beings the condition of being formed by God intellectually, but without corporeality (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 282,283), because for "those who think that intellects are souls and forms of the celestial body, the matter in the composition of celestial bodies is enough for them, and not the intellects that are their souls." (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p.

283). The questioning of how Plato thinks and how Philo himself believes is imposed on Sophia by the understanding of these unidentified Platonists in the dialogue. Here is the reflection of Leo the Hebrew by the mouth of Philo:

Your objection is valid. However, Plato says in the *Timaeus* that the high God, speaking to the celestial, said to them: "Ye are my work, and dissoluble by yourselves. But as it is an unpleasant thing to let the Beauty dissolve, by my participation you are indissoluble, because my strength is greater than your fragility". I believe, however, that by these words Plato does not understand that the heavens are eternally indissoluble, but rather intends to show why they are not successively beget-able and corruptible and little lasting, like the inferiors, despite being made of the same matter that causes birth and perishing; and he says that, though they should be so on account of their material nature, they are nevertheless very long-lived, owing to their greater formal beauty, widely shared by God. (ABRAVANEL, 2001, p. 283)

In this interpretation of the *Timaeus*, Leo the Hebrew reflects the influence received from Philo of Alexandria, who attributed this teaching to the relationship between the active Intellect (*noûs*) and passive matter in the generational act of the world. Commenting on *The Creation of the World According to Moses*, the Alexandrian rebukes those who understand the world as uncreated and eternal. His concern is to reject the suspicion of God's inactivity in the act of creation, highlighting actions of His providence.¹⁷ Once again, Leo the Hebrew evokes the understanding of its ancestral nuances, without undermining the Neoplatonic knowledge of its day, rather, reinterpreting it.

FINAL REMARKS

It is significant to note that all mentions of *Timaeus* in the *Dialogues of Love* are presented through Philo's arguments. As stated, the male character in the work of Leo the Hebrew, in addition to posing himself soberly and thoughtfully, represents the Jewish tradition preserved, passed on, and received over the generations. It is the symbology of the ancient wisdom of the *Torah* aiding the fleeting speculations of Greek philosophy, represented there by Sophia. In Judah Abravanel's text, the Hellenic reflection lacks the epistemological maturation of the Hebrew arcana.

The specific passages alluded to in this work by Plato are linked to the concept of world formation. The Platonic cosmogony that reads the ancient Greek myths becomes a

¹⁷"[8] Moses, who reached the highest point of philosophy itself and was instructed by the oracles in the many and most essential doctrines of nature, knew perfectly well that it is essential that there be an active and a passive cause. The active is the Intellect [*noûs*] of the whole [*hóloi*], completely pure and unmixed, superior to virtue, superior to knowledge, superior to the good itself and the very beautiful; [9] the passive, by itself inanimate and immobile, is, however, moved, configured and animate that this world is. As for the latter, those who claim it to be uncreated do not realize that in this way they cut by the roots what is most advantageous and most necessary for piety: providence [*prónoia*]." (PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA, 2015a, p. 60)

Mosaic reinterpretation in the reading of Judah Abravanel. Plato, considered an initiate into the teachings of Moses, is called to serve as a point of contact between the Hellenic and Semitic cultures. But even so, his text is not enough for a satisfactory interpretation of the action of love in the world. At the end of *Timaeus'* quotations, Philo always resumes the conduct of the narrative, to support an interpretation that helps Sophia in the comprehension that he understands as more faithful to the wisdom of the ancients.

For Leo the Hebrew, Plato could have gone beyond his mythological reading. Because he lacked courage, Abravanel understands, his student Aristotle dared beyond, but without giving up the eternity of the world, understanding it *ab aeterno* to God, which gave his master equal undeserved fame, later reinforced by Plotinus.

Thus, Judah Abravanel's effort to record in the *Dialogues on Love* a bold mosaic interpretation of *Timaeus* of the creation of the world as the final cause for the origin of love is also a way to restore the divine Plato to the number of Kabbalists.

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