"Before the law sits a gatekeeper. To this gatekeeper comes a man from the country who asks to gain entry into the law. But the gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at the moment. The man thinks about it and then asks if he will be allowed to come in sometime later on. “It is possible,” says the gatekeeper, “but not now.” The gate to the law stands open, as always, and the gatekeeper walks to the side, so the man bends over in order to see through the gate into the inside. When the gatekeeper notices that, he laughs and says: “If it tempts you so much, try going inside in spite of my prohibition. But take note. I am powerful. And I am only the most lowly gatekeeper. But from room to room stand gatekeepers, each more powerful than the other. I cannot endure even one glimpse of the third.” The man from the country has not expected such difficulties: the law should always be accessible for everyone, he thinks, but as he now looks more closely at the gatekeeper in his fur coat, at his large pointed nose and his long, thin, black Tartar’s beard, he decides that it would be better to wait until he gets permission to go inside. The gatekeeper gives him a stool and allows him to sit down at the side in front of the gate. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be let in, and he wears the gatekeeper out with his requests. The gatekeeper often interrogates him briefly, questioning him about his homeland and many other things, but they are indifferent questions, the kind great men put, and at the end he always tells him once more that he cannot let him inside yet. The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey, spends everything, no matter how valuable, to win over the gatekeeper. The latter takes it all but, as he does so, says, “I am taking this only so that you do not think you have failed to do anything.” During the many years the man observes the gatekeeper almost continuously. He forgets the other gatekeepers, and this first one seems to him the only obstacle for entry into the law. He curses the unlucky circumstance, in the first years thoughtlessly and out loud; later, as he grows old, he only mumbles to himself. He becomes childish and, since in the long years studying the gatekeeper he has also come to know the fleas in his fur collar, he even asks the fleas to help him persuade the gatekeeper. Finally his eyesight grows weak, and he does not know whether things are really darker around him or whether his eyes are merely deceiving him. But he recognizes now in the darkness an illumination which breaks inextinguishably out of the gateway to the law. Now he no longer has much time to live. Before his death he gathers in his head all his experiences of the entire time up into one question which he has not yet put to the gatekeeper. He waves to him, since he can no longer lift up his stiffening body. The gatekeeper has to bend way down to him, for the great difference has changed things considerably to the disadvantage of the man. “What do you still want to know now?” asks the gatekeeper. “You are insatiable.” “Everyone strives after the law,” says the man, “so how is it that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?” The gatekeeper sees that the man is already dying and, in order to reach his diminishing sense of hearing, he shouts at him, “Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I’m going now to close it.”

When Morgan notes that Scholem treats Kafka as a neo-Kabbalist, “giving new readings of revelation” (Morgan, Michael, Interim Judaism, p. 67) we cannot help asking if Scholem would view the gatekeeper of "Vor Dem Gesetz" as analogous to mystical descriptions of various angels as archons of differing rank, who guard the heavenly halls of the seven heavens in Hechalot texts? (For Scholem on Kafka, see
Scholem’s correspondence with Walter Benjamin as well as Benjamin’s Illuminations and Reflections. This mushal of gatekeepers (archons) guarding heavenly palaces can also be found in Rambam’s Moreh Nevukhim PT. 3, ch.51 and Orchat HaTzadikim. This Jewish subtext of the gatekeepers (angelic beings who guard the 7 heavens’ gates and palaces is different than the legend of the gatekeeper tradition illustrated by Avraham Ulf (Mose vor dem Gesetz: eine unbekannte Vorlage zu Kafkas Turhuterlegende; Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte 57, 4 (1983) 636-650)). Some interpreters have seen Kafka’s protagonist K.’s inability to attain to the heavenly halls, a kind of Beckettian En Attendant Godot character, as a function of Kafka’s own alienation from (1) his father (see Letter to My Father), (2) women (see Kafka’s rejection of a marriage partner in the daughter of a Hasidic Rebbe), and (3) his alienation from traditional Judaism as an assimilated secular Jew. The ambiguity, indeterminacy, non-endings, and lack of resolution to attain to the "transcendent Castle world" characterizes the frustration of post-modern condition that we call "Kafkaesque" whereby "insignificance" marks everyone’s life as if they woke up one morning like Gregor Samsa feeling like a cockroach (see Metamorphosis).

Excerpt from paper written by David B Levy for a class with Agnon expert Dr. Gershon Shaked (see The Shadows Within), former Professor of Humanities (Madei HaRuach) at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Footnote

1 Kafka writes, "Vor dem Gesetz steht ein Turhuter. Zu diesem Turhuter kommt ein Mann vom Lande und bittet um Eintritt in das Gesetz. Aber der Turhuter sagt, dass er ihm jetzt den Eintritt nicht gewahren konne. Der Mann uberlegt und fragt dann, ob er also spatter werde eintreten durfen. 'Es ist moeglich, sagt der Turhuter, jetzt aber nicht. Da das Tor zum Gesetz offensteht wie immer und der Turhuter beiseite tritt, buckt sich der Mann, um durch das Tor in das Innere zu sehen. Als der Turhuter das merkt, lacht er und sagt: 'Wenn es dich so lockt, versuche es doch trotz meines Verbotes hineinzugehen. Merke aber: Ich bin machtig. Und ich bin nur der unterste Turhuter. Von Saal zu Saal stehen aber Turhuter, einer machtiger als der andere. Schon den Anblick des dritten kann nicht einmal ich mehr ertragen.' Solche Schwierigkeiten hat der Mann vom Lande nicht erwartet; das Gesetz soll doch jedem und immer zuganglich sein, denkt er, aber als er jetzt den Turhuter in seinem Pelzmantel genauer ansieht, seine grosse Spitznase, den langen, dunnen, schwarzen tatarischen Bart, entschliesst er sich, doch lieber zu warten, bis er die Erlaubnis zum Eintritt bekommt. Der Turhuter gibt ihm einen Schemel und lasst ihn seitworts von der Tur sich niedersetzen. Dort sitzt er Tage und Jahre. Er macht viele Versuche, eingelassen zu werden, und ermutet den Turhuter durch seine Bitten. Der Turhuter stellt ofters kleine Verhore mit ihm an, fragt ihn uber seine Heimat aus und nach vielem anderen, es sind aber teilnahmslose Fragen, wie sie grosse Herren stellen, und zum Schlusse sagt er ihm immer wieder, dass er ihn noch nicht einlassen konne. See Jacques Derrida, "Devant la Loi," in Kafka and the Contemporary Critical Performance (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univeristy Press, 1987), pp. 128-150. When Morgan notes that Scholem treats Kafka as a neo-Kabbalist, giving new readings of revelation" (p. 67) we cannot help asking if Scholem would view the gatekeeper of "Vor Dem Gesetz" as analogous to mystical descriptions of various angels as archons of differing rank, who guard the heavenly halls of the seven heavens?