

The Mystic Heart of Judaism



SCIENCE OF THE SOUL RESEARCH CENTRE

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PREFACE

THE SEARCH FOR SPIRITUAL INSPIRATION and understanding is universal. Although there have been periods in history when the idea of the divine has become externalized, grounded in the material and the secular, there have always been those people whose direct experience of the mystical reality proved otherwise. Most recently in Europe, the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries saw a rejection of the mystical in favor of social, material, intellectual, and scientific progress. In Judaism this tendency gained great strength under the name of the Enlightenment, the *Haskalah*, which promised release from the insularity of the Jewish community vis-à-vis the dominant Christian society.

Yet at the same time, the explosion of Hasidism as an expression of the belief in the mystical and the essential importance of the spiritual master, the *tsadik*, in attaining soul liberation, counterbalanced this materialistic tendency. Indeed, personal direct experience of the divine through the intervention or inspiration of a spiritual master has always been accepted by devotional groups within Judaism. Perhaps because of the waves of persecutions the Jews had experienced in European society over the centuries, Jews had developed a tendency to look inwards for

their sustenance and strength. In this milieu, many great spiritual leaders appeared, mystics and moralists who gave form to their spiritual practices and developed complex systems of meditation and mystical symbolism.

By the mid-twentieth century, the intellectual Jew was careful not to abandon himself to emotional or ecstatic types of worship, nor to acknowledge the beauty and inspiration offered by the complex symbolism of the kabbalists. The modern intellectual regarded the mystical as mysterious, confusing, and somehow untrustworthy. For the mainstream religious Jew of western society, God became an abstraction rather than a living being. As a transcendent abstraction he could not answer prayers. For the intellectual, there was no room for a living spiritual master, a teacher who could put his disciples in touch with the divine holy spirit, the *ruah ha-kodesh* of the Bible. Anyone could have access to the abstract divine being – intermediaries not needed and not welcome – or at least this was the maxim taught to the masses and the youth.

In recent years, Judaism has moved on towards a more mystical approach. No longer is there shame associated with devotional ecstasy. Attitudes often reflect a cyclical spiral, and so today there is a “renewal” movement in Judaism that has brought many people in touch with the mystical nature of their being. These are people seeking a more immediate experience of God, who invest their religion with renewed hope for spiritual transformation. They are not afraid to seek masters, leaders, *rebbe*s, *tsadiks*, holy men and women, under whose wings they can grow towards a first-hand experience of God.

In 1977, the noted scholar and practitioner of Jewish mysticism, Arthur Green, anticipated this shift in attitudes when he wrote his article “The *Zaddiq* [*tsadik*] as *Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism.” In this article, he explodes the myth that in Judaism there are no holy persons who bring the divine reality to the

human level. He discusses the history of the concept of the *tsadik* as the pillar who connects heaven and earth, divine and mundane, who is the source of all blessings that flow to man on earth, and who acts as the channel through which man can return to the divine. Green recounts how various contemporary scholars have corrected this one-sided presentation of the religion and have demonstrated “the perseverance with which myths of sacred persons survived and developed in the literature of later Judaism.”¹

The purpose of this book is to rediscover the spiritual masters of Jewish history whose teachings have brought inspiration and spiritual solace to generations of Jews – from the prophets of the biblical period through the mystics and rabbis of antiquity; to the *hasidim* (pietists) of Germany, the Sufis, and kabbalists of the Middle Ages; to the messiah figures of all periods, later kabbalists and wonder workers, and finally to the *tsadikim* of Eastern European Hasidism.

The spiritual level attained by these individuals will always remain a mystery for us, both because of limitations of our own experience and the impossibility of assessing another person’s spiritual experience. The depth and degree of their influence on their disciples also would have varied according to the receptivity of those disciples. The dominant threads, however, we can discern: the yearning for spiritual understanding, for closeness to God, relief from the sufferings of the material world – all these the living spiritual masters shared. The richness of the literature they left behind is a witness to the great creative surge that the inner spiritual quest inspires.

It is my own experience with a living spiritual master that has inspired me to dive into these three millennia of Jewish life to bring to the surface the evidence of those great teachers and mystics who dedicated their lives, physically and spiritually, to continually renew the heart and soul of Judaism. They have been a channel for the divine power to enter the physical realm

of human life, and a ladder through which others might ascend and experience the divine.

Working on this book has given me the opportunity to focus on the mystic heart of my own inheritance. It has been inspiring to discover the continuum of voices within Judaism that resonate with the voices of the great spiritual leaders and masters of other ways and paths to God. It is this discovery that has been thrilling and humbling for me, with my deep roots in Judaism, as I have researched material for this book.

In essence, this book is concerned with the universality of spiritual truth as expressed through the Jewish experience. In its natural unfolding as a mostly chronological study, *The Mystic Heart of Judaism* attempts to demonstrate the primacy of the spiritual master as the teacher and transmitter of truth. It presents the living teachers and their living teachings, their inner spiritual life with the divine, their relationship of love with their disciples.

It is my hope that this book will be of value particularly to other readers with a Jewish heritage who are searching within their tradition for knowledge of the one God who is common to all humanity. And if their search takes them to a living spiritual master who can inspire and guide them on the path of mystic awakening, they will be most fortunate.

The twenty-first century is witnessing a growing dialogue among adherents of the world's religions as they explore their common foundation of spirituality while respecting the differences arising from history and culture. It is hoped that this book will make a positive contribution to that dialogue by bringing to light the perspectives of Judaism's great spiritual teachers and mystics.

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I also wish to acknowledge with fondness the contribution of the late Steve Segal, who assisted me with the initial research on the kabbalists discussed in this book.

INTRODUCTION

Revelation and Concealment

THE HEBREW WORD *OLAM*, meaning “world,” is thought to derive from the same root as the word “to conceal” (*le-ha’alim*). Mystics are those who, while living in the *olam*, see through its illusion of substance to the eternal, divine reality it conceals. Like pearl divers who plunge to the depths of the ocean, they retrieve the pearl of pure spirituality and share their wisdom with humanity. Throughout the millennia of Jewish history, every generation has given birth to mystics who have sought the great spiritual treasure that is concealed within the revealed.

Mystical practice is like a fine thread that runs through the entire history of the Jewish people. From the earliest biblical accounts of the patriarchs conversing with God, to the prophets’ passionate commitment to their divine mission, to the *merkavah* mystic’s inner journeys to supernal realms,* to the kabbalists’

* *Merkavah*: Literally, chariot. The merkavah mystics were those who undertook the mystical journey between the first and eighth centuries, the name coming from biblical references to inner ascent on a chariot.

creation of complex meditation practices,* Judaism has always been enriched by these courageous souls, fired by longing for the divine, who let no obstacle stop them in their quest.

Through its 4,000-year history, Jewish mysticism has taken many different forms. At times it has been highly devotional and ecstatic; at other times it has been extremely intellectual. At times it was the solace of small groups of kabbalists who kept awake night after night in study and meditation; later it became the manifested joy of the *hasidim* who made it available to the entire Jewish community.† Additionally, because the Jewish people have lived as a minority among adherents of different religions and cultural traditions, the Jewish mystical experience reflects its exposure to these distinct influences. In Western Europe, Jews came in contact with Christian concepts of God, including its feminine aspect, the Virgin Mary, contributing to the development of the concept of the *Shekhinah* – the feminine, immanent aspect of God. Austere Christian monastic traditions also influenced Jewish mystics and practitioners in the Middle Ages. And when Jews came in contact with Muslims settled in Palestine, North Africa, and Spain, they absorbed elements of Neoplatonism and Sufi mystical practice, to the point where some Jewish writings are nearly indistinguishable from those written by Muslim mystics. Jewish mystics also traveled widely around the Mediterranean and influenced one another, creating a dynamic spiritual tradition.

Yet throughout this highly diverse and many-faceted history, certain themes and characteristics keep recurring. This book tells the story of Jewish mysticism in chronological order, each chapter focusing on a particular time and place, a particular group of mystics, a particular movement in the ever-evolving story of

* *Kabbalah*: Literally, receiving. The term refers to a mystical tradition that began in medieval Spain and continues till today.

† *Hasidism* is the devotional mystical movement that began in eighteenth-century Poland. Its followers were called *hasidim*.

Jewish mysticism. Roughly, the themes that keep reappearing, in spite of vast cultural and historic differences, can be grouped as follows: the chain of transmission, divine unity, divine language, inner journey and mystic experience, and the theme that suffuses all aspects of Jewish mysticism – Revelation and Concealment.

The chain of transmission

From the time of antiquity, before there were written records that attest to an historical lineage of mystics, we encounter many legends and traditions about the biblical patriarchs which portray them as spiritual masters – evolved beings in contact with the divine who imparted their sacred knowledge to humanity. For example, several legends about Adam symbolically tell the story of God bestowing upon him the spiritual teaching in the form of a book, or as a gemstone, which he later passed down through the generations. Eventually, as the legends explain, this knowledge, this light, was shared with humanity through the prophetic mission of Moses and his spiritual heirs – the Israelite prophets.

After the period of the Bible, we have more distinct evidence that mystics continued in their quest to have the experience of God. The *merkavah* (chariot) mystics, active from the first to eighth centuries, would assemble discreetly in small groups to undertake their spiritual journey and lend support to one another. They were called chariot mystics because their mystical experiences were portrayed as a journey in a chariot. Their teachings were brought to Europe by ancient travelers around the Mediterranean basin. They spread from Palestine and Babylonia to Italy, from there to Germany, and later to France, Spain, and throughout Europe.

In many of these documents there are references to heavenly revelations and contact with the prophet Elijah and other supernatural beings. Yet there was always an emphasis on the transmission of the teachings from master to disciple. Beginning

in medieval times, the kabbalists passed on their teachings in secrecy, and later more openly. The relationship of these mystic masters with their disciples was very intimate. They would assemble in small groups called *hevras*, or *idrās*, their entire lives being devoted to adhering to their masters' instructions with great sincerity and intensity.

It is with Hasidism, the movement that began in eighteenth-century Poland, that the teachings were spread to the general populace, the householders – no longer remaining the province of an elite group of mystics. And in Hasidism we find the most explicit emphasis on the importance of the spiritual master, the *tsadik*. He is described as descending from his high rung on the ladder of spirituality to the low level of ordinary people, and raising them to his level where they might experience the divine bliss and joy. Sometimes the master himself was considered the ladder, whose lowest rung was on earth and whose highest was in heaven – he could straddle both the worlds. His consciousness was in the physical as well as the spiritual realms, and thus his true spiritual nature was concealed by his physical body. One of the Habad *hasidim* said that the *tsadik* was “infinite substance garbed in flesh and blood.”² By attaching oneself to such a master, individuals could ascend to the heights of divine experience.

The theme of concealment and revelation may also be found in the belief that there are true spiritual masters present among humanity, but they are disguised as ordinary persons. The example of the prophet Moses is often brought forth: Moses is depicted as an ordinary, somewhat clumsy person with a stutter, yet God chose him for the divine mission of saving his people. In the medieval Zohar, the most important text of the Kabbalah, there are poignant tales of a mule driver who is wiser than the renowned rabbis, and of a child who is the hidden spiritual master. Numerous stories have also been recorded about the hidden spirituality of the first hasidic master, the Ba'al Shem Tov, who

concealed himself as an uneducated ignoramus and, ultimately, through his actions and pronouncements, revealed that he was the great master and liberator of souls. So the true seeker needs to be watchful and thoughtful, as one never knows where or when he will find his master.

Perhaps these stories are also a metaphor for the deep truth that all of us, who seem to be quite ordinary, are created in the image of God – that we, as we are, contain the potential for the greatest heights of spiritual achievement. Our soul is a spark, a particle of the divine essence, trapped in the physical world only temporarily, as we await liberation through the teachers he sends.

Divine unity

An important characteristic of Jewish mysticism is that, despite the expression of the religion through a multiplicity of outer forms and rituals, there is a sense that a single spiritual reality abides in and underlies everything. To the mystics, the one God, who is the object of prayer and the focus of religious practice, can be realized through meditation as the singular creative power that gives life to the entire creation. Without it, creation would disintegrate.

The most important prayer in Jewish life is a quote from the Bible: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4). This oneness is taken by the mystics very literally. It is not just lip-service to a simplistic concept of “monotheism,” as taught to every school child in the Jewish world. The “one God” is the power, the divine presence that is experienced by the mystic as an abstract entity empowering everything, consciousness filling and encompassing the entire creation. And, from the practical human level, it allows one to accept that every event and condition of life, both pleasant and unpleasant, is an expression of the divine will, as there is nothing outside of God. As such, all of life is divine. As Samuel ben Kalonymus of Germany wrote in the twelfth century:

Everything is in You
and You are in everything
You fill everything and you encompass it all;
When everything was created,
You were *in* everything;
Before everything was created,
You *were* everything.³

The multiplicity of the material creation leads us to think that there truly is a diverse reality, but mystics know through personal experience that there is only one divine reality or substance flowing through all of creation. It is the only true reality, as the coarse outer covering of the material creation will perish in time, and only the divine truth or essence will remain. In contemporary terms one could call this a “nondual” approach to religion as it sees the one, rather than the many, in everything.

Kabbalist mystics in medieval times introduced the terms *ayin* (nothing) and *yesh* (substance) for these two opposites, *ayin* signifying the formless divine essence that pervades everything, and *yesh* the physical creation. The tension between the two poles also became the defining motif of Habad Hasidism in the nineteenth century, which emphasized the importance of looking beyond the revealed realm of *yesh* to come in touch with *ayin* – the concealed infinite.

From approximately the twelfth century, Jewish mystics developed a complex symbolism describing the spiritual realms and the process of creation. The literature describing this symbolism makes up the bulk of the texts of the Kabbalah. At its core was the need to explain how *yesh* – matter – could have been created by a God who is *ayin* – entirely abstract and without substance. The kabbalists taught that a series of divine qualities (*midot*) were emanated from the supreme God. These qualities were also called emanations (*sefirot*), and were generally

visualized as flowing in a hierarchical order, each *sefirah* (emanation) a projection or reflection of the one above but existing at a lower vibratory level. Thus the light, the power, of the unitary Godhead, also called the *Ayn-Sof* (the infinite eternal, from the word *ayin*), which is beyond differentiation, flows downward through the *sefirot*, subtly dividing into positive and negative poles. Said another way, the primal divine light breaks apart, its sparks becoming separated from their source, imprisoned in the material creation. This is the realm of duality.

The symbolism of the *sefirot* was extended by each generation of mystics to interpretations of the narratives and personalities of the Hebrew Bible, each being identified with a particular *sefirah*. Thus the biblical stories were understood not simply as tales of human beings interacting with one another and with God, but also as metaphors for the relationship between the qualities of the divine and God himself, and as an allegory of the events of Jewish history.

With the contribution of numerous mystics following the spiritual path over hundreds of years, the symbolism of the Kabbalah has evolved into an elaborate interlinking set of symbols and metaphors with layer upon layer of meaning. Symbolism became the means of conveying several levels of reality at once. Each symbol is like a hypertext link to a multi-faceted reality concealed within a simple word or phrase.

Divine language

From the very beginning, Jewish mystics were engaged in meditation on the “name” or “word” of God, as this divine power or spirit was most often called in the Bible. Over and over we read that the prophets came in contact with this name or word, which gave them the experience of the *ruah ha-kodesh* (the holy spirit). They attest to being uplifted and enveloped by this power. And through their devotion to it, they had the courage to bring

God's message to the Israelites of antiquity – to seek God within themselves and act towards each other lovingly and morally. The prophets often stressed this type of personal spirituality over the performance of sacrifices the people were accustomed to.

After the biblical period, calling on God's "name" became something different, as the concept of the "name" was transformed from being a power, an unspoken ineffable essence, an expression of the holy spirit, into a spoken or written word. From the time of the *merkavah* mystics in late antiquity, throughout the entire history of Jewish spirituality, mystics have used a variety of "outer" name practices to attain spiritual experience. Their devotion to these practices resulted in an intense level of concentration which allowed their minds and souls to become free of the mundane concerns of the material realm and attain a consciousness of the presence of God.

Often the mystics would take particular names or passages from the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and deconstruct them, creating more and more complex "names" of God that have no literal meaning, which they would repeat numerous times. By repeating these meaningless syllables, the mind would no longer focus on meanings; it could attach itself to the letters of the words as abstract symbols and, they believed, rise above the intellectual activity of the mind.

An underlying motivation of the mystics in interpreting and using the text of the Bible in their meditations came from the belief that its very language carries a divine significance. Mystics believed that God had uttered the entire Torah and thus it is an expression of his holiness, his will, his being. They mined the Torah to find the deeper, sacred meaning that lay concealed in its text. This approach was called *pardes*. The word *pardes* in Hebrew means "orchard," and on one level it is used literally for the mythical Garden of Eden; it gives us the word "paradise" – a metaphor for the garden of perfection – a place,

or time, of idealized eternal life. But the letters PRDS are also used as an acronym in Hebrew – signifying four levels at which one can understand the Bible: *Pshat* (simple, literal meaning), *Remez* (hint, inference based on the literal), *Drash* (allegorical interpretation), and *Sod* (hidden, secret, mystical). This meaning of PRDS gives us an insight into the techniques that the Jewish mystics and sages used in interpreting the Torah. So the Torah finally became an esoteric text, its literal meaning concealing and providing a hint to its inner, secret meaning.

This approach informs the way the Jewish mystics have viewed all events and circumstances of life, both on an individual and communal level: every situation or historical event was understood as concealing an inner, hidden, mystical meaning with which it corresponded.

Inner journey and mystical experience

The rich mystical literature of Judaism describes journeys to realms of higher consciousness, spiritual realms where God and his qualities (or angels) are experienced. Some metaphors were used consistently in different periods for this process, such as the ascent to a mountaintop. When the Bible says that the prophet Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the revelation of God, it implies a spiritual ascent as well as a physical climb up a mountain. Similarly, the prophet Isaiah urges the congregation of Israel to join him in the ascent to the mountaintop. The Jewish mystics recognized this dual level of meaning. Abraham Abulafia, a thirteenth-century mystic, wrote that there are two levels to understanding the ascent up Mount Sinai: the physical or revealed, and the spiritual or hidden. He writes:

The ascent to the mountain is an allusion to spiritual ascent – that is, to prophecy, for Moses ascended to the mountain, and he also ascended to the divine level. That

ascent is combined with a revealed matter, and with a matter which is hidden; the revealed is the ascent of the mountain, and the hidden is the level of prophecy.⁴

Other mystics used the image of a ladder to convey the spiritual ascent. The biblical patriarch Jacob saw, in his dream, a ladder stretching from earth to heaven and linking the two. Many centuries later, the hasidic mystics of eighteenth-century Poland wrote of the spiritual master himself as the ladder who straddles the physical and spiritual worlds. The master would descend from his heights in the supernal realms to the physical world in order to raise human consciousness to the divine. He would leave his high rung and descend to our lower rung in order to save us.

As mentioned earlier, another important metaphor for the inner ascent that recurs in various periods – from the biblical to the modern – is that of the chariot (*merkavah*). In the Bible, Enoch and Elijah are described as having ascended to the heavens in a fiery chariot while still alive. The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of a chariot made of the wings of angels and supernatural creatures ascending to the heavens, accompanied by transcendent lights, colors, and the rushing of otherworldly sounds. So the merkavah mystics of antiquity took their terminology from these biblical accounts and commonly wrote of traveling to spiritual realms in the chariot of the body, eventually reaching the throne region of God – the body-chariot itself becoming transformed into the throne, signifying that each human being can be viewed as the throne of God, the place where God resides.

Some scholars attribute the mystics' experiences to states of heightened imagination, or visions they had of ascending to the supernal realms. However, increasingly many students of Jewish mysticism are recognizing that these were meditative experiences, in which they took their attention within themselves and ascended to the higher levels of consciousness. Elliot Wolfson,

an important modern scholar, brings the testimony of Hai Gaon in the tenth century. He wrote that the merkavah mystic's purpose was to take his consciousness "into the innermost recesses of his heart."⁵ These early practitioners "did not ascend on high but rather in the chamber of their heart they saw and contemplated like a person who sees and contemplates something clearly with his eyes, and they heard and spoke with a seeing eye by means of the holy spirit."⁶ Clearly, this means that the mystics penetrated within themselves to a higher state of consciousness where they had the mystic vision of the divine.

Meditative experiences of inner light and sound are also recorded by many mystics in Jewish history: The medieval Jewish Sufis in Egypt and Palestine wrote of the *nur batin* (inner light) which they saw in their meditation, which they called *hitbodedut* (self-isolation). Isaac of Akko, a kabbalist mystic of the thirteenth century, wrote of being in a state between sleep and awakening, and seeing "a very sweet and pleasing light. And this light was not like the light that comes from the sun, but it was like the light of day, the light of dawn just before the sun shines."⁷ Many other kabbalists attest to their experiences of light in meditation; some, like Abraham Abulafia in the thirteenth century, also wrote of hearing the inner sound. The experiences of these past mystics hint at a variety of practices through which they entered the hidden realms of spirituality. While their practices may have differed at different times and places, the record of their experiences points toward the universal reality they discovered beyond the physical *olam* – the ineffable revelation concealed within the realm of *yesh*.

Conclusion

Because Judaism is a scripture-based religion, which emphasizes the engagement of the intellect in spiritual practice, it had historically been restricted to the elite and the male – women

were forbidden to read the scriptures or study Talmud. That is all changing, however. Parallel to the growing acceptance of women as equal partners in Jewish religious life, in the synagogue and the academy, there are many women scholars doing important research about Jewish mystics of the past and teaching meditation to contemporary seekers.

What is the appeal of Jewish mysticism, especially the Kabbalah, today in the twenty-first century? Perhaps its nonlinear and symbolic explanation of the creation and the relationship of the human with the divine resonates with deeper truths that have an eternal, timeless meaning. It is a call to enter territory uncharted by the mind and look at life in this world as one of many layers of reality. And perhaps there is a side of the human mind that still yearns for the power of myth to take it beyond the linear, the rational, and the predictable. It yearns to explore the spiritual core that links all humanity together in a common heritage of divine truth and unity.

We are at a crossroads in history, as many mystical manuscripts and books are being brought to light and translated for the first time. So the testimonies of mystics of the past are available to the contemporary seeker who is inspired to embark on his or her own path. As a result, this book can only be an interim study; new research is coming to light almost every day and it would be impossible to incorporate the latest discoveries. An example is the ground-breaking study by Eitan Fishbane about the kabbalist Isaac of Akko, titled *As Light Becomes Dawn*, published just as this work was in the final stages of editing. But books can only take us so far. The reader is encouraged to continue searching for the truth that is concealed within the revealed – and ultimately to go beyond reading to first-hand experience of the divine – to rise from the level of *yesh* to the fullness of *ayin*. The challenge of the search is to find what we are looking for: the experience of the eternal name or word of God, the *ruah ha-kodesh*. It is possible.

CLASSIC TEXTS OF JUDAISM

The Hebrew Bible

IN HEBREW, THE HOLY SCRIPTURES are called the *Torah*, which literally means teaching or revelation. The Torah generally refers to the Pentateuch – the five books of Moses – the scroll containing the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.* It is generally accepted by scholars that the Torah as we know it today was actually written by at least four authors between the ninth and sixth centuries BCE, drawing on still older documents and even older oral traditions. It was probably edited and combined into one scroll in the fifth or fourth century BCE, at a time when the Israelites had experienced exile and faced potential fragmentation as a people and were in need of a sense of identity with a strong religious and national focus.† The Greek names for each book are commonly used in all English translations of the Bible, and so they are used herein. In Christianity, the Hebrew Bible is often referred to as the Old Testament, but Jews do not use this term as it implies that the Israelites' covenant or

* The Hebrew Bible was originally written on scrolls made from animal skin, which were rolled. This was the common medium for written text in the ancient Near East.

† See Appendix #1 for a more detailed discussion of the writing of the Bible.

testament from God has been superseded by a newer testament or covenant. Understandably, this is a sensitive issue.

Genesis tells the story of the beginnings of the creation and humanity: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Noah and the great Flood, the tower of Babel, an account of the lives of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob), and the origins of the tribal clan of Israel. Genesis ends with Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, being sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers. Abraham is often dated to about 2500 BCE.

Exodus, the second book, concerns the sufferings of the Israelites as slaves in Egypt and the appearance of Moses as their savior. The mass exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, the early years of their wanderings in the desert, and the divine revelation of God's will and teaching on Sinai, perhaps in 1400 BCE, are the main events of the book. The prose and poetry are powerful. The laws of the covenant between God and man, and the details of the building of the Tabernacle and evolution of the worship of YHWH make up the last third of the book.

It might strike some readers as odd that the name of God, often spelled as Jehovah or Yahweh, has been spelled as YHWH, without any vowels between the consonants. This is in deference to those Jews who believe that it is forbidden to pronounce the name of God because of its awe-inspiring power. They use only the consonants of the name as a way of referring to him and giving the sense that the name is unpronounceable.

Leviticus is a record of the priestly forms of worship. The renowned translator Everett Fox separates it into three sections: 1) the sacrificial, consisting of laws governing the various types of sacrifices required, 2) ritual pollution and purification, affecting the general population and the priests, and 3) the concepts and rules of holiness – sacred behavior, sacred time (the calendar), and sacred space. It is generally assumed that this section of the

Bible was written by a priestly author or authors of the lineage of Aaron, Moses' brother, who was the first high priest.

Numbers, the fourth book, continues with the narrative of the Israelites' journey in the wilderness before reaching the "promised land" that God promised to them in the covenant as recounted in Exodus. There are various events demonstrating the rebellious nature of the Israelites. The book contains beautiful biblical poetry. Other sections explain the duties of the Levites, who assist the priests in the shrines, and give laws governing ritual purity and the priestly worship of YHWH. The last section gives instruction on the forthcoming invasion and conquest of Canaan.

The name Deuteronomy, of the fifth and final book, refers to the fact that it is a duplication of much of the earlier books. It is couched as a long narrative given by Moses to the Israelites before his death, impressing on them the importance of adherence to the covenant. It ends with Moses' poignant farewell, as he died before entering the promised land, after naming Joshua as his successor.

It is generally accepted that Deuteronomy was written sometime in the seventh century BCE and found in the Temple during the reign of King Josiah, who used it to justify a purge of the many syncretistic and pagan practices that had persisted in the Israelite worship of YHWH. Josiah had seen the exile of the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria and wanted to avoid a similar conquest and exile.* Probably under the influence of the priests, and perhaps also influenced by prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, he attributed the conquest of Israel to its failure to adhere to the

* After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel was divided into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel, comprising ten of the original tribes, and the southern kingdom of Judah, consisting of two of the tribes. The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE. The southern kingdom fell to the Babylonians a century and a half later.

covenant. God's love and compassion for his "chosen people" is expressed in the form of warnings that nonadherence to the covenant would bring suffering and doom.

The biblical books that follow Deuteronomy – Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings – are all written in the same style as Deuteronomy, and it is generally accepted that they were written by the same person. Together they constitute a complete history, a seamless account, starting with the death of Moses, through the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, the period of the judges, the early united monarchy, the division into two kingdoms, and the conquest of the northern kingdom by Assyria. The history ends with the glorious reign of Josiah, followed by the exile of the southern kingdom to Babylon.

The final editing of all the strains of the Torah into one text was probably done in the fifth or fourth century BCE, at least 500 years after many of the events recounted would have taken place.⁸

The term *Torah*, although strictly speaking referring only to the five books discussed above, is often used for the entire *Tanakh* – which also includes the collections of the *Nevi'im* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (Writings). Together, these three collections make up the Jewish holy scriptures. The Prophets includes the books of Joshua, Judges, the two books of Samuel and Kings, and the life stories and writings of individual prophets like Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and many others, who lived between the eleventh and fifth centuries BCE. In these books we find some of the most eloquent biblical poetry.

Since the nineteenth century, numerous scholars have painstakingly studied the prophets' writings and have demonstrated that most of the sayings and proverbs, which are written in a poetic style, are authentic, while the narratives about their lives and historic events, written mostly in prose, are heavily mixed with the additions, commentaries, and interpolations of later

editors. Joseph Blenkinsopp, a respected biblical scholar, lays out the current thinking on this subject: “The poetry in the prophetic books arose as a spontaneous expression of the prophet’s transformed consciousness, and could therefore serve as a reliable criterion for distinguishing genuine prophetic sayings from editorial additions and embellishments.”⁹ By focusing on the most authentic parts of the prophets’ teachings, we can get a fairly accurate picture of the nature of their spiritual leadership.

The Writings includes works commonly considered part of the Wisdom literature of the ancient Hebrews, such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. It presents the spiritually inspiring stories of Ruth, Daniel, and Job, the poetry of the Song of Songs and Lamentations, the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the two books of Chronicles. The Psalms, greatly valued by Jews, Christians, and Muslims equally, is one of the most important of these scrolls.

With the canonization of the Bible, many inspiring books written in the centuries after the Jews returned from exile and rebuilt their Temple became considered as “external” works, or “apocrypha.” Their study was initially forbidden to Jews, though nowadays they are available for all to appreciate.

Talmud and Midrash

After the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in the year 70 CE, the court and academy retreated to a town called Yavneh under the leadership of Yohanan ben Zakkai. The title *rabbi*, which literally means “my master” or “my teacher,” was first given by Yohanan to his disciples in the year 75 CE, to confer upon them the status of authority. From the second to sixth centuries the title was used for the group of sages who acted as advisors, guides, and teachers to the ordinary people living in Palestine and Babylonia who struggled to please God while coping with everyday worries

and problems.* These rabbis were the authors and editors of the Mishnah, Gemara, and Midrash, the texts which became the cornerstone of “rabbinic Judaism,” the mainstream religious orientation of the Jews for the next twenty centuries.

The Mishnah (from the word *shanah*, meaning to repeat or study), is an orderly arrangement of the laws derived from the Bible; it is organized in sixty-three tractates according to six broad subjects covering agriculture, civil and criminal law, marriage, the Temple rites of worship, issues of purity, and so forth. Written mostly at Yavneh by the rabbis called the *tanna'im* (repeaters, teachers), it was completed in the year 215 CE. In the academies, the Mishnah was memorized by students who heard it from the *tanna'im*. A supplement with some items not included was called the Baraita, and was published shortly afterwards.

The Gemara (from the Aramaic *gemar*, meaning study or teaching), produced by subsequent generations of rabbis called the *amora'im* (interpreters), is the most comprehensive supplement to the Mishnah and is organized accordingly. Produced in two versions – the Jerusalem or Palestinian (completed in the early fifth century) and the more-lengthy Babylonian (completed about a century later), it presents detailed discussions concerning all the legal issues which were of interest to the two sister academies of rabbis in Palestine and Babylonia. Together, the Mishnah and Gemara are referred to as the Talmud. In addition to the legal orientation of the Talmud, there are anecdotes about the rabbis which give hints to their spiritual and mystical activities and teachings.

A highly unusual and atypical chapter of the Mishnah is called *Pirkei Avot*, “Ethics of the Fathers.” It presents anecdotes

* The name Palestine was given to the occupied land of Judea in 135 CE by the Roman emperor Hadrian after he brutally suppressed Jewish rebellion and resistance to the Roman Empire, as a way of punishing the Jews and breaking their attachment to the name Judea, which identified the land as belonging to the Jews. Until 135, it was called Judea.

about the sages and spiritual masters from the Maccabean period (second century BCE) through the mishnaic time. The authors of the *Pirkei Avot* present themselves as the heirs to a sacred chain of spirituality they believed began with God's self-revelation to Moses. They see the entire prophetic period through the lens of their own rabbinic form of leadership, and even refer to Moses as "Moses our rabbi." Although this is recognized as myth, it still points to the wide acceptance of the concept of a divinely appointed or mandated spiritual leadership being active in every generation.

The Midrash is the earliest literary form of supplementary Torah and uses the method of deductive reasoning to interpret the Bible. Written by anonymous rabbis and collected in the early second century, it follows the order of the chapters of the Bible, and includes both *halakhah* (the legal parts of the text) and *aggadah* or *haggadah* (the nonlegal parts – legends and anecdotes which reveal moral or spiritual principles). It became a model for many works of Jewish mysticism in later centuries. Mystical texts of later periods, such as those of the merkavah (chariot) mystics and the Kabbalah, are introduced in the appropriate chapters.

Editions used

Unless otherwise mentioned, Bible citations are taken from the *Tanach: The Holy Scriptures* in *The CD-ROM Judaic Classics Library*, published by the Institute for Computers in Jewish Life and Davka Corporation, Chicago, IL, 1991–96. Bible translation is also partially based on *The Jerusalem Bible*, Koren Publishers. Koren Bible citations are indicated as KB following the citation. In a few instances, I have retranslated a term when necessary to bring out its meaning more clearly. The *Tanach* CD-ROM mentioned above also includes: *The Soncino Talmud*, *The Soncino Midrash Rabbah*, *The Soncino Zohar*. Most citations from Talmud, Midrash, and Zohar are drawn from this translation.

TRANSLITERATION GUIDE

In the interest of avoiding diacritical marks, a simplified approach to transliteration of certain Hebrew sounds and letters has been taken:

The guttural כ (khet) sound is rendered as **h**, and in this book is not differentiated from the normal aspirated ח sound.

The כּ (khaf) is rendered as **kh**

The צ (tsadi) is rendered as **ts**

The ת (tav) is rendered as **t**

In Hebrew, plural forms of nouns end either in the masculine *im*, as in *hasid – hasidim* (devotee – devotees), or in the feminine *ot*, as in *sefirah – sefirot* (emanation – emanations). In many places it was preferable to keep the Hebrew plural forms rather than trying to convert them into English.

Hebrew nouns and verbs may have the prefix **ha-** or **he-** attached (meaning “the”), or **ve-** meaning “and.”

EDITORIAL NOTE

In order to facilitate ease of reading, certain stylistic decisions have been made:

Most Hebrew words have been italicized wherever they appear in the book. However, those which appear very frequently have only been italicized when they are introduced or if the words themselves are being discussed from a linguistic or philological perspective.

A short form has been used for the sources in the Endnotes and Footnotes. Full citations are given in the Bibliography.



The
Mystic Heart
of Judaism



CHAPTER 1

In the Beginning...

SPIRITUAL MASTERSHIP IN JUDAISM can be traced to the beginning of time – with the stories of Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and other legendary figures whose lives are captured in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. In subsequent books of the Bible, in the collections called the Prophets and Writings, the narrative continues with the teachings of prophets like Elijah, Samuel, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The hereditary priests also played a role in providing spiritual guidance through the Temple ritual in which the Israelites attempted to commune with the divine.*

Of the earliest biblical figures – probably up until the time of Moses – we have to rely on the stories and legends collected

*The Jerusalem Temple was built in the tenth century BCE by King Solomon; in its inner sanctum called the Holy of Holies it housed the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. The outspread wings of two cherubim (statues of sphinx-like angels) that covered the ark were considered to be the throne of God – the place where the divine presence would manifest itself and allow itself to be contemplated. After the Temple's destruction in 587 BCE it was rebuilt in about 515 BCE and finally destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.

in the midrashim (rabbinic commentaries on the Bible), the narrative texts of the Talmud, the mystical interpretations of the Zohar (the primary work of the medieval Kabbalah), and other material. We don't have straightforward narratives in the Bible itself describing the mystic experiences of these patriarchs – just hints here and there, which were expanded upon by the later literature. What is significant, however, is what this later literature focused on – the possibility of personal contact with the divine – the first-hand experience of the divine power, the ascent to higher spiritual realms. This demonstrates that there was always a subtext of personal spiritual experience and transmission embedded alongside the literal history that the Bible presented. The later mystics were able to extract these spiritual themes from the Bible's narrative of the events of the men and women of an earlier time.

ADAM, THE FIRST MAN, the first human being: To Jewish mystics he became the archetype of humanity, whom they called Adam Kadmon (the primal Adam). They understood him symbolically as the macrocosm within whom all life was generated, like the Primordial Man of the Upanishads¹⁰ and the P'an ku (primal man) of China.¹¹

The legends surrounding Adam are compelling. In addition to the well-known stories of Adam and Eve in Genesis, many legends were passed down from generation to generation in sources outside the Bible; some were written down as midrashim, or preserved in the Zohar and other collections. Some not included in the Jewish sources appear in the Muslim *hadith* (narrations originating from the words and deeds of Muhammad). Indeed, the very foundation of the Jewish religion is based on a literature conveying the experiences of evolved souls who had direct

revelation from God, and the transmission of that spiritual knowledge, often secretly, from one generation to the other through a line of masters, beginning with Adam himself, the first man. This is not the Adam of original sin whom we know from the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, but the Adam of light – the one chosen by God to receive His light and transmit it to succeeding generations. These legends assume that Adam was given a divine mission to convey God's spiritual light and wisdom to the world.

A fifth-century legend recounts that when Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden, they lost the primordial celestial light – the light that was God's first creation. Later an angel returned a small fragment to them in the form of a gemstone, a *tsohar*.

Without this light, the world seemed dark to them, for the sun shone like a candle in comparison. But God preserved one small part of that precious light inside a glowing stone, and the angel Raziel delivered this stone to Adam after they had been expelled from the Garden of Eden as a token of the world they had left behind. This jewel, known as the *tsohar*, sometimes glowed and sometimes hid its light.¹²

At his death, the legend recounts, Adam entrusted the stone to his son Seth who used it to gain spiritual insight. Seth peered into it and became a great prophet. It was then passed down to Enoch, in the seventh generation after Adam, who also became spiritually awakened by virtue of it and eventually ascended to the heavens where he was transformed into an angel. About Enoch there are only a few lines in the Bible (Genesis 5:18–24) and yet a whole esoteric tradition grew around him; he is portrayed as a spiritual master who ascended to the heavens in mystic transport while still physically alive and saw God enthroned in all his glory, and then shared the divine teachings with his earthly descendants.

The story of the *tsohar* continues through the first generations of man and reveals how each person – Methusalah (Enoch’s son), Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses – used the stone to come closer to God and gain spiritual insight.

The jewel symbolizes the primal divine wisdom, the spiritual knowledge, the inner light, that is the heritage of humanity. It is the link between man and God. The legend says that God had originally bestowed this divine light upon Adam. Adam lost touch with it when he was disobedient to God and listened to the voice of his ego which told him to eat the forbidden fruit. Even though Adam was banished from the Garden of Eden, God preserved this light for Adam and his successors, in the form of a gemstone that an angel later returned to Adam. This is a poetic way of saying that this wisdom still remains within the realm of human realization because God has kept it for us. That it is passed down through the generations, through a lineage of prophets and patriarchs, tells us that it is there for everyone at all times.

The Bible begins its account of the creation of man with the statement, “This is the book of the generations of Adam” (Genesis 5:1). The Zohar interpreted this passage symbolically to mean that this book is actually the spiritual wisdom that is passed down from Adam through the generations. This means that the human lineage beginning with Adam is a spiritual lineage. Enoch inherited the same “book of the generations of Adam” and it gave him the key to the mystery of the holy wisdom.

Rabbi Abba said, “An actual book was brought down to Adam, from which he discovered supernal wisdom. This book reached the sons of Elohim [God], who contemplate and know it.¹³ This book was brought down by the master of mysteries [the angel Raziel], preceded by three envoys.

When Adam departed the Garden of Eden he grasped

that book, but as he was leaving it flew away from him to the gate. He prayed and cried before his Lord, and it was restored to him as before, so wisdom would not be forgotten by humanity and they would strive to know their Lord. Similarly we have learned: Enoch had a book – a book from the site of the book of the generations of Adam, mystery of wisdom – for he was taken from the Earth, as is written: He was no more, for God took him (Genesis 5:24). He is the Lad [the heavenly servant]....* All hidden treasures above were entrusted to him, and he transmits, carrying out the mission. A thousand keys were handed to him; he conveys one hundred blessings every day, wreathing wreaths for his Lord. The blessed Holy One took him from the world to serve Him, as is written: for God took him.¹⁴

Following Adam, the Bible tells the story of Noah and the great flood, in which God commanded Noah to build an ark in order to save one male and one female of each species. According to some students of ancient myth, the ark symbolizes the continuity of life, and thus the core of the spiritual teachings, through the cosmic cycles of creation, destruction, and re-creation.¹⁵ Noah functions as a mythical spiritual master, the archetypal savior of mankind, who carries the mystical teaching (symbolized as the potential for the continuity of life) from one age to another. In the Bible, Noah is called *ish-tamim*, a perfect or innocent man, *tam* meaning simple, whole, or perfect.

Noah is also called a *tsadik*, a term derived from *tsedek* (virtue, righteousness), a quality of God that human beings can

* *Na'ar* (lad) is the term used in the Bible (Proverbs 22:6) which was mystically interpreted as the chief angel, named Metatron by the merkavah mystics, who described him as weaving wreaths of the blessings recited in the prayers of the Jews, and creating crowns of these wreaths for the “head” of God, who sits on the supernal throne.

emulate. *Tsedek* can also mean salvation, deliverance, or victory. Over the centuries, the *tsadik* was to become one of the most important terms for the spiritual master in Judaism.

Although the recorded legends about Adam, Noah, Enoch, and other personalities date from a much later period, they attest to the persistence of a genre of literature parallel to the Bible that presented these towering figures as spiritual adepts who had powerful mystical experiences through meditation and prayer – experiences so profound that they created a model for later Jewish mystics to emulate. They provided narratives through which the later mystics imparted their teachings.

Abraham

Abraham is regarded as the first spiritual father of the Jews, because according to the story, he rejected idol worship and chose to worship YHWH, the one God. The Bible gives an account of Abraham's early life and his journeys, at God's command, from Ur in Mesopotamia, the "land of his fathers," to the land of Canaan. It tells of his devotion to YHWH and of YHWH's covenant with him. The covenant is a promise of mutual faithfulness. It is a pledge between lovers, one divine and one human. Abraham agrees that he will worship and devote himself to the one Lord. In exchange, God promises his unceasing love and care for Abraham and his descendants: that a great and mighty people would issue from him, to whom He would bequeath a land "flowing with milk and honey," provided that they continued to be faithful to Him. The covenant was to be sealed with the circumcision of male children issuing from Abraham and his lineage. This is the story on a literal level.

But what does it mean to say that Abraham began to worship one God? From a mystical perspective, this worship of the one God, or monotheism as it is commonly called, is the worship of the unity that is God, the divine creative power or life force that

permeates the entire creation; it is often referred to in the Bible as the essential, ineffable name or word of God, the holy spirit. Many of the ancient legends about Abraham reflect the esoteric tradition that he experienced God directly as the holy spirit (*ruah ha-kodesh*) and was given a divine mission to convey that knowledge to others.

Rabbi Judah Leib Alter of Ger (1847–1904), one of the most inspired of the later rabbis of Hasidism, taught about the deepest level of meaning of the prayer, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One,” which is considered the embodiment of the monotheism taught by Abraham. He explains that the entire creation “is God himself.” God is the power immanent in the creation.

The proclamation of oneness that we declare each day in saying “Hear O Israel,” and so forth, needs to be understood as it truly is. . . . That which is entirely clear to me . . . based on the holy writings of great kabbalists, I am obligated to reveal to you . . . the meaning of “YHWH is One” is not that He is the only God, negating other gods (though this too is true!), but the meaning is deeper than that: there is no being other than Him. [This is true] even though it seems otherwise to most people . . . everything that exists in the world, spiritual and physical, is God himself.¹⁶

In a play on words, some of the rabbis of antiquity interpreted God’s command to Abraham to leave the home of his fathers and “go up” or “get thee forth” to the land that God would show him, as a command for Abraham to leave the lower level or state of consciousness that he normally inhabited and raise his consciousness to a spiritual level through meditation. The Hebrew says literally, “*lekh lekha*” – “go to yourself” (Genesis 12:1), which has been interpreted mystically as “go within yourself.”¹⁷ The

rabbis believed that Abraham enjoyed communion with God through mystic experience.

Later Jewish mystics remarked that the covenant, which was marked by the rite of circumcision, was Abraham's entry into a relationship with God's "name." The Zohar says that the covenant marks the time that Abraham became united with the higher wisdom, the "name" of God. The circumcision, which seals the covenant, symbolizes the cutting away of attachment to the lower levels, rungs, or grades of spirituality. In fact, the term *brit milah*, commonly translated as covenant of the circumcision, also means "covenant of the name." The Zohar tells us that before entering into the covenant, Abraham had only seen God in a vision on particular occasions, but after that time he was always accompanied by God's presence.

Previously God gave wisdom to Abraham to cleave to Him and to know the true meaning of faith, but only this lower grade actually spoke with him; but when he was circumcised, all the higher grades joined this lower grade to speak with him, and thus Abraham reached the summit of perfection. See now, before a man is circumcised he is not attached to the name of God, but when he is circumcised he enters into the name and is attached to it. Abram,* it is true, was attached to the name before he was circumcised, but not in the proper manner, but only through God's extreme love for him; subsequently He commanded him to circumcise himself, and then he was vouchsafed the covenant which links all the supernal grades, a covenant of union which links the whole together so that every part

* Abraham was originally called Abram. When he circumcised himself he attached himself to God's name. The addition of the syllable "ha" evokes the divine as it is part of the Hebrew divine name.

is intertwined. Hence, till Abram was circumcised, God's word with him was only in a vision, as has been said.¹⁸

The worship of the one God that Abraham taught to his descendants and disciples, therefore, was most probably an inner worship of the name of God, with which he had been united at the time of the covenant. This is the true monotheism – worship of the one divine principle that is everlasting and sustains all.

The contemporary scholar of Jewish mysticism, Arthur Green, explains the essence of monotheism in mystical terms: “In the beginning there was only One. There still is only One. That One has no name, no face, nothing at all by which it can be described. Without end or limit, containing all that will ever come to be in an absolute undifferentiated oneness.”¹⁹

There are many traditions concerning Abraham as a spiritual master, a teacher who brought the divine wisdom from the East – the place of his origin – to Canaan, where he shared it with whomever he would invite into his home. The Zohar presents one of the most interesting. It recounts that Abraham purified the inhabitants of the world with water – a symbolic reference to the inner water, the divine wisdom which flows from the spiritual realms to the human. He then planted a tree wherever he resided, and through this he gave shade to all who “embraced the blessed Holy One.” The tree is also a symbol for the spiritual teaching. God is explicitly likened to the life-giving tree.

Come and see: Wherever Abraham resided, he planted a tree; but nowhere did it sprout fittingly until he resided in the land of Canaan. Through that tree, he discovered who embraced the blessed Holy One and who embraced idolatry. Whoever embraced the blessed Holy One – the tree would spread its branches, covering his head, shading him nicely. Whoever embraced the aspect of idolatry – that tree

would withdraw, its branches rising above. Then Abraham knew and warned him – not departing until he embraced faith. Whoever was pure the tree would welcome; whoever was impure it would not, so Abraham knew and purified them with water. Underneath that tree was a spring of water: if someone needed immediate immersion, water gushed toward him and the tree's branches withdrew. Then Abraham knew he was impure, requiring immediate immersion. . . .

Come and see: When Adam sinned, he sinned with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, inflicting death upon all inhabitants of the world. When Abraham appeared, he mended the world with another tree, the Tree of Life, proclaiming faith to all inhabitants of the world.²⁰

Adam's sin by eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is symbolically a reference to Adam's entering the world of duality, while the tree of life that Abraham planted symbolizes the divine unity, which is the ultimate source of all life.

Moses: The archetypal prophet

Moses is thought to have lived in the thirteenth century BCE, with the Exodus having taken place around 1230. The personality of Moses dominates all discussion of spirituality from his time onward. He is considered the quintessential Israelite prophet. Yet he was not a grand personality nor was he even called a prophet in the Bible – simply a man of God. The biblical portrayal is of a humble man who struggled to fulfill his divine calling and minister to a rebellious people. It is his example that became the standard according to which all the mystics of later generations were viewed, and they often referred to Moses as their spiritual ancestor. The eighteenth-century hasidic master, the Ba'al Shem Tov, taught:

Just as Moses was the head of all of his generation . . . so it is with every generation. The leaders have sparks [within the flame of their souls] from our teacher Moses.²¹

The medieval Jewish Sufi, Obadyah Maimonides, grandson of the twelfth-century philosopher Moses Maimonides, in his book *The Treatise of the Pool*, considered Noah, Enoch, Abraham, and other early patriarchs as practicing mystics, recipients and transmitters of the spiritual wisdom. He describes them as “intercessors” on behalf of the people, through whom the divine Will reached humanity. But, he says, by the time of Moses this lineage of prophecy had ceased to be active. It was only Moses who revived it.

The individuals who attained this state were very scarce, as it is said, “I have seen the sons of Heaven, but they are few,”²² like a drop in the sea. . . . For thou wilt find in each era but a single individual, such as Noah in the generation of the Flood, his predecessor Methuselah, Enoch, Lemekh, Shem, Eber, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. After the patriarchs the bond [*wusla*] was severed and there was no intercessor [*safi*] until the birth of the most glorious of beings and the noblest of creatures, our master Moses, peace be upon him, who restored it, through the Divine Will.²³

This spiritual inheritance that Moses received from the earliest patriarchs and used on behalf of the Israelites is explained symbolically in another legend recounted in a medieval prayer book. The spiritual knowledge was symbolically “engraved” on a rod or staff that came from Adam, who handed it down to his son Seth; and it was passed along through the generations till Moses received it. As a rod or branch cut from the “tree of life,” it symbolizes the spiritual power, the divine “name” of God that

Moses invoked as prophet and spiritual master of the Israelites. It is the rod with which he split the Red Sea, in the story of the Israelites fleeing slavery in Egypt.

There was nothing like it [the rod] in the world, for on it was engraved the ineffable name of God. This rod Adam handed on to Seth, and it was handed on from one generation to the next until Jacob, our father, went down to Egypt and handed it on to Joseph. Now, when Joseph died Pharaoh's servants searched through everything in his house, and they deposited the rod in Pharaoh's treasury.

In Pharaoh's household was Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses; Jethro was one of Pharaoh's astrologers and he learned of the importance of this rod by means of astrology. He took it and planted it in his garden, and it took root in the earth. By means of astrology Jethro discovered that whoever would be able to uproot this rod would be the savior of Israel. He therefore used to put people to the test, and when Moses came to his household and then rose and uprooted it, Jethro threw him into the dungeon he had in his courtyard. Zippora fell in love with Moses and demanded from her father that he be given her as husband. Thereupon Jethro married her off to Moses.²⁴

This legend points to Moses as a true spiritual adept, inheritor of the divine wisdom passed down from the beginning.

But outside of tradition, what do we actually know about Moses? What was the nature of his spiritual revelation, and what was his relationship with his disciples, the Israelites? In other words, what were the characteristics that defined Moses as a prophet, a man sent by God to liberate the people? One important factor was the nature of his selection through a revelation of God in a "burning bush." Second, is the extraordinary divine

encounter he had on Mount Sinai and his continuing intimate communion and conversation with God throughout his entire prophetic career. Also of great importance was his humility, embodied in his reluctant acceptance of his mission.

SELECTION

The book of Exodus of the Bible recounts that Moses was tending the sheep of Jethro, the Midianite priest and astrologer, when he had his first prophetic experience – a direct encounter with the divine reality, the “angel of the Lord,” manifested in a burning bush whose fire was never consumed.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to him
in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush;
And he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire,
and the bush was not consumed.
And Moses said, I will now turn aside,
and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.
And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see,
God called to him out of the midst of the bush,
and said, Moses, Moses.
And he said, Here am I.

EXODUS 3:2–5

The passage suggests that suddenly, spontaneously, without warning, Moses was *chosen* by God to be the savior of the Israelites, freeing them from enslavement in Egypt. The idea of God making himself known to the prophet through a burning bush has galvanized the imaginations of generations of Bible readers, who have understood it literally. But it also seems to suggest a symbolic interpretation, as an ascent to a higher plane of consciousness in which Moses had a strong experience of the divine presence, manifested as the ineffable spiritual light and sound.

Moses' response to this calling was indicative of his great humility. He said:

O my Lord, I am not eloquent,
 neither yesterday nor the day before,
 nor since you have spoken to your servant;
 But I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.
 And the Lord said to him,
 Who has made man's mouth?
 Who makes the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind?
 Is it not I the Lord?
 Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth,
 and teach you what you shall say.

EXODUS 4:10-12

Moses did not seek out this role for himself – quite the opposite, he saw himself as unworthy, unable to speak. When he begged God to relieve him of this awesome responsibility, God reprimanded him for his lack of faith, saying that the One who has created the mouth, and the words it utters, would teach him what to say. What greater reassurance could he have needed? And yet he continued protesting, five times in all, until finally God allowed him to bring along his brother, Aaron, as a spokesman. The humility that marks this incident became identified with the character of Moses.

REVELATION

The Hebrew name for Egypt, *Mitsrayim*, literally means constricted, and the sages interpreted the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt symbolically as signifying a state of spiritual constriction, a lower spiritual state.²⁵ Eventually, under the guidance of Moses, the souls of the Israelites came in touch with true divinity, God's word or speech, through the revelation at Sinai.

The Israelites waited at the foot of the mountain while Moses communed with God at the mountaintop. There God revealed the Ten Commandments and, according to tradition, the entire Torah. The bestowal of the Ten Commandments symbolizes a renewal of God's covenant with Abraham six hundred years before the revelation to Moses.

While Moses was intimately communing with the divine reality on their behalf, the Bible recounts that the Israelites were indulging in immoral behavior at the foot of the mountain, where they created and worshipped a golden calf. Although they were undeserving, the revelation was still bestowed on them. It was their spiritual heritage despite their ingratitude. This would be the model of their relationship with God during their forty years of wandering through the desert before reaching the "promised land." The journey through the desert was to give them the opportunity to leave the constricted spiritual state they had come from and provide a transition to their growing spiritual awareness. But they consistently lost faith and acted rebellious, wanting to turn back to Egypt, and again and again God, through Moses, proved his love for them. This story is also a metaphor for the Israelites' relationship with God and his prophets throughout their history – and for the soul's infidelity and ingratitude to its spiritual heritage.

Moses' experience of the awesome divine presence on the mountaintop is described dramatically in Exodus:

And Moses went up into the mount, and the cloud covered the mount. And the glory [*kavod*]* of the Lord abode upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days; and the seventh day he called unto Moses from the midst of the cloud.

* The glory of the Lord is normally understood as the visual manifestation of God's presence. Later Jewish mystics called it the first expression of God's creative power or will, the angel or logos. It was also used as a synonym for the *Shekhinah*, God's indwelling presence.

And the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. And Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and went up into the mount; and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights.

EXODUS 24:15-18

How did the people perceive Moses after his experience?

And it came to pass, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of Testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses knew not that the skin of his face shone while He [God] talked with him. And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come closer to him. And Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned to him; and Moses talked to them. And afterward all the children of Israel came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. But when Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he took the veil off, until he came out. And he came out, and spoke to the people of Israel that which he was commanded. And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone; and Moses put the veil upon his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

EXODUS 34:29-35

When Moses descended from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, his face shone with light – he had experienced within himself, in a state of higher consciousness, the spiritual light of God's presence with which he glowed. The Israelites

were frightened of the brilliance emanating from Moses – the immediate evidence of the power of the divine. He therefore put a veil over his face so that his light would not overwhelm them – this may be referring not so much to a physical veil but to his spiritually masking his spiritual brilliance so that he would not intimidate them. Moses sacrificed himself by standing between the Lord and the people as mediator, because the full presence of God's self-revelation was too intense for them. The book of Deuteronomy recounts the people's reaction to the divine revelation through fire and the awesome voice that projects from the fire. They were afraid they would die if they faced God directly, while Moses was able to speak with him and live.

The Lord talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire, I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to tell you the word of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire, and went not up into the mount.... [He then repeats the Ten Commandments which were engraved on the Tablets, and then Moses says to them:] These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly in the mount out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice which was not heard again. And he wrote them in two tablets of stone, and delivered them to me. And it came to pass, when you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, for the mountain burned with fire, that you came near me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders; And you said, Behold, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire; we have seen this day that God talks with man, and he lives. Now therefore why should we die? for this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, then we shall die.

DEUTERONOMY 5:4–6, 19–22

The Bible also points to the high degree of Moses' spiritual attainment by calling it a relationship where God spoke to him "mouth to mouth" and allowed him to see His "form":

My servant Moses . . . is the trusted one in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, manifestly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the Lord.

NUMBERS 12:7-8

Many Jewish mystics have taught that Moses' prophetic experience of the revelation of the Torah on the mountaintop was a metaphor for his spiritual ascent, in which he experienced, first hand, the divine power – the essential or unwritten, ineffable Torah or divine word. According to Abraham Abulafia, a thirteenth-century kabbalist, "the ascent to the mountain is an allusion to spiritual ascent – that is, to prophecy." He writes:

For Moses ascended to the mountain, and he also ascended to the divine level. That ascent is combined with a revealed matter, and with a matter which is hidden; the revealed [matter] is the ascent of the mountain, and the hidden [aspect] is the level of prophecy.²⁶

Arthur Green asks us to think about the fundamental significance of revelation. He understands Moses' encounter with the divine realm on a mystical level:

What then do we mean by revelation? Whether we understand the tale of Sinai as a historic event or as a metaphor for the collective religious experience of Israel, we have to ask this question. Here, too, the notion of primordial Torah is the key. Revelation does not necessarily refer to

the giving of a truth that we did not possess previously. On the contrary, the primary meaning of revelation means that *our eyes are now opened*, we are able to see that which had been true all along but was hidden from us... The truth that God underlies reality, and always has, now becomes completely apparent. . . .

What is it that is revealed at Sinai? Revelation is the self-disclosure of God. *Hitgallut*, the Hebrew term for “revelation,” is in the reflexive mode, meaning that the gift of Sinai is the gift of God’s own self. God has nothing but God to reveal to us... The “good news” of Sinai is all there in God’s “I am.”²⁷

Moses explicitly urged the Israelites to look within themselves to find God, “in your own mouth and own heart”:

For this commandment which I command you this day, is not hidden from you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it? Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.

DEUTERONOMY 30:11–14

Green points out that in Jewish spiritual history there is an underlying tension between the vertical conception of God – who lives in heaven, away and apart from us, who can be reached, metaphorically, by climbing a physical mountain – and the inner conception of God, who can be reached by climbing within ourselves to higher inner realms or stages of consciousness, through mystic practice. Green asks:

What does the Torah mean here? It does not sound as though Moses is saying: "God's teaching indeed *used* to be in heaven, but I have already brought it down for you!" This seems to be a rather different Moses than the one who climbs the mountain. Here he seems to be telling us that the journey to Torah is, and always has been, an inward rather than a vertical journey. The only place you have to travel to find God's word is to your own heart. The journey to the heart is the mystical quest.²⁸

The prophetic experiences that Moses had on Sinai, and earlier at the burning bush, indicate that he had a mystic transformation, an experience of the one divine reality within. He got in touch with his "mystic heart." At the most sublime level, the covenant between God and the Israelites was God's pledge to endow them with a state of spiritual consciousness symbolized as a land of milk and honey – the true promised land – provided that the Israelites stayed true to their side of the bargain – to worship YHWH and be obedient to his will.

MOSES THE SHEPHERD

But the Israelites did not stay true to the worship of the one God; they always doubted him and reverted to idol worship and fertility rituals. Yet Moses ministered to them faithfully and never gave up on his attempts to bring them back to God. His experience as a shepherd gave him an understanding of the challenge he faced in caring for his followers. In the ancient Near East, the shepherd was often used as a metaphor for a spiritual master or guide. If one of his sheep would stray, the shepherd would go out of his way to find it and carry it in his arms back to his flock, evading predators.

In fact, according to the Bible, many of the biblical prophets, such as Moses, David, Amos, and Ezekiel, were shepherds in their youth. Some of the later Jewish mystics conjectured that

“tending the sheep” was a biblical metaphor for meditation.²⁹ Whether these prophets were really shepherds or whether this was a metaphor for their pursuit of a spiritual life, their practice of meditation, one cannot know. The Italian kabbalist, Rabbi Simon ben Tsemakh Duran (1361–1444), suggests that Moses, prior to his being selected by YHWH for this mission, was already spiritually attuned, and that it was no accident that he became a shepherd.

With his keen mind, [Moses] was able to understand what was required to attain enlightenment, realizing that the path was through meditation [*hitbodedut*].

He therefore chose to separate himself from all who would disturb him and to reject all physical desires, choosing to be a shepherd in the desert, where no people are to be found. While he was there he unquestionably attained a great attachment to the conceptual, divesting himself of all bodily desires, until he was able to remain for forty days and nights without eating or drinking.³⁰

Aryeh Kaplan, whose studies of Jewish meditation reveal a long tradition of inner spirituality, says that *hitbodedut* was the main term used by ancient Jewish mystics to describe meditation. Literally, *hitbodedut* means seclusion or self-isolation, and is generally understood as a “kind of internal isolation, where the individual mentally isolates his essence from his thoughts.”³¹

Joshua

When Moses was about to die, the Bible recounts that God named Joshua as his successor, because the Israelite masses needed a living spiritual guide. Again using the metaphor of the shepherd and his sheep, Moses begged YHWH to appoint a successor to him, so they not be “as a sheep which have no

shepherd" (Numbers 27:17). The Lord agreed and told Moses to appoint Joshua, "a man in whom is spirit" (Numbers 27:18), meaning that he lives by the force of the holy spirit, just as Moses had. God pledges to have the same relationship with Joshua that he has had with Moses.

Perle Epstein, a contemporary scholar of Jewish mysticism, affirms that Moses' real relationship with Joshua was that of master and disciple. This was an inner, spiritual relationship, which was translated into Joshua's successorship outwardly, for the benefit of the Israelites.

Moses... had obtained the perfect *devekut* [cleaving to God]... All this, Moses accomplished in the high place called Sinai which, sages have said, meant a state of meditation figuratively referred to as "Sinai," as well as an actual mountain. Even the prophet's own sons could not assume the teaching; only Joshua, who "did not depart" from Moses' side, remaining in perfect *hitbodedut* [meditative seclusion] with him from his boyhood, could absorb the "tradition," and pass it on to the generations which followed.³²

But Joshua and his successors had an equally impossible job. Despite Joshua's leadership, the people continued worshipping idols and participating in fertility cults – to rebel, to doubt, and to forget the reality of the one God. This behavior would continue for the next fifteen hundred years. More than anything else, the story the Bible conveys may be a grand allegory of God's love for a wayward people: no matter how badly they behaved, he continued to send his prophets to guide them. This is an important aspect of the prophet's devotion to God and to his people, and it applies to all the prophets from this time onward.



CHAPTER 2

Early Prophets

After the fire, a still small voice.

1 KINGS 19:12

ULTIMATELY, UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF JOSHUA and his successors, the Israelites became settled in the “promised land.” Prophets appeared from time to time to bring the word of God and remind them of the importance of obeying God’s commandments and living ethically and morally.

The phenomenon of prophecy was not uncommon in the ancient Near East, and it encompassed different types of behavior.³³ In the Bible, the most frequently used term for “prophet” is *navi*, which probably comes from the Akkadian *nabi’um* – “the called one,” pointing to the prophets’ experience of being called by God.³⁴ The term was generally used for prophetic speech on behalf of God, and sometimes for the ecstatic behavior of the bands of prophets associated with the early prophets Samuel and Elijah, in the eleventh and ninth centuries BCE. Other terms used in the Bible for the prophet are *hozeh* (seer), *ro’eh* (seer),

ish elohim (man of God), *eved* (slave or servant of God), and *ro'eh* (shepherd),* but *navi* became the most widely used and all-inclusive term.

The *nevi'im* (plural of *navi*) of the ancient Near East generally upheld the forms of worship prevalent in their communities and provided optimistic predictions for the aristocracies. They reassured the monarchs, priests, and military leaders by casting oracles, interpreting dreams, “divining,” and the like. Biblical writings reveal that some Israelite prophets probably also began their careers in this way, but once they were truly called by God and had personal experience of *ruah ha-kodesh*, God’s word, they broke away from their origins and adopted the transmission of the divine will as their only purpose.³⁵

Inevitably, once they had the direct experience of the divine, they became a destabilizing influence on the social hierarchy. They didn’t hesitate to express their disgust at the exploitation of the downtrodden and the corruption of the aristocratic and wealthy classes. Criticizing the sacrifices, pilgrimages, and other forms of worship, they urged greater moral action as a way of adhering to God, focusing on the rights of the widow, orphan, poor, and disadvantaged. They also preached against syncretistic cults which combined the devotion to YHWH with worship of the fertility goddess Asherah and other deities. It has been said that the mission of the Hebrew prophets was one of truth, not of validation or flattery. They acted as the conscience of the community. Their voice was cacophonous, like thunder and bolts of lightning that disturb a calm summer evening. This is because they were galvanized by their personal experience of God which would not let them rest. In speaking about the power of the prophet’s speech, A. J. Heschel, the

* There are two words *roeh*, which are spelled differently in Hebrew. *Ro'eh* with an *aleph* means seer, visionary, and *ro'eh* with an *ayin* means shepherd. Both terms are used for the prophet.

noted twentieth-century philosopher and teacher, wrote in his inspiring work *The Prophets*: “The prophet not only conveys; he reveals; . . . in his words, the invisible God becomes audible. . . . Divine power bursts in the words. The authority of the prophet is in the Presence his words reveal.”³⁶

The writings of the prophets are full of references to their personal experience of the divine, of the word or holy spirit of God. It has been suggested by scholars like Aryeh Kaplan that these experiences came to them through the practice of various forms of meditation, which raised them to a “prophetic state.” No doubt the stages they reached in this meditative state may have differed from individual to individual, but it would be safe to say that they reached some degree of spiritual attainment. It is possible to conclude, even from a casual reading of the texts, that they had inner experiences of light and sound, of fire and storm, visions of angels and other nonphysical beings, and even of God seated on his throne.

So while it seems evident that the biblical prophets engaged in inner spiritual practice, it is hard to determine what their meditation techniques consisted of. The term *hitbodedut* is most commonly associated with the prophets’ form of meditation. It was this term that was used, for example, in relationship to Moses and Joshua’s inner meditation. Another term used is *hagut* or *hagah*, which may refer to a type of “mantra meditation, in which a word or sound is repeated over and over.”^{*} *Hagah* can also mean to contemplate, and was used in association with the experience of spiritual light and sound, as in the prophet Ezekiel’s vision.

^{*} “It appears that the word *hagah* has the primary connotation of ‘directed existence.’ The individual quiets his mind to a state of pure existence, while at the same time directing it toward a single goal. The methods of *hagah* meditation involve the repetition of sounds, words, phrases or melodies, and it is therefore closely related to the various forms of mantra meditation” (Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 115).

The difficulty in identifying the precise techniques used by the prophets is that over time the terms used to describe their meditation have been used for various external types of worship or contemplation, and thus have lost their mystical meaning in the modern context. There are few scholars who have taken it upon themselves to trace back the original, authentic meanings of these terms. One of these scholars was Aryeh Kaplan, a respected twentieth-century rabbi and practicing mystic, who focused on the mystical dimension of the prophets' writings. Thus, while many contemporary religious authorities emphasize only the prophets' moral teachings, scholars like Kaplan reveal the prophets' strong inner spiritual focus. Kaplan remarked:

Many people consider the prophets of the Bible to be nothing more than spokesmen and agitators, who spoke out against the wrongs of their people and governments. What is not generally known is the fact that these prophets were among the greatest mystics of all times, actively engaged in the loftiest meditative techniques.³⁷

The biblical texts, with a few bold brushstrokes, paint the prophets as larger than life, revealing intimate emotions and spiritual yearning, their states of higher consciousness and inner communion with the divine, their anguish and frustration at the resistance they encountered as they sacrificed themselves in fulfilling God's mission. And in these texts we get a sense of the divine presence revealing itself to them and, through them, to their followers and ultimately to us.

Textual scholars have found that the sayings and poetic writings of the prophets are the most authentic parts of the prophetic books of the Bible. They have demonstrated that the narratives, colored by predictions of forthcoming natural disasters and political upheavals, were heavily altered by later compilers and

editors who sought to bolster the agenda of the political and religious establishment. Fortunately, through the powerful and inspiring eloquence of the prophets' poetic writings, the spiritual dimension of their teachings reveals itself, and the reality of their relationship with the divine can become as immediate to us as it was for their own disciples.³⁸

Of the early prophets, however, little of their authentic teaching is available to us, while of the later prophets we have texts of their original words, published in their names. The early prophets, who lived between the eleventh and ninth centuries BCE, are mostly known to us through legends and miracle stories recounted in the books of Samuel and Kings. But despite this, what comes through is their intense and often-ecstatic experience of God, and their extreme loyalty to him despite danger to themselves.

Samuel

*Only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth
with all your heart.*

1 SAMUEL 12:24

In the eleventh century BCE, the child Samuel, who ministered to Eli, the high priest in the city of Shiloh (a northern shrine), heard God calling him by name. This was at a time when “the word of the Lord was rare” among the Israelites (1 Samuel 3:1), implying that the community had lost touch with the spiritual teachings. In the story, Samuel doesn't realize God is calling him, but ultimately God calls again and Samuel answers, “Speak; for your servant is listening. . . . And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and let none of his words fall to the ground” (1 Samuel 3:19).

And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew
that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord.

And the Lord appeared again in Shiloh;
for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh
by the word of the Lord.

1 SAMUEL 3:20–21

The prophets were God's emissaries to the people with a divine mission to convey his will. They were the leaders in spiritual and worldly realms. But after some time the people clamored for a king. The Bible narrates that God eventually agreed, and mandated that the king would share in the prophetic responsibility. The prophet anointed the king, and by so doing he shared his power and influence with the worldly ruler. Anointing symbolized his divine selection. Samuel anointed the first kings of Israel – Saul and David.

Thus even the king's worldly tasks were divinely ordained, and the king needed to be spiritually prepared to undertake them. This is because the temporal leadership of the people was derived from spiritual experience. God guided the prophets, and once the monarchy was established, he guided the kings also, through the prophets. Samuel's anointing of Saul would become the hallmark of divine selection of prophet, king, and priest in early Israelite religion, which would be carried over into the concept of the *messiah* – the anointed one. The king becomes a spiritual leader or master, at least potentially or symbolically. In practice, as we see in reading the Bible, they often did not live up to their anointing.

The historic account emphasizes that Samuel provided spiritual guidance to the people at a time when they were becoming a nation and gaining a political and national identity. He reminded them not to forget who their real King was, and of their deep and abiding relationship with Him.

The essence of the prophetic teaching is the spiritual guidance the prophet provides to the people. Samuel spoke humbly

of his role as prophet in teaching the people and in intervening on their behalf:

Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way. Only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth with all your heart; and consider how great things he has done for you. But if you shall still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king.

1 SAMUEL 12:23–25

But Saul was weak and disobedient, distrusted Samuel, and then became depressed. The spirit of God left Saul and went to David, his son's friend and fellow warrior, and an evil spirit took hold of Saul. Saul became jealous of David and tried to kill him. Eventually, when he felt unable to get guidance from the prophet nor directly from God himself, he sought the help of a spirit medium, which was prohibited under the covenantal law that allowed only the worship of YHWH.

When Saul sent his messengers to find David in order to kill him, they found him in the company of Samuel and his band of disciples, all "prophesying" – inspired and transformed by the spirit of the Lord. So Saul's messengers also prophesied – they all entered into the ecstatic prophetic state, overcome by the consciousness of the divine presence. Finally, Saul himself came to Samuel, and he too experienced the divine ecstasy. This was Samuel's way of taking Saul's consciousness away from the negative act he was about to perpetrate, and keeping him within God's will. And Saul became transformed by his inner experience in meditation.

And Saul sent messengers to take David; and when they saw the company of the prophets prophesying, and Samuel standing as chief over them, the spirit of God was upon

the messengers of Saul, and they also prophesied. And when it was told Saul, he sent other messengers, and they prophesied likewise. And Saul sent messengers again the third time, and they prophesied also. Then went he also to Ramah, and came to a great pit that is in Sechu; and he asked and said, Where are Samuel and David? And one said, Behold, they are at Naioth in Ramah. And he went there to Naioth in Ramah; and the spirit of God was upon him also, and he went on, and prophesied, until he came to Naioth in Ramah. And he also stripped off his clothes, and prophesied before Samuel in like manner, and lay down naked all that day and all that night. Therefore they say, Is Saul also among the prophets?

1 SAMUEL 19:20–24

It is interesting that in this poignant story of prophet and king, we can see at close hand the role of the prophet with his disciples – as mediator with God, as teacher, conveyer of the holy spirit, spiritual guide, anointer of the king, and as comforter.

David: The prophet-king

*By day the Lord will command His lovingkindness,
And in the night His song shall be with me.*

PSALMS 42:9

In David, the roles of prophet and king come together, and it is his anointing as king that later becomes a metaphor for the messiah in the Jewish imagination.

What were the qualities that were combined in David that made him the ideal prophet-king? He is portrayed in his youth as sensitive and spiritually minded, a shepherd who plays on the harp, “the beloved of God.” Tending sheep, as we have seen, was a common occupation of the prophets as it kept them humble,

trained to care for their flock of disciples, and gave them ample time for meditation. David is portrayed as beautiful, with a pure heart. With his anointing, “the spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward.” From then on, he was a receptacle for the *ruah ha-kodesh*, the holy spirit.

David’s spiritual stature is underscored in another beautiful passage from the book of Samuel, in which David speaks to his people just before his death. The narrator uses three metaphors for David’s spiritual calling – as “the man who was raised up on high,” “the anointed of the God of Jacob,” and “the sweet singer of Israel.” David addresses the people, declaring that it was the spirit of the Lord, the word of God, that spoke through him in ruling them. It was this spirit that laid down certain spiritual principles and qualities needed in a divinely appointed ruler.

And these are the last words of David.
David the son of Jesse said,
and the man who was raised up on high,
The anointed of the God of Jacob,
and the sweet singer of Israel, said,
The spirit of the Lord spoke by me,
and his word was in my tongue.
The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spoke to me,
He who rules over men must be just,
ruling in the fear of God.
And he shall be as the light of the morning,
when the sun rises, a morning without clouds;
As the tender grass springing out of the earth
by clear shining after rain.

2 SAMUEL 23:1-4

The biblical Psalms are a large body of hymns that are attributed to David, and contribute to the tradition of his being a

prophet-king, appropriately called the “sweet singer of Israel” who played the harp and danced for God.* Many of the psalms have a mystical strength and seem connected with a practice of meditation and the experience of the spiritual light and source of life within. For example:

Be still and know that I am God.

PSALMS 46:11

I recall You on my couch,

I meditate [*hagah*] on you in the night watches.

PSALMS 63:7

For with Thee is the fountain of life;
in Thy light do we see light.

PSALMS 36:10

In others psalms, he appeals to God to protect him from his enemies, which can be understood symbolically as his own weaknesses that assailed him. Here is one psalm that is well loved by people from all cultures and religious backgrounds as it speaks to the inner peace and strength that come from the Lord:

A Psalm of David.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul;

he leads me in the paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

* Research has shown that some of the Psalms predate David, some probably originating as hymns of other Canaanite religions that were adapted by the Israelites. Some were probably written in the centuries after David's death. They were finally assembled in about 400 BCE, about 600 years after David lived.

Even though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.
Surely goodness and lovingkindness shall follow me
all the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

PSALMS 23:1-6

The Psalms were generally sung in the Temple, and later were also recited by individuals at home. Devotional music was associated with the state of prophecy, and so the linking of David with the Psalms establishes him not just as a worldly monarch but as a spiritual adept who plunged within his own mind and soul and drew on the divine music and light he experienced. Joseph Blenkinsopp remarks that there is a tradition that David founded the guild of Temple musicians, who discharged their functions by “virtue of prophetic inspiration . . . the composition and rendition of liturgical music was a form of prophecy. In the act of worship, prophetic and poetic inspiration came together.”³⁹

The biblical stories about David’s life are contradictory: some present him as a spiritually elevated soul, a prophet, some as a man who struggled with his own weaknesses. There is a rather candid story, for example, that he sinned through lust for another man’s wife, had her husband killed, and then deeply repented for his actions. There are a number of instances where he suffered greatly on account of his weaknesses and sought God’s forgiveness. Since these stories were compiled at least four centuries after David would have lived, it is possible that legends ascribed to several people have been combined, creating contradictions.

Or perhaps the stories are meant as morality tales to demonstrate that no one, not even a king, stands above moral laws. Even the king has to pay for his actions.

The Israelite king was meant to be an extension of the divine will in the temporal sphere. He was, after all, anointed by the prophet to extend the prophet's influence into the worldly sphere, to fulfill God's will in the world. That was the origin of the monarchy in Israel.

As king, David was considered the starting point of a divinely appointed perpetual lineage, but few of his successors could live up to the standard of spirituality demanded by God and the prophets. Because David conquered the city of Jerusalem from the Jebus tribe and made it his capital, Jerusalem later became associated with the idea of a king-prophet-messiah – a spiritual leader who would retrieve his people from exile and rule from Jerusalem, a prophet who would have not only spiritual influence but worldly power as well.

There is a continuing debate among scholars as to whether references in the prophetic books to the Davidic covenant, in which God promises the eternal leadership of Israel to a king-messiah from David's lineage, may have been added to these texts after the fact. It would appear that the reputation of David was greatly embellished by later writers who wished to establish his stature in both spiritual and worldly spheres, and also to validate the claims of later kings to divine appointment and approval. Despite this, however, we can still get an idea of the type of living spiritual teacher being projected in the Bible through the figure of David.

Prophets and their disciples

Scholars agree that there were lines of succession among the Israelite prophets even where they do not refer to their predecessors by name.⁴⁰ The "sons of the prophets" is a term used for

groups of prophets-in-training or junior prophets associated with the earlier ecstatic prophets like Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha. As the prophets wandered from place to place among the people, their “sons” or disciples would accompany them. Similarly, many centuries later, “schools” of prophets gathered around the anonymous visionaries whose writings have come down to us under the name of Isaiah.

The eighteenth-century kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzatto wrote about what was required of a biblical prophet:

One must realize that a prophet does not attain this highest level all at once. He must elevate himself step by step until he actually attains full prophecy.

Prophecy therefore requires a course of apprenticeship, just as other disciplines and crafts, where one must advance step by step until the subject is mastered thoroughly. This explains what the Bible means when it speaks of the “sons of the prophets.” These were the ones who apprenticed themselves to recognized prophets in order to learn the necessary techniques of prophecy.

Those who train themselves for prophecy must do so through a number of specific disciplines. The purpose of these is to bring the Highest Influence to bear on them, nullifying the effects of their physical nature, which restricts it. In this manner, they attach themselves to God and bring upon themselves a revelation of his light.

These disciplines can include various meditations, reciting certain divine names, and praising God with prayers containing such Names, combined in a specific manner.

The main initiation into prophecy, however, depends on the neophyte’s devotion to God. To the degree that they make themselves worthy through their deeds and continually purify themselves through the above-mentioned

disciplines, they bring themselves closer and closer to God. The prophetic influence begins to come on them, and they finally attain true prophecy.

All this, however, requires the guidance of a master prophet. He must have an adequate knowledge of the prophetic methods, and be able to teach his disciples what each one must do to attain the desired result, according to each one's particular level of readiness.⁴¹

Blenkinsopp writes that "Samuel was the leader or 'father' of an ecstatic brotherhood, not unlike the sheik presiding at a later date over the Sufi dervish community."⁴² The philosopher and commentator Abarbanel writes about the Academy of the Prophets who were attached to Samuel and followed a meditation practice: "It appears that Naioth was a place near Ramah, where the prophets stayed. It was a place set aside for their meditations, where they would go and seek the word of God. The *Targum* (Commentary) therefore states that it was the 'Academy of the Prophets.'"⁴³ And Kaplan also writes that "Samuel taught and directed the 'sons of the prophets,' his disciples, . . . preparing them to perceive the prophetic influx. They would go to this hill to meditate (*le-hitboded*) and seek prophecy because of the influence of the Ark of God, which was kept there."⁴⁴

Elijah and Elisha: The ecstasies

Almost two centuries after Samuel and David, in the early ninth century BCE, the prophets Elijah and Elisha appeared in the north. Many of the legends about them and their miracles were also told about other "holy men" preceding them, so it is difficult to make any claims to historical accuracy. These were legends current in that period about spiritual masters of myth and pre-history. That said, Elijah and Elisha remain important prophets in Israelite history and Jewish consciousness.

Elijah is portrayed as a passionate ecstatic and a miracle worker. In the scriptural account, he is in perennial conflict with the Israelite King Ahab, the evil queen Jezebel, and all the prophets of the Ba'al cult, whose worship involved temple prostitution and other immoral behavior. Elijah is the truth-teller, the challenger of authority; he is charismatic and fearless. He warns the people to reaffirm their devotion to God and the moral life embodied in the covenant. He draws his strength from his direct communion with God, from his experience of the holy name or word.

In the text, Elijah is called the “servant” of God. What does this term reveal about his relationship with the divine?

And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things by thy word.

1 KINGS 18:36

The Bible says that the true servant of God is the one who “walks before Him with all his heart,”⁴⁵ in other words, the one who follows the path that God has indicated for him, in total devotion. God’s servant is he who has “done all these things at thy [God’s] word.” He has totally surrendered himself to the divine will. His actions are only the implementation of His will.

Throughout the narrative, we read that the word of God “comes” to Elijah. This means that the *ruah ha-kodesh* manifests within him; that he rises to the level of consciousness saturated with the divine presence, and that it guides his teachings and his actions.

After an incident in which he prevailed over the 450 prophets of the Canaanite god Ba'al, he ran to Mount Horeb. There he hid

in a cave where he meditated for a lengthy period, and “the word of the Lord came to him” and asked him what he had been doing. He explained that he was defending the covenant, the divine teaching, and now the prophets of Ba’al sought to kill him. Then God’s power manifested itself to him in the form of earthquake, strong wind, fire, and violent sounds. These may be symbolic references to the lights and sounds of the inner planes of consciousness, experienced in the state of mystic awareness. Ultimately, within the power of these spiritual lights and sounds he clearly heard “the still small voice,” the voice of God – the will of God.

And he said, Go out, and stand upon the mount
 before the Lord.
 And, behold, the Lord passed by,
 and a great and strong wind tore the mountains,
 and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord;
 But the Lord was not in the wind;
 and after the wind an earthquake;
 But the Lord was not in the earthquake;
 And after the earthquake a fire;
 but the Lord was not in the fire;
 And after the fire, a still small voice.

1 KINGS 19:11–12

Kaplan writes that the visions of the biblical prophets, their experiences of God, came about through the deep meditation and tranquility achieved with the state of *hitbodedut*:

The spiritual power and enlightenment that is the most important element of the prophetic experience is not found in the whirlwind or earthquake, but in the “still small voice” of utter tranquility. This is a state that is attained through deep meditation.⁴⁶

At Elijah's time of death, he did not experience a physical death. Rather, we are told that he ascended to heaven in a chariot of light and sound. This vision was interpreted by later Jewish mystics as an inner spiritual journey to the higher realms or stages of consciousness, not a physical ascent. Along with the other-worldly chariot vision of the prophet Ezekiel (sixth century BCE), it became the reference point or paradigm for the meditation practice and inner spiritual journey of later generations of Jewish mystics. Elisha, Elijah's disciple, had the vision of Elijah's ascent in the chariot. Elijah's power – a double portion of his spirit – came to Elisha. Elisha assumed Elijah's role as prophet; symbolizing his succession, he took Elijah's cloak, which had fallen to the ground. The text also says that Elisha poured water on the hands of Elijah, a poetic metaphor for his relationship of devotion and service to his master (2 Kings 3:11). At the moment of Elijah's death, Elisha saw him ascend bodily in the chariot of fire.

And it came to pass, as they still went on,
and talked, that, behold,
There appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire,
and separated them one from the other;
And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven.
And Elisha saw it, and he cried,
My father, my father, the chariot of Israel,
and its horsemen.
And he saw him no more;
and he took hold of his own clothes,
and tore them in two pieces.
He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him,
and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan;
And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him,
and struck the waters, and said,

Where is the Lord God of Elijah?
And when he also had struck the waters,
 they parted to one side and to the other;
 and Elisha went over.
And when the sons of the prophets who were in Jericho
 saw him,
They said, The spirit of Elijah does rest on Elisha.
And they came to meet him,
 and bowed to the ground before him.

2 KINGS 2:11–15

The biblical narrative doesn't give much detail about what these early prophets taught or about their day-to-day relationship with their disciples. We see them more as miracle-workers, clairvoyants, challengers to moral evil manifested in the physical world. Many of the stories about Elijah and Elisha, such as the revival of a dead child, are ancient legends that have been ascribed to them. However, we do get glimpses here and there, in the descriptions of their inner visions and experiences of God's word or voice, that it was their inner communion with God that guided them in ministering to their community.



CHAPTER 3

The Classical Prophets

The lion has roared, who will not fear?

AMOS 3:7

THE EIGHTH CENTURY BCE marks the beginning of the period in human spiritual history sometimes called the Axial Age because it marked a revolutionary change in the spiritual foundations of humanity and the appearance of a higher level of spiritual consciousness worldwide. Great mystics and spiritual leaders appeared in countries around the globe – Buddha and Mahavir in India, Lao-Tse in China, Socrates in Greece, and many of the prophets who guided the Israelite people between 800 and 400 BCE.

The prophets Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, who appeared at that time, urged the people to turn inward and worship the one true God, and adopt moral behavior in all their dealings. The prophets warned of impending punishment if their corrupt behavior did not improve, though always reassuring their followers of God's compassion and their eventual return to his favor. The potential for forgiveness is an overriding theme in their message.

A century later, Jeremiah became a witness to the fulfillment of this prophecy, as he went into exile with his people. His commitment to speaking the truth despite his unpopular message is unequalled in passion and poignancy. Divine compassion resonates in every word.

And in Ezekiel, in the sixth century BCE, we have the visionary prophet-mystic whose personal spiritual experience mirrors the priestly Temple ritual. His vision of an ascent on a chariot made of angels and supernal creatures, whirling with lights and sounds, bears witness to his awe-inspiring experience of God. He also cries out with anguish as he tries to correct the behavior of the people he ministers to.

Looking to the future, a day when exile will end and the people can return to the lap of the Lord, Zechariah and other later prophets look with longing to “the end of days” – a time when peace will reign, when the messiah will liberate his people. This theme is more fully developed by the anonymous authors of 1 Enoch and the book of Daniel starting in the fourth century BCE. The theme of Ezekiel’s inner ascent on the chariot of light and sound reappears in the documents found at Qumran, written in the second century BCE, attesting to the continuation of the inner mystic practice described in terms of the Temple ritual.

Most of these prophets embody similar qualities:

a dramatic inner experience of being called by God to preach to their rebellious people;

a sense of their own unworthiness – it is only God’s selection of them that has given them the ability and wisdom to prophesy;

extraordinary eloquence and passion in their words, including the use of dramatic metaphors based on their own life experiences, to shock the people;

their compulsion to fulfill the mission God has given them, even when it is painful;

their compulsion to speak the truth even when the people want the comfort of false reassurances;

their rejection of false worship of God, sacrifices and empty prayers, and their insistence on heartfelt prayer and a life of compassion and concern for the weaker sections of society.

Amos: Seek the Lord and live

*Surely the Lord God will do nothing,
without revealing his secrets
to his servants the prophets.*

The lion has roared, who will not fear?

The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy?

AMOS 3:7-8

Amos proclaims that he has no option but to be God's messenger. When the Divine wishes to communicate with humanity, he reveals his secrets "to his servants, the prophets." But what is the response Amos encounters? How is he received by the Israelites?

They hate him who rebukes in the gate,
and they loathe him who speaks uprightly.

AMOS 5:10

The compulsion to prophesy burns within the prophet; it was placed there by God, a reflection of his divine compassion and love for a people uninterested in spirituality, who even try to corrupt the spiritual leaders placed among them.

Considered the first of the classical prophets, Amos was active in the early eighth century BCE in the northern kingdom

of Israel.* Like the earlier prophets Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha, he narrates his direct ecstatic experiences of the holy spirit.

Amos is true to his mission. He boldly tells the people: God wants justice, love, and compassion, not sacrifices.

I hate, I despise your feast days,
 and I will not smell the sacrifices
 of your solemn assemblies.
 Though you offer me burnt offerings and meal offerings,
 I will not accept them;
 nor I will regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.
 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
 for I will not listen to the melody of your lutes.
 But let justice roll down like waters,
 and righteousness like a mighty stream.

AMOS 5:21–24

He exhorts the people to turn within and find God the Creator within themselves, to seek him and find life.

Seek Me, and you shall live . . .
 Seek the Lord, and you shall live . . .
 Seek him who made the Pleiades and Orion,
 and turns the deep darkness into morning,
 and makes the day darken into night;
 Who calls for the waters of the sea,
 and pours them out upon the face of the earth.
 The Lord is his name.

AMOS 5:4, 6, 8

* After the time of King Solomon, the Jewish kingdom was divided into two: the northern kingdom of Israel, comprising ten of the twelve Israelite tribes, and the southern kingdom of Judah, made up of two of the tribes, and its capital at Jerusalem.

Speaking in God's name, Amos conveys deep frustration that the Israelites use any pretext to cheat one another and take advantage of the poor. He reflects extreme intolerance for this kind of personal moral corruption, and explains that unethical and immoral behavior will result in an equivalent punishment. The people have been warned to reform their ways, but still they persist in exploiting those who are helpless.

Therefore, since you trample upon the poor,
and you take from him exactions of wheat,
You have built houses of cut stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
You have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink wine of them.
For I know your many transgressions, and your mighty sins;
You who afflict the just, you who take a bribe,
and turn aside the poor at the gate.
Therefore the prudent shall keep silence in that time;
for it is an evil time.
Seek good, and not evil, that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, shall be with you,
as you have spoken.
Hate the evil, and love the good,
and establish justice in the gate;
It may be that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious
to the remnant of Joseph.

AMOS 5:11–15

How simply he expresses God's will, to "Seek good and not evil, that you may live.... Hate evil and love the good." This is reminiscent of his call to "Seek the Lord and live." To seek the good means to seek God in all our actions. Otherwise we bring great suffering upon ourselves.

Behold, the days come, says the Lord God,
when I will send a famine in the land,
Not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord;
And they shall wander from sea to sea,
and from north to east,
They shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord,
and shall not find it.

AMOS 8:11–12

Here the prophet is informing the people that they will have to pay for their actions, according to the law of action and reaction. And the worst suffering, he says, even worse than the natural disasters he predicts, will be that they will not be able to experience the divine within themselves any longer. They will become alienated from spirituality. They will suffer a famine, “not a famine of bread nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord; . . . they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it.”

Another characteristic of Amos’s prophecies, in addition to his exhortations, were numerous graphic symbols, metaphors, and parables through which he dramatized the urgency of God’s call for repentance and reform. The use of allegories and parables was a common form of teaching in the ancient Near East. The heritage of the Israelites was an oral literature of myths, legends, and stories that transmitted the collective spiritual and material history of the people. Most of the other classical prophets also used these literary devices to illustrate the spiritual truths and principles they wished to convey.

It couldn’t have been easy to be a prophet in ancient Israel, but Amos had no choice. God had called him, and he was compelled. He was a simple and humble farmer and shepherd sent on God’s mission.

I am not a prophet, nor am I a prophet's son;
but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees;
And the Lord took me while I followed the flock,
and the Lord said to me:
Go, prophesy to my people Israel.

AMOS 7:14–15

The tremendous power and compassion in Amos and the other classical prophets, which comes from their direct experience of the divine, gives their writings a relevance and immediacy to the contemporary reader.

Hosea: The husband betrayed

*I am like an evergreen cypress tree.
From me comes your fruit.
Whoever is wise, let him understand these things;*

HOSEA 14:9–10

Hosea followed Amos in ministering to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE. His prophecies reveal the Lord's overwhelming love and forgiveness for his people despite their errant behavior. This is the first instance in biblical writings where the metaphor of love and marriage between man and woman is used to describe the relationship of the Lord with the Israelites, and mystically of the Lord with the soul.* Later it would be used by other prophets, and most emphatically in the Song of Songs.

*This metaphor was expanded upon and used allegorically in the spiritual literature of Judaism of subsequent generations, from Isaiah to the Song of Songs of later biblical times, to the literature of the Kabbalah, especially the teachings of Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century, who even enacted with his disciples a weekly marriage ceremony of the creator Lord and his bride, the Shekhinah (the immanent divine presence), to welcome the start of the Sabbath.

But the Israelites were unfaithful to their husband; they worshipped other gods. Hosea likens their betrayal of God to the unfaithfulness of an adulterous wife. By expressing his disgust in such graphic terms, he is attempting to awaken the people to the seriousness of their actions.

In the first chapter of the Hosea scroll, the prophet recounts his experience of “the word of the Lord” manifesting within him. It commands him to marry a harlot and have “children of harlotry; for the land has committed great harlotry, departing from the Lord” (1:2). He is told to call his three children by horrific names: *Jezreel*, a play on *Israel*, who would become the destruction of Israel; *Lo-Ruhamah* (unpitied), to illustrate that God would no longer be merciful to the Israelites, and *Lo-Ammi* (not my people), to remind them that he no longer considers them *his* chosen people. He says: “You are not my people and I will not be your ‘I am’ (*Ehyeh*), your God” (1:9).

So Hosea’s entire life became a painful allegory for the unfaithfulness of the Israelites to their covenant with God, which he symbolized as a marriage contract. Hosea is not content simply to *speak* the truth. He is made to act out his prophecy on the stage of his own life. He is the supreme performance artist, and the shock value of his performance corresponds to the deviant behavior of the Israelites.

What is so touching about Hosea’s writings is the depth of his identification with the divine commitment to humanity. Just as Hosea was in anguish at his wife’s unfaithfulness and the birth of their bastard children, so is God in anguish at the unfaithfulness of his “chosen” people and the fruit of that unfaithfulness – their immoral behavior and the establishment of syncretistic cults that encouraged indulgence in the sense pleasures.

Mystically, this divine anguish expresses the yearning of the Lord for the soul to reunite with him and escape from its imprisonment in the material creation. The soul has been separated

from its divine source since the time of creation and is under the sway of sensuality and selfish involvements. But all souls are, ultimately, the chosen of God, who is waiting to forgive them. The mystics try to awaken humanity and kindle their desire to return.⁴⁷

Hosea's outrage was sparked because the people persisted in worshipping the Canaanite gods called *ba'alim* despite the fact that God had revealed himself continuously, for hundreds of years, through the prophets. He expresses God's displeasure that they preferred to appease the fertility gods; he says that it is their wayward tendencies, "their spirit of harlotry," that has misled them, as well as their loss of discrimination through unethical and immoral practices.

O Ephraim,* what shall I do to you?
 O Judah,† what shall I do to you?
 For your goodness is like the morning mist,
 and like the dew that early goes away.
 Therefore have I hewn them by the prophets; . . .
 For I desired loyal love, and not sacrifice;
 and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.
 But they like Adam have transgressed the covenant;
 there have they dealt treacherously against me.
 Gilead is a city of those who work iniquity,
 and it is polluted with blood.
 And as troops of robbers wait for a man,
 so does the company of priests;

* *Ephraim*, one of the tribes of the northern kingdom, is used as a euphemism to designate the entire northern kingdom.

† *Judah*, the main tribe of the southern kingdom, is often used to designate the entire southern kingdom. It is the origin of the word *Yehudi*, which became *Jew* in English.

they murder on the way to Shekhem;
for they commit lewdness.

HOSEA 6:4–9

He complains that the people themselves have established kings and princes – who were not chosen by God nor anointed by the prophets. Furthermore, they have fashioned idols from silver and gold. These idols are made by men, not by God, and they are useless. Poignantly he declares: They have sown nothing so they will reap nothing.

For they have sown the wind,
and they shall reap the stormy wind;
It has no stalk; the bud shall yield no meal;
If, perhaps, it yields, strangers shall swallow it up.

HOSEA 8:7

Yet, despite the harshness of his predictions, Hosea always emphasizes God's fundamental love and forgiveness, like a father's love for his erring child. It is as if the Lord longs for the loyal love of his people; he is in pain because he knows their true state and can see that they are being misled and helplessly fall prey to their lust and greed. He knows the suffering their false worship and sins will bring them. Out of his love he wants to protect them and nurture them.

When Israel was a child, then I loved him,
and called my son out of Egypt.
As he called them, so they went from them;
they sacrificed to the *ba'alim*,
and burned incense to carved idols.
I taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by their arms;
but they knew not that I healed them.

I drew them with human cords, with bands of love;
And I was to them like those who take off the yoke
from their jaws, and I laid food to them.

HOSEA 11:1-4

Hosea courts his wife again with a message of forgiveness. He brings a vision of peace, justice, harmony, faithfulness, and mercy. The covenant becomes a betrothal, a marriage contract, as he converts the harlot into a virtuous wife. The prophets' relationship with the people is always loving and tender even when he has to chastise them.

By exploring the quality and extent of God's love, Hosea conveys something of the "inner life" of God – the dimension of God's unqualified, abundant love and compassion. He tells the people to "wait on your God," to patiently wait for the divine grace to manifest itself.

And the Lord YHWH is the God of hosts;
His remembrance is his name YHWH.*
Therefore turn to your God;
Keep loving kindness and judgment,
and wait on your God continually.

HOSEA 12:6-7

Through the ages, Hosea teaches, God has demonstrated his love and mercy by sending prophets to teach humanity how to obey him and follow his path of purity and righteous behavior. He sometimes called the prophet the "watchman" who looks out over the city (9:8). He didn't just send one prophet, Moses, to free them from Egypt, he has continued sending prophets in all

* Author's translation based on precise meaning of the words. *Zikhro* (his remembrance) can be understood as a reference to a practice of remembrance; it is from the same root as the Arabic *zikhr*.

times to sustain Israel spiritually. He is implying that God never forgets his children: there are always prophets sent by God to guide souls to a spiritual life.

Towards the end of his prophecies, Hosea speaks with extraordinary love and comfort, using symbolic language that has a clearly mystical overtone.

I will be as the dew to Israel; he shall flower like the lily,
 and cast forth his roots as Lebanon.*
 His branches shall spread,
 and his beauty shall be like the olive tree,
 and his fragrance like the Lebanon.
 Those who dwell under his shadow shall return;
 they shall revive like the grain, and blossom like the vine;
 their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.
 Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols?
 I answer him, and look on him;
 I am like an evergreen cypress tree.
 From me comes your fruit.
 Whoever is wise, let him understand these things;
 whoever is prudent, let him know them;
 For the ways of the Lord are right,
 and the just walk in them;
 but the transgressors shall stumble in them.

HOSEA 14:6-10

Like the grapevine, he is saying, the divine reality has a wonderful spiritual fragrance. Like the olive tree, it provides shade from the heat of the world. God will be as the dew to Israel, to nurture them on the spiritual journey. Perhaps by this

* Literally, Lebanon means "the white tree," probably signifying the white cedar of Lebanon.

he is referring to the inner nourishment or bliss on the journey to stages of higher consciousness, or he may simply be giving wise guidance to a people making their way through the experiences of life. Like the evergreen cypress tree, which never loses its leaves, he is the “tree of life” which knows no death. The tree of life is an ancient Judaic symbol for the inner wisdom and the journey through various stages of spirituality to ultimate divine union, the spiritual “fruit.”

“Whoever is wise,” he says, “let him understand these things.” He will understand the ways of the Lord, and will please him by living according to his word. Because of the universal resonance of these passages, it is probable that the prophet is referring not only to intellectual knowledge and wisdom, but to the inner wisdom, *hokhmah*, the higher knowledge identified by Jewish mystics with the creative power of God. Wisdom is often personified as a feminine spiritual entity in the poetic literature of the ancient Near East. The term carries multiple levels of meaning – those awakened to the deeper levels would understand it in a mystical sense, while others would take it simply as good advice.⁴⁸

Hosea’s life and teachings have been presented in depth because of the intensity of his portrayal of the intimate relationship between God and humanity. These passages illustrate the theme of all the prophets in one way or another. Although their personalities may have differed, they shared one common goal: to impress upon the people God’s great love for them and his desire that they return in repentance to him; that they give up their corrupt behavior which arises from their moral and spiritual weaknesses. These passages also urge the listeners to give up external forms of worship and find the experience of God and his divine power within. By finding the God within, it becomes more difficult to exploit others, as the same God lives within everyone, and “others” become a mirror for oneself.

Isaiah: A vision of holiness

*O house of Jacob, come,
and let us walk in the light of the Lord.*

ISAIAH 2:5

Isaiah ben-Amoz, prophet to the southern kingdom of Judea., was a contemporary of Hosea. Isaiah received his calling in an astounding spiritual vision, which he eloquently recounts. Yet he calls himself “a man of unclean lips.” A hallmark of the prophetic calling is the ecstatic experience of the divine, along with a sense of one’s unworthiness to undertake God’s mission.

In the year that king Uzziah died
I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up,
and his train filled the temple.
Above it stood the *serafim*;* each one had six wings;
with two he covered his face,
and with two he covered his feet,
and with two he did fly.
And one cried to another, and said,
Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.
And the posts of the door moved at the voice of he who cried,
and the house was filled with smoke.
Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone;
because I am a man of unclean lips,
and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.
Then flew one of the serafim to me,
having a live coal in his hand,
which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar;

* A type of angel.

And he laid it upon my mouth, and said,
Behold, this has touched your lips;
 and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.
Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying,
Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?
Then said I, Here am I; send me.

ISAIAH 6:1–8

The transcendence or “otherness” of God breaks into the prophet’s consciousness during his inner ascent to a higher state. Mystically, the throne is a symbol of God himself. The sound created by the *serafim*, angels of this region, is a metaphor for Isaiah’s experience of inner spiritual music (which the Greeks called “the music of the spheres”), which made him aware of the holiness, the glory of God that fills and sustains the entire creation. Consequently, he becomes conscious of his own finite physical self with its inherent limitations and impurity. The angels symbolically purify him by placing a live coal on his lips. Isaiah finally hears the voice of the Lord calling for someone to send on the divine mission, and he responds to the challenge.

The prophet’s awe-inspiring experience of being chosen by God echoes Moses’ overwhelming encounter with the divine reality at the burning bush. Despite feeling themselves ill-equipped and incapable, impure and weak, they both ultimately surrendered to God’s summons, serving him faithfully without concern for the suffering, humiliation, and social ostracism it inevitably caused them.

Throughout the entire Isaiah scroll, the prophet eloquently expresses the need for a living spiritual teacher to understand God’s will and learn the most effective way to worship Him. In the passage below, Isaiah gives one of the most profound descriptions of the holy spirit and its power to guide the future prophet, to give him wisdom and understanding, knowledge and awe of the Lord, and

the ability to distinguish between true and false. By means of his virtue, or righteousness, he will be able to help the poor and humble. Isaiah is saying that in the future you will have a *living* teacher who is guided by the spirit of the Lord and who in turn will guide you with that same spirit. The “rod” and “branch” are ancient symbols for the spiritual master. The rod and branch are cut from the “tree of life,” a metaphor for the divine spirit, the source of life.* Thus he is saying that the master is a branch or extension of God’s divine power.

And there shall come forth a rod from the stem of *Yishay*,
 and a branch shall grow from his roots;
 And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
 the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
 the spirit of counsel and might,
 the spirit of knowledge and of the fear [awe] of the Lord;†
 And his delight shall be in the fear [awe] of the Lord;
 and he shall not judge by what his eyes see,
 nor decide by what his ears hear.
 But with righteousness shall he judge the poor,
 and decide with equity for the humble of the earth.

ISAIAH 11:1–4

This is the first instance where a prophet has spoken of the appearance of a future prophet in such utopian terms, giving it what would later be called a messianic overtone.

And then, in terms that have become classic to the English language, Isaiah speaks of the ideal future, when harmony will reign through the influence of the prophet, the man of God:

* In the Garden of Eden, the tree of life was beyond the duality of the tree of good and evil. It symbolized the source of higher wisdom, the state of spirituality beyond the world of mind and duality.

† Author’s brackets. The Hebrew term *yir’at ha-shem* literally means fear of the Lord in the sense of awe.

The wolf also shall live with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
and a little child shall lead them.
And the cow and the bear shall feed;
their young ones shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den.
They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord,
as the waters cover the sea.
And in that day there shall be a root of *Yishay*,
who shall stand for a banner of the people;
To it shall the nations seek;
and his resting place shall be glorious.

ISAIAH 11:6-10

When Isaiah says that the wolf and the lamb will live together, he is saying that even the creatures whose instincts put them in conflict with one another will be able to live in harmony. Although this passage is generally interpreted to mean there will be a time of peace on earth, a more mystical interpretation is perhaps more realistic. He may not be referring to a material, physical peace in the political arena but rather to the inner peace that comes from spiritual realization. Once people have achieved inner peace, conflict on the material plane would diminish, as they would resolve their problems more rationally and peacefully. He may also mean that there will be an end to the duality of existence, a state in which we now live, never knowing peace. We will transcend all these temporary states when we realize our true spiritual essence, which is permanent.

Isaiah eloquently declares that the prophet of the future will

evaluate life not by his outer ears and eyes, the external senses, but rather by inner knowledge. He will bring not only justice but mercy and compassion. The “little child who leads them” represents the state of innocence, the soul itself, which assumes control. It is childlike in its purity. Alternatively, this could also be a reference to the archetypal spiritual master, who is pure and is the epitome of innocence. In Jewish mystical literature he is often called the “youth” or the “child.”

Although this entire passage has been interpreted as a prediction of one particular prophet-king, it cannot be limited to only one future prophet or redeemer, one messiah. Through this beautiful metaphor, he is conveying the fact that people need a spiritual master to guide and lead them to higher states of consciousness. When he says that there shall be no violence “on my holy mountain,” for the entire creation will be full of the “knowledge of the Lord,” he is again referring symbolically to the higher spiritual realms, which are often symbolized as a physical mountain.

Isaiah proclaimed that the prophet would always be waiting for the disciples to return to him. He explained that although the people have been rebellious and have even asked the prophets not to prophesy, yet when they change their ways and become receptive to the divine teaching (Torah) and turn to him, he will answer their cry with his grace. Till now, he says, their teacher has been withdrawn; they could not see him, as they were blind to the spiritual call. Yet, when they turn back to God they will see him and hear his words, his instructions to walk the path, the way back to God:

You shall weep no more;
 He will be very gracious to you at the voice of your cry;
 when he shall hear it, he will answer you.
 And though the Lord gives you the bread of adversity,
 and the water of affliction,

Yet your teacher shall not withdraw himself any more,
but your eyes shall see your teacher;
And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying,
This is the way, walk in it,
when you turn to the right hand,
and when you turn to the left.

ISAIAH 30:19–21

The Israelites were farmers, pressers of olives and grapes. The prophets of the ancient Near East often used parables and allegories taken from the daily lives of the people they ministered to. In the much-loved and well-known passage below, Isaiah uses the classic mystic allegory of the gardener and the vineyard to convey the Lord's loving relationship with the Israelites and, on a deeper level, the relationship of God with the individual soul. His frustration comes from his inability to help them. He has given them every advantage and yet they refuse to wake up. Ultimately he destroys the garden.⁴⁹

Now will I sing to my well beloved a song
of my beloved touching his vineyard.
My well beloved has a vineyard in a very fruitful hill;
And he dug it, and cleared away its stones,
and planted it with the choicest vine,
and built a tower in its midst,
And also made there a winepress;
and he looked for it to yield grapes,
and it yielded wild grapes.
And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem,
and men of Judah, judge,
I beg you, between me and my vineyard.
What could have been done more to my vineyard,
that I have not done in it?

Why, when I looked for it to yield grapes,
 it yielded wild grapes?
 And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard;
 I will take away its hedge, and it shall be eaten up;
 and break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down;
 And I will lay it waste; it shall not be pruned, nor dug;
 but there shall come up briars and thorns;
 I will also command the clouds not to rain upon it.
 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel,
 and the men of Judah his pleasant plant;
 And he looked for judgment, but behold oppression;
 for righteousness, but behold a cry.

ISAIAH 5:1-7

Isaiah, like Amos and Hosea, emphasized the need for social justice and true worship; he boldly declared that sacrifices, pilgrimages, and outward prayers are not the way to worship God. He refers to the Israelites as the rulers and inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (1:10), the biblical epithet for the most immoral and abominable of societies. He condemns their “vain offerings, incense of abomination,” their sabbaths, and their “new moons and appointed feasts” (1:13). “When you stretch out your hands in prayer,” he says, “I will hide my eyes from you” (1:15). How can they find God’s favor? In terms reminiscent of Amos and Hosea, he says, “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge [advocate for] the orphan, plead for the widow” (1:16, 17).

Essentially, when one gives up sinful behavior, then there is nothing to stand in the way of having communion with God within. But he reminds them that if they refuse to change their ways and continue rebelling, they will be punished. Reminiscent of Hosea, he calls the city unfaithful to God, a harlot, full of evil.

Come now, and let us reason together, said the Lord;
Though your sins be as scarlet,
 they shall be as white as snow;
Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
 you shall eat the good of the land;
But if you refuse and rebel,
 you shall be devoured with the sword;
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.
How the faithful city has become a harlot!
It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it;
 but now murderers.
Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water;
Your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves;
 everyone loves bribes, and follows after rewards;
They judge not [for] the orphans
 neither does the cause of the widow reach them.

ISAIAH 1:18–23

He begins another mystical psalm with the metaphor of the strong city, fortified by the walls of spiritual “salvation,” to signify the spiritual strength of the disciple who is true to God’s ways, whom God trusts and who has trust in God. He reminds the people that if they trust in the Lord and attach their minds to Him, they will find “perfect peace” – the inner peace that never ends. Ultimately, Isaiah teaches, the true worship takes place at the spiritual core within oneself where one can find the divine reality that guides a person to a moral and ethical lifestyle, which he calls “the path of the just.”

On that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah;
We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint
 for walls and bulwarks.

Open the gates, that the righteous nation
 which keeps the truth may enter in.
 You will keep him in perfect peace,
 whose mind is stayed on you;
 because he trusts in you.
 Trust you in the Lord forever;
 for the Lord God is an eternal Rock;
 For he brings down those who dwell on high;
 the lofty city, he lays low;
 He lays it low, even to the ground;
 he brings it even to the dust.
 The foot shall trample it down, even the feet of the poor,
 and the steps of the needy.
 The way of the just is uprightness;
 You, most upright, do make level the path of the just.

ISAIAH 26:1-7

Speaking in the voice of the people, the prophet says: “Lord, the desire of our soul is to your name and to the remembrance of you” (26:8). We meditate through the night, and seek you with the “spirit within” (26:9). He declares that there is no deliverance on earth – there is no kingdom of heaven here. Nothing of this world will bring forth any result. We are like a pregnant woman who delivers only air; no child is born.

He ends the psalm with a beautiful declaration of future salvation: The spiritually dead shall awaken and live, and the soul shall sing its inner song and taste the dew that brings life every morning. So come, enter your “chambers,” your inner rooms – take your attention within yourselves and quiet your minds in meditation.

Your dead men shall live,
 together with my dead body shall they arise.

Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust;
for your dew is as the dew of herbs,
and the earth shall cast out the shades of the dead.
Come, my people, enter into your chambers,
and close your doors behind you;
Hide yourself for a little while,
until the wrath has passed.

ISAIAH 26:19–20

Aryeh Kaplan comments that although the prophets revealed little of their actual techniques of meditation, there are hints throughout the Bible.⁵⁰ For example, there are several passages where Isaiah refers to meditation in terms of hearing the inner music, the voice of God, and seeing the word of God, the inner light, on “the mountain of the Lord.”

You shall have a song, as in the night
when a holy solemnity is kept;
And gladness of heart, as when one goes with a flute
to come to the mountain of the Lord,
to the Rock of Israel.
And the Lord shall cause his glorious voice to be heard.

ISAIAH 30:29–30

These are not references to hearing outer music; this is all a metaphor for going up the inner “mountain of the Lord” and hearing his “glorious voice.” In another poem he uses the same metaphor of climbing the mountain in order to learn the divine will or way, so we can walk in the Lord’s “light.”

O house of Jacob, come,
and let us walk in the light of the Lord.

ISAIAH 2:5

We have taken a glimpse into only some of the powerful teachings preserved in the Isaiah scroll, those which are attributed to the first of several prophets called Isaiah. There was probably a long lineage of anonymous prophets called Isaiah who lived over more than two hundred years.⁵¹ Keeping to our chronological approach, we will take up the prophets generally called Second and Third Isaiah after Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Jeremiah: A message of comfort

*The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.*

LAMENTATIONS 3:25

Jeremiah received his prophetic calling in the late seventh century BCE, about one hundred years after First Isaiah, just prior to the conquest of the southern kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians and the exile of the Judeans to Babylon. It is believed that Jeremiah may have begun his teaching as early as the reign of King Josiah, who had embarked on a series of religious reforms in 606 BCE. The Jews, as ever, had not been faithful to the worship of the one Lord YHWH, and his goal was to reestablish the sole worship of YHWH at the Temple in Jerusalem. Josiah was succeeded by King Jehoiakim, who did not support the reforms and returned to the worship of the deities of the Canaanite pantheon along with YHWH at numerous shrines around the kingdom. When the scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies reprimanding the king and predicting divine judgment was read to Jehoiakim, the king became enraged and burned it. Jeremiah was forced to flee for his life.

One of the main themes of Jeremiah's prophecies was the admonition to return to the worship of YHWH alone, and to obey the moral and ethical guidelines required by God in order to avoid the destruction and exile that were threatening the Israelites from both their northern borders with Babylon and

the southern border with Egypt. What made Jeremiah the object of scorn – and of the king’s rage – was that he repeatedly told the people that their fate of exile was inevitable, a consequence of their evil behavior, and that they should accept it. He also predicted that the exile would last only seventy years. He urged them to adopt a detached attitude and concentrate on improving themselves spiritually. For this, he was labeled as a traitor by the institutional prophets of the monarchy who flattered the king.

While Jeremiah urged acceptance of the exile as the price of sin, he always maintained that the essential spiritual relationship of God with the soul remained constant and loving. The suffering was a direct result of their actions. Seeing himself (like Isaiah) as a “servant” of God, Jeremiah denounced the corrupt Temple practices and the hypocrisy of the many “false prophets” who urged the people to fight the Babylonians. In fulfilling his mission of prophesying to a people undergoing great external instability, Jeremiah opposed the king, the court, and the Temple. By the end of his life, Jeremiah was unpopular and isolated – despised, even considered deranged – as he did not give people an optimistic message they could comfortably live by.

Jeremiah’s description of his call to prophecy (1:4–9) is similar to the experiences of Moses and Isaiah. God selected him for this task even before his birth. “Before I formed you in the belly I knew you; and before you came forth out of the womb I sanctified you, and I ordained you a prophet to the nations.” Yet Jeremiah feels himself inadequate, just as Moses and Isaiah did. He says he is just a child, but God says no, you are not a child. “Be not afraid of their faces,” he says: Be bold and prophesy. Then Jeremiah eloquently recounts the moment when God invested him with his power: “God put forth his hand and touched my mouth.” Jeremiah experienced his mouth becoming filled with the Lord’s words – another graphic description of how he has been charged with the divine will, and a potent declaration that

he is not speaking his own thoughts or words; he is conveying the will of the Lord who has sent him. He has thus been given divine reassurance that he has nothing to fear from those who are not receptive to his prophecies.

The prophet preaching to an unreceptive and unrepentant public was a common theme in the Bible, but with Jeremiah, perhaps, we can empathize even more strongly, as he expresses the anguish of his dilemma in very human terms. Yet he had no option but to fulfill God's mission:

O Lord, you persuaded me, and I was persuaded;
 you are stronger than I, and have prevailed;
 I am in derision daily, everyone mocks me.
 For whenever I speak, I cry out loud,
 I shout of violence and ruin;
 The word of the Lord is a reproach to me,
 and a derision all day.
 Then I said, I will not make mention of him,
 nor speak any more in his name.
 But his word was in my heart like a burning fire
 shut up in my bones,
 And I was weary with restraining myself,
 and I could not.

JEREMIAH 20:7-9

Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel, a fifteenth-century mystic and philosopher, explained that Jeremiah's experience of the divine word, which he feels compelled to teach, is the holy spirit, *ruah ha-kodesh*, which he experienced in the prophetic state as burning or flashing fire.

The "flashing fire" alludes to the influx of prophecy that reaches his mind, which in its power, is like purifying fire.

This is what God told Jeremiah, “Are not my words like fire?” (23:29). Jeremiah himself also said, “It was in my heart like the burning fire” (20:9).⁵²

Fire is purifying. It burns away the dross from metal, and in that sense it is like the truth, which separates reality from illusion. Jeremiah has no choice but to speak the truth, to convey God’s message without diluting or distorting it. He is totally obedient to the mission God has sent him on: “Whatsoever thing the Lord shall answer you, I will declare unto you; I will keep nothing from you” (42:4).

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE PROPHET?

Although Jeremiah bemoaned his inability to express himself, he revealed himself to be quite eloquent. The passage below gives an excellent overview of his relationship with God, and the message he brought the people on His behalf. He begins by explaining that the word of God came to him and enjoined him to “stand in the gate of the Lord’s house” and preach the word to them. Here there could be a double meaning to the term “the gate of the Lord’s house,” as it refers both to the Temple gates, where he was physically standing, as well as mystically, to the third eye, the entry to the inner spiritual regions, which were known as the “gates” to the Lord’s house.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying,
Stand in the gate of the Lord’s house,
and proclaim there this word, and say,
Hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah,
who enter these gates to worship the Lord. . . .
Amend your ways and your doings,
and I will make you dwell in this place.

JEREMIAH 7:1-3

Jeremiah speaks in God's voice, as was the style of many biblical prophets. Like Amos and other prophets who preceded him, he cajoles the people to give up their immoral and sinful ways. He says that if you act justly and mercifully with your fellow man; stop oppressing the widow and orphan; give up murder, adultery, and stealing – if you stop worshiping the Ba'al and other gods, and only worship me, then "I will make you dwell in this place," the land of Judah, which was in danger of conquest. On a mystical level, he is telling them that the inner, spiritual realms will always receive them if they return to the true worship of God.

Speaking as God, he continues by saying he never commanded the sacrifices and offerings with which they worship in the Temple. He expresses disgust at the Temple, which has become "a den of robbers" (7:11) not a place of worship. What kind of worship did God teach your ancestors? "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you" (7:23). The "ways" he commanded include compassionate and ethical behavior towards others – the moral foundation for spirituality – as well as the obedient worship of the word of God, not through sacrifices, but through inner devotion (7:21–22).

The prophet's role is to speak the truth to the people and try to bring them back, even if the punishment they are destined to suffer is set. In the passage below, Jeremiah again describes how he received God's word within himself, which commanded him to preach to the people.

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying,
 Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying,
 Thus said the Lord; I remember you,
 the devotion of your youth, your love like a bride,
 when you went after me in the wilderness,
 in a land that was not sown. . . .

Be astonished, O you heavens, at this,
and be horribly afraid,
Be greatly appalled, said the Lord.
For my people have committed two evils;
They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters,
and dug cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns,
that can hold no water.

JEREMIAH 2:1-2, 12-13

This passage is also reminiscent of Hosea and Isaiah, as Jeremiah draws on the same metaphor of the bride and the beloved for the people of Israel and the Lord (esoterically, the soul and the Lord). He reprimands the people for being unfaithful, and reminds them of the idyllic time in the past when they shared in a mutual love and had total trust and faith in him, although they didn't know where he was leading them.

Now, he says, they have committed two evils: they have forsaken God, the "fountain of living waters," the source of the spiritual word or divine power,* and they have run after the false gods and false prophets, whom he calls "broken cisterns" because they cannot retain water nor provide life-giving sustenance.

Jeremiah rails against the false prophets, who mislead the people into complacency. He reassures the people that He will gather them from the diaspora and give them true shepherds to guide and protect them after they return. In one of the Bible's most eloquent and concise statements of God's omniscience, he says: "Am I a God near at hand, says the Lord, and not a God far away? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see

* Fountain of living waters: A common mystic metaphor for the holy spirit or divine power as part of the complex allegory of the garden, the tree of life, and the water that nourishes it. Thus these are the waters that give life, and the Lord is the source, the fountain of the living waters.

him? said the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord” (23:23–24). He continues:

I have heard what the prophets said,
 who prophesy lies in my name, saying:
 “I have dreamed, I have dreamed.” . . .
 The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream;
 and he who has my word,
 let him speak my word faithfully.
 What is the chaff to the wheat? says the Lord.
 Is not my word like a fire? says the Lord;
 and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? . . .
 Behold, I am against the prophets, says the Lord,
 who use their tongues, and say: “He said.”

JEREMIAH 23:25, 28–29, 31

The punishment comes through the divine utterance, he says, because truth destroys deception. It separates the wheat from the chaff; it is a hammer that breaks the rock of delusion into pieces. Sometimes it creates cacophony, but that is an expression of God’s power also.

HOW TO PLEASE GOD AND FIND HIM?

First, we have to recognize his power and our true status, and become humble. Jeremiah reminds the people of the fragility of life and the need for devotion to God, to remember that their destiny is in his hands. Jeremiah, more than the other prophets, emphasizes human powerlessness in the face of God’s plan. Here he uses the familiar parable of the potter:

The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying,
 Arise, and go down to the potter’s house,
 and there I will cause you to hear my words.

Then I went down to the potter's house,
and, behold, he was working at the wheels.
And the utensil that he made of clay was spoiled
in the hand of the potter; so he made again another utensil,
as it seemed good to the potter to make.
Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying,
O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter?
said the Lord.
Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand,
so are you in my hand,
O house of Israel.

JEREMIAH 18:1-6

In another passage Jeremiah gives his spiritual teachings in the form of proverbs and examples drawn from the people's experience of desert and drought, and their understanding of the life-giving quality of water. The "wise" person, meaning he who trusts in God and not in his own ego, will be like the life-giving tree, the "tree of life." He draws his water from the ever flowing river (the eternally flowing divine power), and so he can withstand all adversity. As earlier, the Lord is called "the fountain of living waters," as he is the never-ending water that sustains life – the spirit that nourishes our souls. God sees into our hearts; he knows who we really are and whether we are pure or corrupt. The "glorious high throne from the beginning" that he refers to is the spiritual realm, the abode of God. He asks the Lord to "heal" him spiritually and "save" him, through his fountain of living waters. At the end, Jeremiah submits himself humbly before the Lord, saying that he acted as God's shepherd and never hesitated to carry out his will.

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,
and whose hope is the Lord.

For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters,
 that spreads out its roots by the river,
 And shall not see when heat comes,
 but its leaf shall be green;
 And shall not be anxious in the year of drought,
 nor shall it cease from yielding fruit. . . .
 I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the inward [parts],
 to give every man according to his ways,
 and according to the fruit of his doings. . . .
 A glorious high throne from the beginning
 is the place of our sanctuary.
 O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you
 shall be ashamed,
 And those who depart from me shall be written in the earth,
 because they have forsaken the Lord,
 the fountain of living waters.
 Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed;
 Save me, and I shall be saved; for you are my praise.
 Behold, they say to me, Where is the word of the Lord?
 Let it come now.
 As for me, I did not hasten from being a shepherd
 to follow you;
 nor have I desired the woeful day;
 You know, that which came out of my lips
 was right before you.

JEREMIAH 17:7–16

We do not have any indication of the specific technique recommended by the prophet through which the people could come in tune with the Lord's will and surrender to him, other than by being true to his "name," giving up idol worship, and following moral and ethical norms. As we have seen, the prophets often referred to their own experience of God's word, name, or

holy spirit, and Jeremiah felt a compulsion to preach that word to the people and awaken them through its power. But no specific meditation practice is taught. In the scroll of Lamentations, written in the poetic style of the Wisdom literature and traditionally attributed to Jeremiah, we get some hint of a meditation practice. In it, he states the basic principles of God's grace and compassion which accompany the soul, the soul that renews itself and "waits for him" in meditation each morning; that searches for him within, quietly, and has hope and faith in his salvation; that recognizes the Lord as its "portion," its inheritance. Every phrase of this passage has spiritual depth and beauty:

The grace of the Lord has not ceased,
and his compassion does not fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
The Lord is my portion, says my soul;
therefore will I hope in him.
The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that a man should quietly hope
for the salvation of the Lord.

LAMENTATIONS 3:22-26

Ezekiel: Visionary of the chariot of God

*And he said to me, son of man, stand upon your feet,
and I will speak to you.*

EZEKIEL 2:1

The prophet Ezekiel experienced his divine calling in the sixth century BCE while he was in exile in Babylon, sitting on the banks of the river Kevar. He had come to Babylon in the company of the large group of Judeans who were taken there following

the conquest of the southern kingdom and the destruction of Jerusalem. We know that Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, was born into a priestly family, but beyond that there are no details of his life prior to his call to prophecy.

The scroll of Ezekiel opens with a dramatic and wondrous vision of mystic transport to spiritual realms on a chariot of supernatural beings accompanied by awe-inspiring lights and sounds. This is one of few explicit descriptions of the inner spiritual journey that appear in the prophetic literature. Selections are reproduced below:

And it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Kevar river, that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. . . .

And I looked, and, behold, a stormy wind came from the north, a great cloud, and a fire flaring up, and a brightness was around it, out of its midst, as the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire. Also out of its midst came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. And everyone had four faces, and everyone had four wings. . . .

As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, and like the appearance of torches; it flashed up and down among the living creatures; and the fire was bright, and from the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures ran and returned like the appearance of a flash of lightning. . . .

Where ever the spirit would go, they moved, for the spirit wanted to go there; and the wheels were raised with them; for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels. . . . And when they moved, I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of great waters, like the voice of the

Almighty. . . . And there was a voice from above the firmament that was over their heads, when they stood still, and had let down their wings. . . .

And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like lapis lazuli; and upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness like the appearance of a man upon it. And I saw something like the color of amber, like the appearance of fire enclosed around it, from what appeared to be his loins upward; and from what appeared to be his loins downward, I saw what appeared to be fire, and it had brightness around it.* As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness around it. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one speaking.

EZEKIEL 1:1, 4–6, 13–14, 20–28

Ezekiel's experience is of the "glory of the Lord" (1:28). According to scholars, "this glory (*kavod* in Hebrew) is a technical term in the ancient priestly tradition for the mysterious manifestation of the divine presence in worship."⁵³ Other scholars have also commented on the priestly nature of the images in the vision. Parallels can be drawn with the entire priestly ritual in the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

Ezekiel's experience became the paradigm for the inner experiences of Jewish mystics starting in the first century BCE, who used the same vocabulary to describe their "descent" to inner realms in the heavenly "chariot."[†] This is possibly an indication

* The Hebrew term used here is *nogah*, meaning radiance or an aura of light.

† The term *merkavah* (chariot) has several meanings, which add a mystical spiritual dimension to our understanding. The root of *merkavah* is *rkv*, meaning "to ride." However, *rkv* also means to assemble or combine, which suggests the techniques of combining words and names in order to make the ascent to inner realms. Thus

that Ezekiel's teaching and method of meditation were continued through a direct lineage of transmission. Ezekiel's chariot vision seems to be an attempt at describing what was essentially an overwhelming experience of the great spiritual force that took him inwards, and the sights and sounds of the various spiritual levels he traversed. He ultimately reached the "throne" level, the highest realm, where he saw God seated on a throne, in the form of a man. Scholars have shown that Ezekiel expressed his vision in terms familiar to his audience – as an internalization of the priestly Temple ritual which could no longer take place on the outer, physical plane because the Temple had been destroyed.⁵⁴

It is as if the prophet-priest Ezekiel, having survived the destruction of the First Temple and living in exile, conveyed the reality of God's presence by visualizing a re-creation of the Temple. It was certainly an image that would have made a strong imprint in the Jewish imagination of that time.*

Ezekiel recounts how he received his calling: A "spirit" entered into him – this is the *ruah ha-kodesh*, the holy spirit or

the merkavah conveys the sense of the inner journey through a meditation practice based on concentration and recombination of letters and words.

* It seems that the priestly ritual in the Temple's Holy of Holies had a mystical element to it, though we do not have much detail. It is known that, in addition to the animals and grains people brought as sacrifices when they came to Jerusalem on pilgrimage, they would be given a glimpse of the golden cherubim in the Holy of Holies, on whose wings it was believed God's presence would alight; they were His divine throne. There also may have been some sort of contemplation or meditation practice associated with the viewing of the cherubim. Only on the Day of Atonement would the high priest pronounce aloud the "explicit" or ineffable, "unpronounceable" name of God, which was forbidden at other times. Some scholars have also conjectured that the priest may have used the "names" of God in an esoteric or magical manner. The vocalization of its sounds was thought to resound with the divine essence itself. Through the vision of Ezekiel, the Holy of Holies and the ritual associated with it were raised from the physical into the "virtual" realm, and re-created as the focus of his meditation.

divine power which he felt entering into him so powerfully that it actually raised him onto his feet.

And he said to me, son of man, stand upon your feet,
and I will speak to you.

And a spirit entered into me when he spoke to me,
and set me upon my feet,
when I heard him speaking to me.

EZEKIEL 2:1-2

The message he gets is one of retribution for the people's rebellious behavior, probably intended as a way of instilling fear in them and motivating them to give up their immoral and idolatrous behavior, to prompt them to repent and worship God. Ezekiel knows he must fulfill his task, whether or not the people listen – and it is indeed doubtful they would listen.

As with Hosea, Ezekiel's life itself becomes a symbol, and his prophecy becomes the enactment of a powerful drama. He is told to eat the scroll of God's command, to make an unequivocal and powerful public display of God's imperative and his compulsion to preach it.

But you, son of man, hear what I say to you:
Do not be rebellious like that rebellious house;
Open your mouth, and eat what I give you.
And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me;
and, lo, a scroll of a book was in it;
And he spread it before me;
and it was written inside and outside;
and lamentations, mourning and woe were written in it.
And he said to me, son of man, eat what you find;
eat this scroll, and go and speak to the house of Israel.
So I opened my mouth, and he caused me to eat that scroll.

And he said to me, son of man, make your belly eat,
and fill your bowels with this scroll that I give you.
Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth sweet like honey.
And he said to me, son of man, all my words
that I shall speak to you, receive in your heart,
and hear with your ears.
And go, get you to the exiles, to your people,
and speak to them,
And tell them: "Thus said the Lord God";
Whether they will hear, or whether they will refuse to hear.

EZEKIEL 2:8-10; 3:1-3, 10-11

Unexpectedly, Ezekiel declares that when he ate the scroll, it was as sweet as honey, as nectar. One would expect a stern and bitter message to taste bitter, but because Ezekiel has become an extension of the divine will, and because God's message is the divine truth, he finds the message sweet. He is then commanded to retain and repeat everything God communicates to him.

Ezekiel then describes another experience of the spirit taking him up and transporting him. He hears the sound of great rushing, which he describes as the sounds of the wings and wheels of the celestial beings whom he saw in his earlier vision. As before, this must refer to the inner sound of the spiritual realms. His heart is heavy because he knows the bitterness of his prophecy, yet he must do it, because the "hand of the Lord," meaning the power or will of God, was upon him.

So again he sits at the river bank among the exiles for seven days. We can presume he was engaged in some form of meditation, as he says he was in an "overwhelmed" state. He experiences the divine power or will informing him that he will be a "watchman" to the people – someone to guide, warn, and protect them. He feels God's "hand" inspiring him to go to the "plain," perhaps a reference to a spiritual realm within himself or perhaps to a

particular physical place. There he experiences “the glory of the Lord” once again, the visual manifestation of the holy spirit or word. The spirit enters into him, its power sets him on his feet and compels him to retreat to his house, where God informs him that the people will bind him with cords. Even if he tries, he will be unable to speak or to reprove them, as they will not listen. But then, when the time is right and the divine will manifests itself in him, he will again be able to convey God’s message loudly and clearly. And those who “will hear, let them hear,” he says in God’s voice; those who are receptive will hear and listen, but the others will not be able to (3:15–27).

As before, he is forced to act out his prophecy on himself, to make himself and his life into a dramatic symbol. This is a powerful way to get across his message, which no one can ignore. But the Israelites are intransigent. They are unable to comprehend the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, unwilling to accept the inevitability of their own exile, so Ezekiel tries to use even more bold and shocking methods to shake them out of their stupor. Unfortunately, he finds that they are still unreceptive.

They become stubborn and vicious in their refusal to listen to the prophet. But God counsels him not to give up nor let their stubbornness affect him. He just needs to persevere. “And whether they hear or refuse to hear, they will know that there has been a prophet among them” (2:5). They will know that God has not given up on them. He continues to send his prophets, spiritual masters, to help them understand the divine will and return to God.

Ezekiel also uses the metaphor of the shepherd for the prophet, demonstrating the softer side of God’s love and care for his people. He says:

As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day
that he is among his sheep [that are] scattered;

So will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them
out of all places where they have been scattered
in the cloudy and dark day.

EZEKIEL 34:12

The text of Ezekiel presents an empathetic portrait of the prophet as a human being touched by the holy spirit, who was raised to the heights – and agony – of divine service. It narrates his life from the moment he experienced God’s summoning, via otherworldly mystical experiences of light and sound, to his faithful and anguished relationship with the community to whom he was sent.

Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah:

Polished arrow and servant of God

*Listen, O islands; and give heed, you nations from afar;
The Lord called me before I was born;
While still in my mother’s womb, he named me.
And he has made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
And He made me a polished arrow;
in his quiver he hid me.*

ISAIAH 49:1–2

From the depths of his soul, the anonymous prophet we know as Second Isaiah, who lived about 150 years after the First Isaiah, reveals how he experienced God’s call. Like Ezekiel, he probably lived during the period of the exile in Babylonia. Like Ezekiel, he had no choice but to respond. This was his divine destiny. Even before his birth, God had selected him to be his sword and arrow, to boldly and sharply speak the truth to the Israelites and awaken them from their complacency. The divine power uses the prophet to convey its message to humanity. God continues to

select spiritual teachers to reach out to humanity and transform their consciousness from negative to positive.

So what is the teaching this prophet was sent to deliver? In one of the first poems in the Second Isaiah grouping, the prophet is simply called “the voice” (40:3), implying that he is the voice that speaks or is propelled by God’s word. He cries out to the people, poignantly warning them to stick to the true path, calling this world a “wilderness” and a “desert.” He describes the great power of the Lord using the topography of the land as a metaphor. Our lives are filled with mountains and valleys – highs and lows, pleasures and pain, wealth and poverty. All of them are subject to God’s will. He can raise or level all of them. Next to him, to his will, human life is insignificant.

“The word of our God shall endure forever,” he says (40:8), referring to the true and eternal quality of the divine creative spirit or power that can be experienced by living according to his instructions. He says that the Lord comes with a strong hand and arm, to convey the power of his reach through his spirit and the teachings of the prophets. As transcendent and powerful as God is, the prophet reminds the people that he intimately cares for his flock like a shepherd, full of compassion and gentleness. Ultimately, the Lord is answerable only to himself: “Who has directed the spirit of the Lord?” (40:13). From whom has he taken counsel?

Second Isaiah calls himself *eved* YHWH (the servant of God), selected by God and invested with his spirit to perform a specific mission – to bring awareness of the divine presence, truth, and justice to humanity. He acts as an intermediary between God and man, in the same way that Moses, Joshua, and other prophets before him did. In the first of the “Servant Songs,” as this collection of poems is sometimes called, it is YHWH himself who declares that the prophet is his faithful servant. The prophet is filled with the *ruah ha-kodesh*. He says it is he who was sent as the

covenant for the people, the fulfillment of the divine promise of redemption; as a light to the nations, and (using the same metaphor that appears in First Isaiah, Chapter 35) to bring sight to the spiritually blind and freedom to those who sit in the prison of spiritual darkness.

Behold my servant, whom I uphold;
 my elect, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
 he shall bring forth judgment to the nations.
He shall not cry, nor lift up,
 nor cause his voice to be heard in the street.
A bruised reed shall he not break,
 and the dimly burning flax shall he not quench;
 he shall bring forth judgment to truth.
He shall not fail nor be discouraged,
 till he has set judgment in the earth;
 and the islands shall wait for his Torah [teaching].
Thus said God the Lord, he who created the heavens,
 and stretched them out;
He who spread forth the earth,
 and that which comes out of it;
He who gives breath to the people upon it,
 and spirit to those who walk in it:
I the Lord have called you in righteousness,
 and will hold your hand, and will keep you,
And give you for a covenant of the people,
 for a light to the nations;
To open the blind eyes,
 to bring out the prisoners from the prison,
 and those who sit in darkness, out of the prison house.

And yet, though he is the servant of God who brings a message of hope, he often feels he has failed in his mission. He says: “I have labored in vain . . .” though he has been true to his calling. He reiterates that he was called for this mission from the womb, to bring Jacob back to God.* Ultimately, he says, God will vindicate him; his spiritual light will not only redeem the Israelites, he will have the power to bring salvation to all the nations, to the “ends of the earth.” One gets the sense that during the exile the prophets were not only ministering to their own people, but that their words and teachings resounded farther, to the surrounding peoples. Here Isaiah’s vision is universalist and all-encompassing, as God’s grace and mercy reach all humanity.

I will also give you for a light to the nations,
that my salvation may be to the end of the earth.

ISAIAH 49:6

The prophet can transcend any personal sense of failure, as his self-confidence lies in God’s confidence in him. Yet the pain he experiences at being unappreciated by his flock persists; in another poem he describes his suffering at the hands of an ungrateful and unrepentant people. They beat him, they spit at him, they humiliate him (50:6–11). Still he obeys God, who has given him the voice, the tongue, and the words to “sustain with a word him who is weary.” It is the divine spirit or inner word that has the power to sustain the person who is tired of the world and its falsehood and is ready to submit to God’s will. The Lord has given the prophet the inner hearing (“opened my ear”) to hear him, despite the fact that his devotion to God and his single-minded pursuit of his mission has caused others to despise him.

* Jacob, as the patriarch of the twelve tribes, is often used as a synonym for the Israelites, specifically for the northern kingdom of Israel.

He concludes by speaking to those who walk in darkness and have no inner, spiritual light. He says, one who “fears the Lord, who obeys the voice of his servant (the prophet), should trust in the Lord and be steadfast.” Then he will no longer walk in spiritual darkness (50:10).

Another astounding passage in Second Isaiah confirms the prophet’s calling by God for his spiritual ministry to all humanity.

As many were astonished at thee;
 I anointed his visage more than any man,*
 and his form more than the sons of men
 So shall he sprinkle many nations;
 the kings shall shut their mouths at him:
 For that which had not been told them shall they see;
 and that which they had not heard shall they consider.

ISAIAH 52:14–15⁵⁵

Just as God has “anointed” him, pouring his spiritual “waters” upon him, so he (the prophet) will sprinkle those waters of wisdom on the world. The spiritual waters were a common symbol for the holy spirit, the divine power that is experienced within oneself. Thus, he is saying that just as he has received this spirit from God, so he will teach others to receive it.

In another song, Isaiah speaks in the voice of his disciples, who lament their terrible behavior towards their prophet. He carried our sorrows and bore our transgressions, they say, yet we didn’t appreciate what he was doing for us. Here he calls God and the prophet “the *tsadik*,” generally translated as the righteous one, but which means much more than that: it suggests the saintly, compassionate, and pure one. It is a term used throughout the centuries for the holy man, the master, the prophet who emulates God.

* Dead Sea Scrolls version.

Who has believed our report?
and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?
For he grew up before him as a tender plant,
and as a root out of a dry ground;
He had no form nor comeliness that we should look at him,
there was no countenance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with sickness;
and we hid as it were our faces from him;
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he has borne our sicknesses,
and carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteemed him stricken, struck by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded because of our transgressions,
he was bruised because of our iniquities;
His sufferings were that we might have peace;
and by his injury we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed, but he humbled himself
and opened not his mouth;
He was brought like a lamb to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that is dumb before its shearers,
he did not open his mouth.*

ISAIAH 53:1-7

* This passage, in speaking of the "lamb brought to slaughter," is most probably a reference to the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in the Israelites' ancient past. Although according to the canonized Bible, Isaac was freed by Abraham at the last minute and not killed, according to some old legends and commentaries on the Bible, and even a medieval Hebrew poem, Isaac was indeed sacrificed, not once but twice, symbolically representing all martyrs who serve as scapegoats.

Second Isaiah teaches that the saint, the “servant of God,” suffers because of his duty; he is despised and rejected by humanity; he is “a man of sorrows.” Using the imagery of the Temple and its sacrificial cult, he says that the prophet bore the sins of his followers, ultimately dying in that cause. At the end of the poem, God promises to vindicate him because he has performed the duty God assigned to him even though it brought him death: “because he has poured out his soul to death.”

This passage has often been interpreted as a prediction of the coming and suffering of Jesus Christ, who would be abused and rejected. Yet it seems there were many such prophets who suffered in the line of duty, and the experiences of Jesus echoed the travails of many of the Jewish prophets.

About the power of this passage, Joseph Blenkinsopp remarks: “It seems reasonable to conclude that the intensity of the language in this lament, almost unparalleled in the Hebrew Bible, arises out of the profoundly revealing experience of conversion to discipleship and prepares for the suffering and rejection of the ‘servants of YHWH’ in Third Isaiah. It is no wonder that it has continued to reverberate throughout Jewish history and that it came to have such a decisive influence on the early Christian understanding of the prophetic ministry of Jesus.”⁵⁶

Years later, after the Jews returned to Judea from exile, the prophet we now call Third Isaiah, who was probably Second Isaiah’s disciple, also sang about the *tsadik* who died unappreciated and unmourned. It has been suggested that he was lamenting the suffering of his spiritual predecessor, Second Isaiah, the “servant of God,” who was spurned by his people because he tried to warn them of the evil that would befall them.

The *tsadikim* perish, and no man lays it to heart;
and merciful men are taken away,

None considering that the righteous
is taken away from the evil to come.

ISAIAH 57:1

The spirit of God is upon him, Third Isaiah says, because he has been sent by the divine power to share the good news of the people's redemption, their salvation. This is a message for the "humble," he says – those who are humble in spirit. He has been sent to free those who have been imprisoned by their weaknesses and lower tendencies (in Hebrew, the *yetser ha-ra*), which cause moral corruption. The prophet, the mystic, is joyful in his role, as he is covered in the "robe" of virtue (*tsedakah*)*.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord
has anointed me to announce good news to the humble;
He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; . . .
I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my soul shall be joyful in my God;
For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness [virtue],
As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth her bud,
and as the garden causes the things that are sown in it
to spring forth;
So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring forth before all the nations.

ISAIAH 61:1, 10–11

* *Tsedakah* is commonly translated as righteousness, but it also means virtue, charity, piety. It is related to the word *tsadik*.

Third Isaiah also saw himself as the “servant of the Lord,” much despised by the general populace. Yet he continued with his divine mission as truth-teller, without regard for his personal convenience. He was called by God to teach the Israelites about their true status in life and remind them how helpless they were in the face of destiny and the divine will. He asked the Lord to be compassionate with them because they longed to return to his comfort, but God himself caused them to stray: “O Lord, why have you made us stray from your ways, and hardened our heart from your fear? Return for your servants’ sake, the tribes of your inheritance. . . . We have become like those over whom you never ruled, who were not called by your name. O that you would tear the heavens and come down, that the mountains would melt away at your presence” (63:17, 19).

The Israelites were suffering in their separation from God. Ultimately he begs the Lord for mercy, for himself and his people, reminding God that it is He who created them with limitations and weaknesses. “But now, O Lord, you are our father; we are the clay, and you our potter; and we are all the work of your hand” (64:7).

Third Isaiah brings us a strong and explicit declaration of the purpose of the prophet as spiritual master. He uses the term *mafgi’a*, meaning an intermediary or intercessor – someone who could intervene or advocate for them spiritually. He is saying that the reason the Lord has intervened is because there was no intermediary. Therefore he will extend his “hand,” a metaphor for the redeemer, to bring salvation. The concept of redemption was an interesting one in biblical times. Just as one had to pay to redeem a slave, so the prophet sent by God stands in for us, as payment for us. In bringing us a message of forgiveness, he is saying that he has given a guarantee for us, despite our evil behavior, and so we can go free.

And truth is absent;
 and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey;
 And the Lord saw it,
 and it displeased him that there was no justice.
 And he saw that there was no man,
 and wondered that there was no intercessor [*mafgi'a*];
 Therefore his arm brought salvation to him;
 and his righteousness sustained him. . . .
 And a redeemer shall come to Zion,
 and to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,
 says the Lord.
 As for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord;
 My spirit that is upon you,
 and my words which I have put in your mouth,
 shall not depart from your mouth,
 nor from the mouth of your seed,
 nor from the mouth of your seed's seed, says the Lord,
 from now on and forever.

ISAIAH 59:13–16, 20–21

Thus the Lord reminds them of their covenant with him, that they should always keep his holy spirit, his command, foremost in their mouths – in their mind and actions.

Like Hosea, Isaiah uses the allegory of the marriage between God and the Israelites to express the relationship of the soul with the divine. He says that when the people return to the true worship of God and give up their corrupt ways, God will fulfill his end of the marriage contract – and they will be reclaimed, possessed, ransomed by their master, and protected by his “watchmen,” another metaphor for the prophets. By calling the people “the crown (*keter*) of glory” and “the royal diadem (*atarah*),” he is using the language of mystic symbolism that was later adopted

by the Jewish mystics of the Middle Ages, the kabbalists, to refer to the brilliance of the higher spiritual realms – the stages of the emanation of the divine power. When the people come into the orbit of divine love, they will be a means to spread the divine light and love in the creation.

You shall also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord,
 and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
 You shall no more be termed Forsaken;
 nor shall your land any more be termed Desolate;
 But you shall be called Hephzibah,* and your land Beulah;†
 for the Lord delights in you,
 and your land shall be married.
 For as a young man marries a virgin,
 so shall your sons marry you;
 And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
 so shall your God rejoice over you.
 I have set watchmen upon your walls, O Jerusalem,
 who shall never hold their peace day nor night;
 You who make mention of the Lord, take no rest.

ISAIAH 62:3–6

Third Isaiah explicitly questions the need for temples and altars, because God cannot be limited to these places. Probably written at the time the Second Temple had been rebuilt in 515 BCE, the prophet confronts the people: What kind of house can contain the Lord? He is everywhere! “Heaven is my throne, the earth is my footstool” (66:1), he says in God’s name, and I have created them both! How can you best worship me? Who is most acceptable to me? The man who is “poor and of a contrite spirit,

* *Hephzibah*: Literally, “I desire her.”

† *Beulah*: Literally, “possessed,” “having a husband.”

and trembles at my word” (66:2). Humility is the divine quality of the person who trembles, who is moved by the Lord’s word, his holy spirit. The sacrifices and offerings commonly brought in the temples and altars are anathema to God. They are similar to idol worship. He seems not to condone the killing of animals at all. He spoke strongly: “He who kills an ox is as if he slew a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, as if he cut off a dog’s neck; he who offers a meal offering, as if he offered swine’s blood; he who burns incense, as if he blessed an idol. For they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations” (66:3).

Here he has given a categorical denunciation of the sacrifices and rites of the Temple as instituted in the Bible’s priestly documents, and favors the man who “trembles” or obeys the word, the holy spirit.

So how can God be worshiped? He challenges them: See if your idols can help you! They can be destroyed by the slightest wind. But whoever trusts in God will “inherit my holy mountain,” perhaps a reference to a physical mountain but probably to the inner spiritual regions, the higher states of consciousness. He proclaims himself as the one who is eternal – who is not dominated by time, whose word is holy – all spirit, beyond the level of matter and mind. Come, prepare the way, he says: Come with me. I dwell in the high and holy place. But I also dwell in the heart and spirit of the humble and contrite, to whom I give spiritual life. The humble people may be low in a worldly sense, but they have attained to great heights spiritually, loved and guided by the Lord.

When you cry, let your collection of idols save you;
but the wind shall carry them all away;
a breath shall take them;
But he who puts his trust in me shall possess the land,
and shall inherit my holy mountain;

And one shall say, Build up, build up, prepare the way,
take up the stumbling block from the way of my people.
For thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity,
whose name is Holy:
“I dwell on the high and holy place,
yet with him also who is of a contrite and humble spirit,
to revive the spirit of the humble,
and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

ISAIAH 57:13–15

The concept of the messiah

Although the Temple had been rebuilt by the late sixth century BCE, instability persisted in the land of Judea, which now was inhabited by returned exiles as well as descendants of the original population who had remained in the land. There were also converts from other tribes nearby who had intermarried with the Judeans who had remained. Several prophets appeared, like Third Isaiah, who continued with the prophetic mission but who increasingly emphasized the dawn of a future “golden age” – a period when God’s will would be established on earth, when morality would be upheld by all, and an ideal king-redeemer would reign from Jerusalem, God’s holy city.* The focus had changed from the present, full of suffering and subjugation, to a brilliant future. The scattered Jews in the diaspora would hear God’s call and gather to return to the Holy Land. In these prophecies there were also predictions of great battles and tremendous violence that would bring about an apocalypse, which would precede the ideal “day of the Lord.” The eschatological and apocalyptic imagery were expanded upon by editors of later periods, who added their commentaries and interpolations to the texts.⁵⁷

*The anticipation of the “end of days” and the prophecies concerning that time is called eschatology.

With the great suffering of the Israelites, their conquest and exile – first of the northern kingdom and then of the southern kingdom – it is only logical that they would develop a longing for deliverance on a material, temporal level. As we saw earlier, when the prophets used external events as dramatic symbols for their teachings, later editors often understood them literally. They took events that happened after the prophets lived, such as battles and earthquakes, and cast them as predictions of future punishment for the people's behavior.

In the literature of this period, the future redeemer who brings the prophecy, who saves humanity, is called a messiah. Literally, the term "messiah" (Hebrew *mashiah*) means "anointed one"; and it was through their anointing by God with the *ruah ha-kodesh* that the prophets were chosen by God to teach, guide, and save the people. And eventually during the Second Temple period, two other figures became associated with the role of the messiah, in addition to the prophet – the king and the high priest, both of whom were literally anointed with oil at the time of their selection.

The concept of the royal messiah originated when the prophet Samuel anointed Saul, and then David, as kings of Israel. As we saw in our discussion of Saul, the people had clamored for a king, but God was reluctant to establish a monarchy, saying: I have given you the prophets to lead and guide you. But the people insisted and God acceded to their request. Thus the anointed king shared in the prophet's spiritual power and he was expected to function as both a spiritual and temporal leader. However, when the kingdom split apart and was eventually destroyed, the Davidic monarchy became a symbol of the Israelites' self-identification as a people chosen by God, a people independent of foreign domination and free to worship their own God. So the aspiration for a kingly messiah, embodied by the lineage of David, became a focus of their spiritual hope as well. The kingly

messiah was also associated with the tribe of Judah from which David came.

The concept of the high priest as messiah originates in the Bible, with the story of the selection of Aaron as the first high priest, whose lineage continued for millennia. The narrative recounts that Moses felt inadequate for his mission; he hesitated to preach to the Israelites and lead them out of Egypt, so God “reluctantly” chose Aaron to assist him. According to the biblical account, some of Moses’ prophetic role was diverted to Aaron. The priestly messiah is associated with the tribe of Levi, from which Moses and Aaron came.

The priesthood of antiquity, so long as the Temple was standing, was responsible to conduct the Temple rituals and sacrifices that would propitiate God and bring atonement for the people. The priest also permitted the pilgrims to the Temple in Jerusalem to gaze at the Holy of Holies, specifically at the “throne” of God created by the outspread wings of the cherubim, where the presence of God was believed to alight when it entered the physical world. It was also in the Holy of Holies where the priests would repeat the ineffable or unpronounceable “name” of God on the awesome Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, and it is they who may have converted the name YHWH into a 48- or 72-letter name of God whose letters were combined into unpronounceable and meaningless syllables as a way of transcending language. By concentrating on these names, the priests would have attempted to raise their consciousness to supernal realms. Thus the priests, through the performance of this ritual, brought a mystical dimension into the people’s lives.

Having a priestly messiah presumes the existence of a Temple where a high priest could officiate. And this presumes the political and religious independence that the people had been denied during their exile. In the late sixth century BCE, the Persian king allowed the exiled Judeans to return to Jerusalem and

encouraged them to rebuild their Temple as a central place of worship. The prophet Zechariah also returned to Jerusalem with the exiles. He recounts a vision, received from an angel during his sleep, which establishes both the kingly and priestly messiahs as divinely mandated, supporting the prophet-messiah from either side. The vision is important in understanding the development of the concept of the messiah in both Judaism and Christianity.

And the angel who talked with me came again,
and waked me,
like a man who is wakened out of his sleep,
And he said to me, What do you see?
And I said, I have looked,
and behold a lampstand [*menorah*] all of gold,
with a bowl upon its top, and seven lamps on it,
and seven pipes to the seven lamps,
which are upon its top;
And there are two olive trees by it,
one upon the right side of the bowl,
and the other upon its left side.
And I answered and spoke to the angel who talked with me,
saying,
What are these, my lord?
Then the angel who talked with me answered
and said to me,
Do you not know what these are?
And I said, No, my lord.
Then he answered and spoke to me, saying,
This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel [the high priest],
saying,
Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit,
says the Lord of hosts.

The menorah, the lampstand with its seven oil lamps, represents the Lord or the prophetic messiah, who is the source of spiritual illumination or light. The mystic teacher is often referred to as the illuminator in Jewish mysticism, the one who gives light, so this symbol is very apt. (Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, the legendary author of the Zohar, was referred to as “the holy lamp” by his disciples.) The seven lamps represent the seven realms or heavens of spiritual consciousness that the Jewish mystics alluded to. They also represent the various qualities of God, or the gradations of his power, which were symbolized by the seven lower *sefirot* (emanations) in the later mystic teachings of the Kabbalah. In this passage, Zechariah reminds the priest that it is this power – God’s holy spirit – that sustains everything in the physical world. Zechariah again asks God the significance of the two olive trees:

What are these two olive trees upon the right side
of the lampstand and upon its left side?
And I answered again, and said to him,
What are these two olive branches
which are beside the two golden spouts,
from which the golden oil is poured out?
And he answered me and said,
Do you not know what these are?
And I said, No, my lord.
And he said, These are the two anointed ones,
who stand by the Lord of the whole earth.

ZECHARIAH 4:1-14

The two olive trees are the source of the divine oil or spiritual nourishment that flows into the menorah; mystically, this is a beautiful illustration of how the divine power or essence flows through the realm of duality into the realized or illumined soul,

symbolized by the menorah, the lamp. The image seems to symbolize the transcendence of duality through divine knowledge, the unity that is God. On a literal level, Zechariah says that the trees represent the kingly messiah and the priestly messiah (the two anointed ones), both of whom would rule from the Temple, one as the worldly leader and the other as the priest, creating peace and harmony through their joint rule and support for the prophet's mission.

It would appear, if the literal sense of this prophecy is authentic, that Zechariah is supporting the reconstruction of the Temple as a focus for the devotion and worship of the people, and he has woven the three concepts of the messiah (prophetic, priestly, and kingly) into his vision. We will see that later, in the writings of the Qumran sect in the first century BCE, all three concepts of the messiah merge into one.

In another passage, Zechariah uses the term *tsemakh* (plant, growth, branch) for God's servant. It is not clear if he is referring to the prophetic or royal messiah – perhaps to both. This implies that the prophet is a branch or organic extension of God. If God is the tree, then the branch grows from it. Isaiah and Jeremiah had also called the future king the branch and the rod.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, Zechariah returns to the imagery of the true shepherd for the master, and he calls those who mislead the people the false shepherds, with whom God is displeased. They gave “empty comfort,” and the people went astray, because “there was no (true) shepherd” (10:2). In the future, when God wishes to bring them back to him, he will call for them like a shepherd with his flock: “I will whistle for them and gather them: for I have redeemed them” (10:8). “I will strengthen them in the Lord,” and they shall “walk up in his name” (10:12). They will follow in God's teachings, his path, and live according to the divine name or command.

Zechariah also contrasts the glory of the true spiritual king with his intrinsic humility by portraying him as entering the city

on a donkey, a lowly animal, despite the fact that he is victorious and powerful. It is this image that became the model associated with all messianic figures in the future, from Jesus to other Jewish messianic figures in later centuries.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O daughter of Jerusalem;
Behold, your King comes to you; he is just, and victorious;
humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass.

ZECHARIAH 9:9

After the destruction of the Second Temple and the conquest of Judea by Rome, there was no longer any possibility for a royal or priestly messiah to function. Thus all three roles of the messiah became inextricably merged, as the people had to combine their aspirations into the hope for a spiritual master or messiah who would redeem and save them on all levels at once. The aspiration for a messiah would now figure into almost all Jewish spiritual and mystical teachings from this time onwards.



CHAPTER 4

The End of Prophecy?

THE PROPHETS WE HAVE BEEN STUDYING represent only a small group out of the more than forty-eight prophets, both men and women, whose lives and teachings are documented in the Bible. They are generally divided into “major” and “minor” prophets, grouped not according to their importance but to the length of their writings, which were preserved in scrolls. Those with the longest scrolls were considered major, and those with the shortest, minor.

By the third or second century BCE, sages and scribes were editing the writings of the prophets and compiling a canonized scripture. The sages were a nonpriestly group of elders who interpreted the Bible and provided guidance to the people. They declared that prophecy had ended with Malachi, in the fifth century BCE, and that afterwards any mystics and holy men who appeared could not have been of the same level. These sages maintained that the divine gift of prophecy was no longer active in Israel, and thus they chose not to include in their canon of scriptures most of the prophetic, esoteric, and apocalyptic literature written over the next few centuries, with the possible

exception of the book of Daniel (parts of which were written in the second century BCE).*

It is now believed by most scholars that this decision represents the ascendancy of a newly powerful group of sages, precursors to the Pharisees and the rabbis,[†] over the prophetic-priestly circles who continued to be active through the time of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

In the early second century BCE, the priesthood of the lineage of Zadok (who had been high priest in the time of King David and who traced his lineage to Moses' brother Aaron), was usurped by the new self-declared priestly house of the Hasmoneans. The Hasmoneans cooperated with the Seleucid Greek rulers and hellenized Jewish worship, which included installing statues of Greek deities in the Temple and adopting Greek festivals and the lunar calendar. To the Zadokite priesthood and their followers this was blasphemous. In particular, the solar calendar was considered to be divinely ordained and sacred because of its adherence to periods of time marked out by the earth's rotation around the sun – the four seasons, years consisting of twelve months of 364 days, twelve astrological signs, seven days in a week, fifty-two weeks with fifty-two sabbaths divided into thirteen periods or “watches.” Each family of Zadokite priests would have been responsible for the Temple rites for specific watches. The lunar calendar, on the other hand, was dependent on man's discernment of the moon to establish the new months, and so was seen as an invention of man.

* Apocalypses were a form of esoteric literature that focuses on the role of the messiah in saving a remnant of humanity from terrible catastrophes. They generally indulge in detailed descriptions of the destruction of the world through wars and natural catastrophes brought about by the wrath of God as a consequence of the misbehavior of humanity. Many apocalypses were written during this period, and the genre was adopted by early Christian writers.

[†] The derivation of the name *Pharisee* is unknown. It is thought to signify interpreters or separatists.

The choice of calendar was extremely important, especially for the priests who were entrusted with ensuring that the cycle of Jewish holy days and festivals was observed correctly and at the correct times.

Thus, it is now believed by some scholars that when the priests of the sons of Zadok were deposed, they settled by the shores of the Dead Sea, at Qumran, and tried to continue with their duties and observances according to the solar calendar, transforming their community into a “virtual” or substitute Temple. The library of 930 scrolls found in the nearby caves at Qumran in 1947 attests to the continuance of the prophetic tradition among the Zadokites. They clearly did not accept the edict of the sages that prophecy had ended.

Mystic masters at Qumran

Most of the scrolls found at Qumran were texts of the biblical scrolls, many in earlier versions than were available at that time. There were also commentaries on the scrolls, various documents giving rules of the community and guidance for its members, as well as several beautiful visionary, mystical documents.*

Many of these documents bear witness to the activity of at least one important spiritual master who guided the members and who was known as the Teacher of Righteousness (*moreh ha-tsedek*).[†] We learn of his persecution by the Wicked Priest,

* When the Dead Sea Scrolls were first discovered, the Qumran settlement was originally identified with the legendary Essenes, a mystical sect mentioned by three Greek and Roman first-century writers, including Josephus Flavius. However, as there is nothing in the Qumran documents to link them with the name Essene, or even with the description of the Essenes, this theory has been losing favor among many scholars who point out the priestly content of the documents. It is possible that there was an Essene sect, but they are not mentioned in any Hebrew or Aramaic documents of that time.

[†] “The Damascus Rule” and the “Commentary on Habakkuk” are the main sources of information about the Teacher.

sometimes called the Liar or the Scoffer, and his betrayal by unfaithful followers who believed the Liar. The Wicked Priest probably refers to the Hasmonean High Priest of the second century BCE who persecuted the Zadokites. The Teacher and his loyal disciples fled to a place of refuge, called in the text “Damascus,” probably a cryptic reference to Qumran.* Ultimately, the Wicked Priest killed the Teacher of Righteousness. Scholars have speculated that the Teacher may be identified with Second Isaiah, who was persecuted by his followers and is mourned by his successor, Third Isaiah. It has also been conjectured that there may have been more than one Teacher of Righteousness, and that the term was used generically for a lineage or series of teachers who ministered to the sect.⁵⁹

We will probably never know for certain who the Teacher was, but we can get an image of him from these texts, which include a collection of poems called the Thanksgiving Hymns, most of which are attributed to him. He seems to have been a devoted and pious lover of the Lord, a mystic, who had experienced within himself the light and word of God, the holy spirit, and who tried to raise his disciples to a level of spirituality that would ensure their salvation and divine forgiveness. Out of his love for God, he attended to his ministry at great inconvenience and pain to himself. He often refers to his followers as “the sons of light” who are in a battle with the “sons of darkness,” presumably the followers of the Wicked Priest.

Using the rich symbolism of the ancient biblical prophets, the Teacher of Righteousness thanks God for giving him an unending spiritual knowledge and allowing him to share it with others who, through it, would be united with “the everlasting spring” – God himself.

* It was a common practice at that time to encrypt references to places.

I [thank Thee, O Lord,*
For] Thou hast placed me beside a fountain of streams
in an arid land,
and close to a spring of waters in a dry land,
and beside a watered garden [in a wilderness].

[For Thou didst set] a plantation
of cypress, pine, and cedar for Thy glory,
Trees of life beside a mysterious fountain
hidden among the trees by the water,
And they put out a shoot of the everlasting Plant.
But before they did so, they took root
and sent out their roots to the watercourse
that its stem might be open to the living waters
and be one with the everlasting spring.

*THANKSGIVING HYMNS 14*⁶⁰

In the next selection, he again uses the image of “the everlasting Plant” to describe the spiritual knowledge that is unending and unbounded, the heritage of all mankind. It is a source of light, which becomes the “ever-flowing eternal fountain” or source of spiritual knowledge. But those who are evil will be consumed by its flames, not nourished by its waters.

They shall send out a bud [forever]
like a flower [of the fields],
and shall cause a shoot to grow
into the boughs of an everlasting Plant.

* Many of the scrolls were found in fragments, and scholars have pieced together the texts, filling in gaps with wording based on their study of similar texts. The filled-in words are given in square brackets. Parentheses indicate words implied in the text but not spelled out.

It shall cover the whole [earth] with its shadow
 [and its crown] (shall reach) to the [clouds];
 Its roots (shall go down) to the Abyss
 [and all the rivers of Eden shall water its branches].

.....

A source of light shall become
 an eternal ever-flowing fountain,
 And in its bright flames
 all the [sons of iniquity] shall be consumed;
 [it shall be] a fire to devour all sinful men
 in utter destruction.

THANKSGIVING HYMNS 10⁶¹

The Teacher thanks God for the inner faith and strength he has received from him, which saved him from those who have attacked him. He is grateful that the Lord has made him a “father” to his disciples, who are the “sons of grace.” He says:

I thank Thee, O Lord,
 for Thou hast upheld me by Thy strength.
 Thou hast shed Thy Holy Spirit upon me
 that I may not stumble....
 Thou hast made me a father to the sons of grace,
 and as a foster-father to men of marvel;
 They have opened their mouths like little babes...
 like a child playing in the lap of its nurse....
 Thou hast lifted my horn above those who insult me,
 and those who attack me
 [sway like the boughs] (of a tree);...
 And I shall shine in a seven-fold light
 in [the Council appointed by] Thee for Thy glory;
 for Thou art an everlasting heavenly light to me

and wilt establish my feet
 [upon level ground for ever].

THANKSGIVING HYMNS 1⁶²

One of the important concepts taught in these poems and in other texts found at Qumran is the belief in absolute predestination. People are governed by a combination of both evil and good inclinations or spirits. He calls this the “rule of two spirits.” It is God who decides which will predominate in each person. Thus it is He who puts people on the path of good or the path of evil. The Teacher is thankful that he has been chosen for God’s work and that the inclination to good has predominated in him.

He says he knows this because God has revealed it to him: “Thou hast unstopped my ears to marvelous mysteries.” This phrase signals prophetic revelation. He ends the poem in deep humility, calling himself “a shape of clay, kneaded in water, a ground of shame and a source of pollution, . . . a straying and perverted spirit of no understanding.” He asks: “What can I say that is not foreknown, and what can I utter that is not foretold?”

[And] to the spirit of man
 which Thou has formed in the world,
 [Thou hast given dominion over the works of Thy hands]
 for everlasting days and unending generations.
 . . . in their ages
 Thou hast allotted to them tasks
 during all their generations,
 and judgment in their appointed seasons
 according to the rule [of the two spirits].
 For Thou hast established their ways]
 for ever and ever,
 [And hast ordained from eternity]
 their visitation for reward and chastisements;

Thou hast allotted it to all their seed
 for eternal generations and everlasting years . . .
 In the wisdom of Thy knowledge
 Thou didst establish their destiny before ever they were.
 All things [exist] according to [Thy will]
 and without Thee nothing is done.

These things I know by the wisdom
 which comes from Thee,
 For Thou hast unstopped my ears
 to marvelous mysteries.

And yet I, a shape of clay kneaded in water,
 a ground of shame and a source of pollution,
 A melting-pot of wickedness and an edifice of sin,
 a straying and perverted spirit of no understanding,
 fearful of righteous judgments,
 What can I say that is not foreknown,
 and what can I utter that is not foretold?

THANKSGIVING HYMNS 1⁶³

In other selections, the Teacher thanks the Lord for giving him the heart and wisdom to discriminate between good and evil, so that he may choose the good. He also declares that through the understanding God has given him he understands that “it is not in mortals to direct their step” but that “the inclination of every spirit” is in his hand. As God has power over all, this means that everything is predestined, even whether we choose the good or the evil. He begs God to purify him by his holy spirit, the divine word, and to draw him close through his grace. Then he continues:

And I know that man is not righteous
 except through Thee,

And therefore I implore Thee
by the spirit which Thou hast given [me]
to perfect Thy [favors] to Thy servant [forever],
Purifying me by Thy Holy Spirit,
and drawing me near to Thee by Thy grace
according to the abundance of Thy mercies.

THANKSGIVING HYMNS 22⁶⁴

INNER ASCENT

Did the Qumranites have inner spiritual experiences under the guidance of the Teacher of Righteousness? What were the “marvelous mysteries” the Teacher heard when his ears were unstopped? A unique discovery among the Qumran scrolls, which dates from the first century BCE, has brought to light an early account of mystic ascent in the *merkavah* (the chariot or vehicle which becomes the throne of God in the supernal realms). It is reminiscent of Ezekiel’s description of his inner ascent. It was a poem meant to be recited on one of the sabbaths of the cyclical year. The presence of this document among the Qumran scrolls confirms that the technique of chariot ascent was known by that time. It is quite fitting that it should be found among documents written in priestly circles, as it uses the symbolism of priestly worship in the Temple’s Holy of Holies to convey the awesome experience of God. This fragment may be an important missing link joining Ezekiel’s prophetic vision with the documented experiences of the merkavah mystics of several centuries later. It demonstrates that the metaphor of the chariot for the inner spiritual journey was in use by Jewish mystics many centuries earlier than had been realized. It also suggests that there may have been a subterranean transmission of the esoteric tradition that we still have not uncovered, as some scholars have implied.⁶⁵

The beauty and clarity of the account suggests that it represents the writings of a mystic who entered the spiritual regions

and heard the inner sound and saw the inner light with the “eyes and ears of his soul.” The “still small voice” of 1 Kings 19:12, signifying God’s self-revelation to Elijah, is rendered here as the “sound of divine stillness” and the “still sound of blessing” that comes from the movement of the angels.*

The experience of spiritual light and sound is common to all mystics who have gone within to the spiritual realms, as these are the projection or manifestation of divine power on the spiritual and mind planes. Sometimes the sound is heard as the “sound of joyful praise” and singing of angels; Greek mystics have used the term “the music of the spheres” for this spiritual experience. Here is the account from the scrolls, recited on the twelfth sabbath of the year:

BY THE MASTER: SONG OF THE SACRIFICE
OF THE TWELFTH SABBATH

Praise the God of cycles of wonder and exalt him.
 Glory is in the tabernacle of the God of knowledge.
 The cherubim fall before him and bless him.
 As they rise the sound of divine stillness [is heard].
 There is a tumult of jubilation;
 As they lift their wings
 the sound of divine stillness is heard.
 The cherubim bless the form of the chariot-throne,
 [which is] above the firmament of the cherubim.
 And they sing and praise the splendor
 of the luminous firmament,
 [which is] beneath His glorious seat.

* “In our Qumran text, this voice is uttered by the cherubim and it is interesting to note that, although the Bible does not define the source of the voice, the ancient Aramaic translation of 1 Kings (*Targum of Jonathan*) ascribes it to angelic beings called ‘they who bless silently.’” (Geza Vermes, quoted in *The Other Bible*, Barnstone, ed., p. 705.)

When the *ofanim* [wheels] move, the holy angels return.
 They emerge from his glorious wheels
 like the appearance of fire,
 Spirits of the holy of holies round about,
 between the appearance of [mighty] streams of fire
 like *hashmal*.⁶⁶
 And there is radiance,
 embroidery of glorious and wonderful colors,
 wondrously hued, a pure blend.
 The spirits of living godlike beings which move perpetually
 with the glory of the wondrous chariots.
 There is a still sound of blessing
 in the roar of their movement.
 They praise His holiness as they return to their paths.
 As they ascend, they ascend wondrously,
 and when they settle, they stand still.
 The sound of joyful praise falls silent.
 There is a stillness of divine blessing
 in all the camps of godlike beings;
 sound of praises . . . [coming]
 from among all their divisions.
 On their sides each of their number in his turn praises
 while passing by,
 And all their mastered troops rejoice,
 each one in his station.

SONGS OF THE SABBATH SACRIFICE⁶⁷

1 Enoch

One of the most unusual documents to be found at Qumran is *The Apocalypse of Enoch*, also called *1 Enoch*,⁶⁸ which was most probably written in the Zadokite priestly circles. It gives an image of how the spiritual master was viewed at this time – as

a quasi-supernatural being, a messiah, who could ascend to the spiritual realms and return with lessons for mankind.

In the book of Genesis of the Bible, Enoch is only mentioned briefly, as the grandfather of Noah, who lived in the seventh generation after Adam, who “walked with God” and did not die, but ascended to the heavens while alive (Genesis 5:18–24). Various legends and stories over the centuries cast him as a spiritual adept, a mystic traveler who had learned the secrets of God and the divine mystery. Mystics of much later periods used his character to tell the story of their own mystic journey. In this way, the secrecy that surrounded mystical experience in the late Second Temple era was maintained, and these accounts gained a certain acceptability within the Jewish tradition. This form of writing is called pseudepigraphic, and it became a common style for presenting mystical teachings from that time onwards.

It seems clear that writings like *The Apocalypse of Enoch*, while couched in terms of legends and myths about ancient persons, are not simply works of fiction by imaginative writers. Elliot Wolfson, a contemporary scholar, believes that these apocalyptic works reflect the experiences of mystic practitioners. In his interesting study of the vision of God in Jewish mystical texts, he writes:

The recorded visions of the enthroned form of God’s presence (or glory) and/or the angelic hosts in the heavenly realm result from otherworldly journeys that, one may presume, were induced by specific visionary practices, though the records of these visions were often expressed in conventional imagery drawn from the theophanic traditions in Hebrew Scripture. . . . It is evident that such visions, in the framework of apocalypticism, are part of the much larger phenomenon regarding the disclosure of divine secrets. That is, apocalyptic is the revelation of divine mysteries

through the agency of visions, dreams, and other paranormal states of consciousness.⁶⁹

Enoch's visions during his journey to realms of higher consciousness cover such subjects as the history of the world, the coming of the messiah, the "Son of Man," the messiah's redemption of those who are good, the origin of evil through the activity of rebellious angels, salvation and immortality of the soul, and bodily resurrection. He refers to the Lord of the Spirits as the "glory of God." In most of the selections below,⁷⁰ Enoch places the messiah at the level of the Lord of Spirits. He uses terms like the "Elect One," the "Chosen One," and the "Son of Man" for the spiritual adept who can redeem souls, as he is an extension or manifestation of God. And in some later mystical traditions, Enoch, like Ezekiel, realizes that it is he himself, in his spiritual essence, who is seated on the divine throne.*

Enoch is also associated with the Zadokite priesthood, and he is characteristically credited with bringing the secrets of the solar calendar down from the spiritual realms and teaching them to mankind.

The Apocalypse of Enoch is interesting because it gives a sense of the attitudes that had evolved during the late Second Temple period about the spiritual master; it shows him divinely appointed to bestow spiritual as well as earthly salvation. In Enoch's vision of the Son of Man in the presence of God, he acknowledges his own divine nature. This work also bears witness to the persistence of legends about the transmission of spiritual knowledge from the divine realms to humanity: Enoch

* In another mystical text written a couple of centuries later, Enoch was seen on the divine throne transfigured into Metatron (the chief angel or creator God), which caused one of the mystic travelers to become a heretic, as he thought he saw "two gods in heaven." In Mishnah *Hagigah* 14b, the Talmud uses this story to warn people against attempting the mystic journey.

brings to earth the knowledge he gained in heaven. His disciples are portrayed as his children and grandchildren, to whom he imparts his wisdom. The selections that follow reveal a spiritual master seen as a living adept who could travel to inner regions, meet with spiritual beings there, understand their secrets, and then return to share the wisdom and understanding he had gained during his experience. The spiritual symbolism he employs is quite beautiful and complex, similar to Ezekiel's prophecy.

In this first selection Enoch ascends to the heavens and sees the Lord seated on his throne. He calls the Lord the "great Glory" and the "excellent and glorious One." The Lord calls him to hear his "holy word":

And behold I saw the clouds: And they were calling me in a vision; and the mists were calling me; and the course of the stars and the lightnings were rushing me and causing me to desire; and in the vision, the winds were causing me to fly and lifted me up into heaven.

And I kept coming (into heaven) until I approached a wall which was built of white marble (or crystals) and surrounded by tongues of fire; and it began to frighten me.

And I came into the tongues of the fire and drew near to a great house which was built of white marble, and the inner wall(s) were like mosaics of white marble, the floor was also of crystal.

The ceiling was like the path of the stars and lightnings, between which (stood) fiery cherubim and their heaven was made of water; and flaming fire surrounded the wall(s), and its gates were burning with fire.

And I entered into the house, which was hot like fire and cold like ice, and there was no pleasures of life within. Fear covered me and trembling seized me. And as I shook and

trembled, I fell upon my face and saw a vision!

And behold, there was a portal open before me: a second house, greater than the former, and built with tongues of fire!

And in every respect it excelled (the other) in glory and great honor, to the extent that I cannot recount to you the extent of its glory and greatness.

Its floor was made of fire and above it was lightning and the path of the stars. The ceiling was also flaming fire.

And I gazed and saw inside it a lofty throne – its appearance was like crystal and its wheels like the shining sun; and the voice of the cherubim; and from beneath the great throne flowed streams of flaming fire. It was difficult to look at it.

And the great Glory was sitting upon the throne – as for his gown, which was shining more brightly than the sun, it was whiter than any snow.

None of the angels was able to come in and see the face of the excellent and the glorious One; and no one of the flesh can see him – the flaming fire was round about him, and a great fire stood before him.

No one could come near unto him from among those that surrounded the tens of millions (that stood) before him. . . .

All this time I was prostrate on my face, covered and trembling. And the Lord called me with his own mouth and said to me, “Come near to me, Enoch, and hear my holy word.”

And he lifted me up and brought me near to the gate, but I (continued) to look down with my face.

1 ENOCH 14:8–25

Enoch then recounts his vision of the magnificent seven mountains of the northwest. It is significant that he sees seven

magnificent mountains, as the number seven occurs frequently in Jewish mystical literature; it is understood symbolically as representing qualities or powers emanated from the divine unity. The precious stones also symbolize the divine qualities perceived as aspects of the supernal light. Then he encounters a beautiful and fragrant tree – the tree of life – which, through its spiritual fragrance, will nourish the good (*tsadikim*) and the humble pious (*anavim*) for eternity.*

From there I went to another place of the earth, and he showed me a mountain of fire which was flaming day and night.

And I went in its direction and saw seven magnificent mountains, all different one from the other, made of precious and beautiful stones, and all magnificent and glorious to see, and beautiful.

Three faced the east and three towards the south. These mountains had deep rough ravines between them. . . .

The seventh mountain was situated in the midst of them, and it was excellent in height, resembling the seat of a throne surrounded by fragrant trees.

And among them, there was one tree such as I have never at all smelled; there was not a single one among the other trees which is like it; among all the fragrances nothing could be so fragrant; its leaves, its flowers, and its wood would never wither in all eternity; its fruit is beautiful and resembles the clustered fruits of a palm tree.

At that moment I said, “How beautiful is this tree, and fragrant, with leaves so handsome and blossoms so

* As the original text no longer exists, it is impossible to know which terms were used here. Avraham Cahane, in his contemporary Hebrew translation from the ancient Ethiopic (Geez), which is close to the original Aramaic, uses *tsadikim* (good, virtuous) and *anavim* (humble, pious).

magnificent in appearance.” Then Michael, the leader of the holy and revered angels, who was with me, responded:

And he said unto me, “Enoch, What are you asking me concerning the fragrance of this tree and why are you so inquisitive about it?”

At that moment, I answered: “I want to know about everything, but especially about this tree.”

Michael answered: “This tall mountain which you saw, whose summit resembles the throne of God, is indeed his throne, on which the holy and great Lord of Glory, the eternal King, will sit when he descends to visit the earth with goodness.

“And as for this fragrant tree, not a single human being has the authority to touch it until the great judgment, when he shall take vengeance on all and conclude everything forever.

“This tree will be given for the good and the devoted, the pious. And the elect will be presented with its fruit for life.

“He will plant it in the direction of the northeast, upon the holy place – in the direction of the house of the Lord, the eternal King.

“Then they shall be glad and rejoice in gladness and they shall enter into the holy (place); its fragrance shall (penetrate) their bones, long life will they live on earth, such as your fathers lived in their days.”

At that moment, I blessed the God of Glory, the eternal King, for he has prepared such things as gifts for the righteous people, as he had created (them) and given it to them.

1 ENOCH 24, 25

Enoch then travels to the home of the righteous, the pious, and of the angels, where he sees the elect one, the messiah, under whose wings he wants to dwell.

In those days, whirlwinds carried me off from the earth,
and set me down into the ultimate ends of the heavens.
There I saw another vision of the dwelling places of the holy
and the resting places of the righteous (*tsadikim*)....
And they interceded and petitioned and prayed
on behalf of the children of the people,
And righteousness flowed before them like water,
and mercy like dew upon the earth,
and thus it is in their midst forever and ever.
And in that place my eyes saw the Elect One of *tsedek*
[virtue] – and of faith,
And righteousness shall prevail in his days,
and the righteous and elect ones shall be without number
before him forever and ever.
And I saw his dwelling place underneath the wings
of the Lord of the Spirits;
And all the righteous and the elect before him
shall be as intense [or beautiful] as the light of fire.
Their mouth shall be full of blessing; and their lips
will praise the name of the Lord of the Spirits,
And righteousness before him will have no end;
and uprightness before him will not cease.
There (underneath his wings) I wanted to dwell;
and my soul desired that dwelling place.
Already my portion is there;
for thus has it been reserved for me
by the Lord of the Spirits.

1 ENOCH 39:3–8

Here Enoch sees the fountain of goodness. The fountain is the divine word, the spiritual bounty which has its source in the divine. It flows eternally to the realms of man. The pious will drink it and have wisdom and life. The “son of man” appears to him, “named by the Name in the presence of the Lord.”

Furthermore, in that place I saw the fountain of righteousness, which does not become depleted and is surrounded completely by numerous fountains of wisdom. All the thirsty ones drink (of the water) and become filled with wisdom. (Then) their dwelling places become with the holy, righteous, and elect ones.

At that hour, that son of man was named by the Name in the presence of the Lord of the Spirits, the Before-Time (the Head of Days); even before the creation of the sun and the moon, before the creation of the stars, he was given a name in the presence of the Lord of the Spirits.

He will become a staff for the righteous ones in order that they may lean on him and not fall.

He is the light of humanity and he will become the hope of those who are sick in their hearts.

All those who dwell upon the earth shall fall and worship before him; they shall glorify, bless, and sing the name of the Lord of the Spirits.

For this purpose he became the chosen one; the Lord of the Spirits concealed him by his own presence prior to the creation of the world, and for eternity.

1 ENOCH 48:1-6

The “son of man” is described in terms used in many writings of this period – as a staff for the righteous, the light of humanity, the hope of those who are sick in their heart. This is the messiah. He is also described as having been created prior to the creation and hidden until such time as God wants to reveal him to the world. Later rabbinic legends also identify the *tsadik* (the virtuous or righteous one, i.e., the spiritual adept) with Adam and other mythic characters of the dawn of human life, and describe him as having pre-existed the creation of the world.

Enoch’s vision of the infinite spiritual wisdom and glory flowing into the creation is breathtaking. He looks into the

future, at a time when the messiah, the elect or chosen one, displays his might, which is the foundation of all righteousness and virtue, and when oppression “will vanish like a shadow” without reality and no one will be able to speak falsehood.

So wisdom is poured out like water
 and glory is measureless before him forever and ever.
 For his might is in all the mysteries of righteousness,
 and oppression will vanish like a shadow
 having no foundation.
 The Elect One stands before the Lord of the Spirits;
 his glory is forever and ever
 and his power is unto all generations.
 In him dwells the spirit of wisdom,
 the spirit which gives thoughtfulness,
 the spirit of knowledge and strength, and the spirit
 of those who have fallen asleep to righteousness.
 He shall judge the secret things.
 And no one will be able to utter vanity or falsehood
 in his presence.
 For he is the Elect One before the Lord of the Spirits
 according to his good pleasure.

1 ENOCH 49:1–4

In another section Enoch evocatively recounts how he has been carried off and transfigured into a divine being. Led through the heavens by the angel Michael, he has another vision of God (the Head of Days) on his throne, his spirit is transfigured, and all he can do is extol and praise God with a powerful voice.

And it came to pass after this that my spirit was translated
 and it ascended into the heavens:
 And I saw the holy sons of God.

And the angel Michael seized me by my right hand,
and lifted me up and led me forth into all the secrets,
and he showed me all the secrets of righteousness.
And he showed me all the secrets of the ends of the heaven,
and all the chambers of all the stars,
and all the luminaries,
whence they proceed before the face of the holy ones.
And he translated my spirit into the heaven of heavens,
and I saw there as it were a structure built of crystals,
and between those crystals tongues of living fire. . . .
And with them the Head of Days,
his head white and pure as wool,
and His raiment indescribable.
And I fell on my face,
and my whole body became relaxed,
and my spirit was transfigured;
And I cried with a loud voice,
. . . with the spirit of power,
And blessed and glorified and extolled.

1 ENOCH 71:1, 3–5, 10–11

There is a beautiful section at the end of the book in which Enoch gives instructions to his son Methuselah – a symbolic reference to the author’s advice to his disciples and perhaps even to all humanity. Using language that has obvious mystical overtones, he says he is giving them “wisdom,” the wisdom that “passeth all thought,” meaning that it transcends intellectual knowledge, that will be tastier and more nourishing than good food, and they will not need (physical) sleep.

In the last selection he tells them that he has received the divine knowledge (by the spirit that has been “poured” on him), of everything that will happen throughout history. He knows everyone’s destiny and will share that knowledge with them.

And now, my son Methuselah, all these things
 I am recounting to thee and writing down for thee,
 and I have revealed to thee everything,
 and given thee books concerning all these:
 so preserve, my son Methuselah,
 the books from thy father's hand, and (see)
 that thou deliver them to the generations of the world.
 I have given wisdom to thee and to thy children,
 [and thy children that shall be to thee],
 that they may give it to their children for generations,
 This wisdom (namely) that passeth their thought.
 and those who understand it shall not sleep,
 But shall listen with the ear
 that they may learn this wisdom,
 And it shall please those that eat thereof
 better than good food.

ENOCH 82:1-3

Enoch continues by exhorting Methuselah to assemble his family to receive the divine spirit or word:

And now, my son Methuselah, call to me all thy brothers,
 and gather together to me all the sons of thy mother,
 For the word calls me, and the spirit is poured out upon me,
 That I may show you everything
 that shall befall you forever.

So Methuselah called his brothers and assembled his relatives. And he spoke to all the children of righteousness and said:

Hear, ye sons of Enoch, all the words of your father,
 and hearken aright to the voice of my mouth;
 For I exhort you and say unto you, beloved:

Love uprightness and walk therein.
and draw not nigh to uprightness with a double heart,
and associate not with those of a double heart,
But walk in righteousness, my sons.
and it shall guide you on good paths,
and righteousness shall be your companion.

1 ENOCH 91:1-4

The Apocalypse of Enoch gives a taste of the nature of prophecy in priestly circles, and of the stress laid on personal, mystical experience of God through access to the divine supernal realms. The hope for a worldly leader who would bring peace and harmony has become merged with the concept of the spiritual master or messiah.

Concept of the messiah at Qumran

There is another important fragment found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which was translated and published as late as the 1990's. It reveals the qualities that the Jews of the late Second Temple period expected in a messiah and demonstrates the persistence of the prophetic tradition. It draws on the language of the prophet Isaiah as well as the prayers collected in the *Shemoneh Esrei* (Eighteen Benedictions), one of the oldest Jewish prayers in the liturgy (probably fourth century BCE). Called by its translators "The Apocalyptic Messiah," or "The Messiah of Heaven and Earth," the text reads:

The heavens and the earth will listen to His messiah,
and none therein will stray from the commandments
of the holy ones.
Seekers of the Lord, strengthen yourselves in His service!
All you hopeful in [your] heart,
will you not find the Lord in this?

For the Lord will consider [visit] the pious [*hasidim*]
 and call the righteous [*tsadikim*] by name.
 Over the poor His spirit will hover
 and will renew the faithful with His power.
 And He will glorify the pious on the throne
 of the eternal Kingdom.
 He who liberates the captives,
 restores sight to the blind, straightens the bent,
 And forever I will cling to Him
 and I will hope in His mercy;
 And His fruit – his goodness – he will not delay.
 And the Lord will accomplish glorious things
 which have never been ...
 For He will heal the wounded, and revive the dead,
 and bring good news to the poor.
 ... He will lead the uprooted and shepherd them.⁷¹

These lines are reminiscent of Isaiah 61:1–2, probably written
 a few centuries earlier, in which the prophet describes the mis-
 sion given to him:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me;
 because the Lord has anointed me to announce
 good news to the humble;
 He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
 to proclaim liberty to the captives,
 and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
 ... to comfort all who mourn.

ISAIAH 61:1–2

In the Eighteen Benedictions, these qualities of mercy are
 assigned to God himself:

You are eternally mighty, my Lord, who revives the dead,
 who bestows your salvation abundantly,
Who sustains the living with kindness,
 revives the dead with abundant mercy,
 supports the fallen, heals the sick,
 releases the captives,
 and maintains his faith to those asleep in the dust.⁷²

There must have been an oral and written tradition that was the basis for both the descriptions of God and the hoped-for messiah. The lines from Isaiah are repeated in the Gospel according to Luke (4:18), in which they are associated with the messiahship of Jesus. The same phrasing is repeated in Matthew and elsewhere in Luke after Jesus gives his talk called the Beatitudes, in which the salvation he was sent to bring is described.⁷³

Professor James Tabor, an expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls, argues that this definition of the messianic identity is identical with what is presented about Jesus in the Gospels.⁷⁴ Tabor also discusses the conception of the messiah in the Scrolls and in other ecstatic mystical groups active in Judaism of the time:

Through this Dead Sea Scroll fragment, ... we are taken back to a very early common tradition within Palestinian Judaism regarding the "signs of the Messiah." We are in a better position to speak of the common expectations of a variety of interrelated apocalyptic, sectarian, baptist groups which have fled to the "wilderness" to prepare the "Way of the Lord" (Isaiah 40:3; Luke 3:4; 1QS 8,9). They appear to share a specific set of expectations, and they draw in strikingly similar ways upon a common core of prophetic texts from the Hebrew Bible and related Jewish literature.⁷⁵

End of prophecy? A postscript

By looking at some of these documents written in priestly circles in the last few centuries before the Common Era, we have seen that although the sages had declared that prophecy had ended with the prophet Malachi in the fifth century, there is enough evidence to show that it continued. Indeed, it would appear that to the people living at Qumran, the concept of an “end to prophecy” was alien or irrelevant at best.

Historically, the idea that there would be no more prophecy, no more direct communion between the divine and the human, seems to have arisen from a struggle between those who sought to establish the authority of human interpretation of past revelation as presented in texts and those for whom revelation was a continuing process.

There were however, some differences between the prophetic experiences of the classical prophets and those of the last few centuries BCE – the exilic and post-exilic periods. As we have seen, in these later periods, prophecy was focused on the material future – on a hope for a messiah who would end the suffering of exile and subjugation, as well as who would bring spiritual liberation.

Another significant difference is that in the later prophecies, the identities of the mystics is kept hidden by their anonymity. They were no longer linked with a particular “named” individual and his unique personality, like Jeremiah, Amos, Ezekiel, or Zechariah, but rather with someone from a lineage or school – like Third Isaiah or Malachi (whose name simply means “my messenger”) – or with a great biblical figure of the past, under whose name the work was written, like Enoch, Ezra, or the scribe Baruch. Another change is that now the prophecies are intended only for a select few – the “wise,” the elect, the qualified. The mystic experience has become esoteric, secret, no longer for public consumption.

And because the prophetic teachings were no longer recognized as a valid form of communion with God, it is probable

that people began to lose the capacity to understand or accept them. The scholar Elliot Wolfson comments that the vision of the enthroned form of God, recounted first in *1 Enoch* and later in other texts, created a dilemma for traditional heirs to the faith. From the time of Moses, who sensed that he could not see “the face of God” and still live, it was considered beyond human capacity to see God in his glory. Yet some of the prophets as well as these later anonymous mystics did have such visions. Thus there was a “clash between the vision of the enthroned form . . . and the overwhelming sense that such a vision is impossible.”⁷⁶

The mystic experience threatened the very assumptions of the religion concerning the accessibility of God, and – by extension – the possibility of *unio mystica* (mystic union). These experiences were considered dangerous, likely to confuse the ordinary person. Those who engaged in the practices that led to such experiences felt that only their small coterie of fellow-mystics and disciples were ready for them. So the mystics knew that they had to keep their experiences secret and teach them only to their select disciples.

In later times, however, there were numerous philosophers and religious luminaries who attested to the continuance of prophecy as the means for the divine to enter and guide people’s lives. Moses Maimonides, the highly venerated twelfth-century philosopher, wrote that the level of prophecy could be achieved by anyone at any period, not only the biblical prophets. He believed it described a state of consciousness that could be attained through inner, mystic experience. He wrote explicitly of the limitations of intellect and of the potential for superior spiritual knowledge through prophecy, which he described as “the vital energizing condition that established the channel linking man with God.”⁷⁷ Maimonides saw a link between the level of prophecy achieved by the prophets of the Bible and the spiritual state that can be achieved by people of all times through mystic practice. “In the thought of

Maimonides, prophecy ceased to be a singular phenomenon of God's revelation vouchsafed to chosen individuals, and became instead an episode in a larger category of man's encounter of the divine; it became a phase of mystical experience."⁷⁸

It is true that in the later period, the intense, raw relationship with God which the classical prophets had enjoyed and which prompted them to minister to their flocks with such dedication and selflessness, was mostly portrayed as a relationship with the divine realm through a hierarchy of angels and other intermediate forms. The earlier prophets received God's word in a revelation direct from God himself, not through intermediaries, and they transmitted that "word" boldly and publicly.

Maimonides tended to evaluate the level of prophecy of the earlier and later prophets according to *how* they received their message: whether directly, through an angel, in a night vision, in the daytime, while asleep, while conscious, and so forth.⁷⁹ There were some teachers, however, at different periods, who understood the phenomenon of encounters and revelation through angels as metaphorical, a literary device used by these later prophets in a world culturally very different from that of the classical prophets, to convey the concept of a *graduated* revelation or series of revelations. The philosopher Philo of Alexandria in the first century wrote that angels were not "beings" but rather devices or metaphors to express the extension of God's power to humanity.⁸⁰ Even Saadia Gaon, the tenth-century philosopher and grammarian, referred to the divine power, the "glory of God" which reveals itself to man, as an angel. Similarly, in later periods the kabbalist mystics expressed the nature of revelation and the creative activity of God through the symbol of the *sefirot* (gradations of the divine power), which were sometimes also called angels. So the differences may be attributed to historical and cultural conditions, or to differences in the symbolism and language being used to express the awesome, supernatural phenomenon the mystics were experiencing.



CHAPTER 5

Sages and Rabbis

THE LAST FEW CENTURIES BCE were a watershed period, a time when the priestly and prophetic traditions were being marginalized into a small sect that continued the old ways, and the life of the people was gradually being transformed by the scribes and sages into a rabbinic and intellectual way of life. This is not to say that the rabbis and sages joined the camp of the Hasmoneans and their hellenized brand of Judaism. Quite the contrary. Just as the Zadokites tried to establish themselves and their community as an alternative to the Second Temple, so the rabbis also tried to find a new way for the Jews to define themselves, as they considered the Temple to be corrupt and illegitimate. It no longer provided a viable focus for their worship. Believing that prophecy had ended, they set about interpreting the holy texts and tried to build a way of life in which each moment would be a reminder of God and his covenant.

The earliest group of these sages, who lived from the third through first centuries BCE, are known only through a few brief references in the Talmud, the Jewish legal code which was written during several hundred years starting in the first century CE.

These sages, whom the Talmud calls the *hasidim rishonim* (early or first pietists) underwent persecution at the hands of the hellenized Jewish rulers and the powerful Hasmonean priesthood. It is said that thousands were killed and others fled to unknown lands. In the Talmud, they were praised for their loyal adherence to the spiritual and ethical requirements of Judaism, with a total disregard of the danger this would bring. Their lives were marked by an extraordinary pursuit of virtue on the individual level. It appears that they practiced some sort of meditation every morning before their prayers in order to direct their hearts to God. It is still not known whether they were a formal sect or simply a loosely identified group of people with a common outlook and devotion for God, who followed a strict lifestyle adhering to Jewish religious and ethical law. Their loyal love of God became an inspiration for Jews over the centuries, and the terms *hasid* and its plural *hasidim* came to be associated with true devotees of God in all periods.*

There was a subgroup of these *hasidim* who were considered miracle workers. And indeed, many miracles were attributed to them by virtue of their good deeds and study of Torah. So, despite the official insistence that prophecy had ended, accounts in later rabbinic literature attribute numerous miracles and magical practices to these sages and the generations that followed.

Rome conquered Judea from the Greeks in 70 BCE and the

* Literally, *hasid* means devout, pious, godly, kind, saintly, or benevolent. It comes from *hesed*, one of God's qualities, meaning abundant and unbounded love, grace, lovingkindness, devotion, goodness, mercy, and compassion. The term was sometimes used for the followers of the prophets in the Bible and, after the "early" *hasidim*, it was used in medieval times for the Jewish Sufis of Egypt as well as the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* (German Pietists). The kabbalists of the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries who met in small groups were also called *hasidim*. The term will be most familiar to contemporary readers as a reference to Hasidism, the movement that began in eighteenth-century Poland and continues into modern times.

next generation of rabbinic leaders lived under Roman domination until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The Roman respect for Jewish cultural and religious autonomy produced a renewed interest in the study of Torah, which had declined during the Hasmonean period. Academies for study of religious texts were established and literacy was widespread. It is said that in Jerusalem, prior to its destruction, there were three hundred primary schools.

Haninah ben Dosa, considered the last of the early hasidim who were miracle workers, was still active during the early Roman period. Haninah's saintly qualities and spiritual stature are revealed in the following story:

Once he went to visit his master and, arriving early at the school, he stood in the doorway and announced: "Receive everyone with a friendly countenance." A Roman official came by and said, "Which one of you will carry me on his shoulder to his house and do for me all that I want?" Haninah rose and offered himself, took him upon his shoulder to his house, brought him water, sat down in the dust, and asked the Roman, "Master, what is thy wish, and what will my master have for dinner?" When he replied, "honey and nuts," Haninah scurried in different directions, and brought the desired food. When the Roman threw the table to the ground, Haninah asked: "Master, kindly tell me thy wish." When he replied, "Who will carry me to my house?" Haninah again offered himself. When he came out to the market of the town, he felt that the Roman had dismounted. He saw a flame rising to heaven and heard its voice say to him, "Haninah, return, thou hast been tried and found perfect, we shall no longer trouble thee, for I heard it said about thee, 'And I have put my words in thy mouth, and have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand' (Isaiah 51:16)."⁸¹

Haninah is quoted in the *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), a section of the Mishnah which presents the sayings of the early sages:

He whose actions exceed his wisdom, his wisdom shall endure, but he whose wisdom exceeds his actions, his wisdom will not endure.⁸²

Haninah's total faith in God was the subject of legend. To him and his wife, the miraculous was natural. When they ran out of oil and his wife used vinegar instead, he said:

He who commanded oil to burn will also command vinegar to burn.⁸³

Despite his life of virtue, Haninah was truly humble and saw himself as a sinner. He exemplified the qualities of the true *hasid*. Once, a poisonous lizard bit him and yet *it* died. He brought it on his shoulder to the academy, commenting simply:

See, my sons, it is not the lizard that kills, it is sin that kills.⁸⁴

The true *hasid* was patient and always ready to forgive. An anonymous sage taught:

There are four kinds of tempers among people. He who is easily injured and easily appeased, his loss is compensated by his gain; he who is hard to anger and hard to appease, his gain is cancelled in his loss; he who is hard to anger and easy to appease, he is a *hasid*; he who is easily angered and hard to appease is a wicked man.⁸⁵

One of the most important teachers during the period of Roman domination was Hillel (70 BCE–10 CE). His influence

was widespread among the Jews of his time and persists even till today; there are quite a few legends about his personal piety, humility, and thirst for knowledge. Born in Babylonia, he was attracted to the schools of Shemaya and Abtalyon and traveled to Judea to study with them. Despite great economic hardship he studied under his masters while working to support himself, often sleeping in the cold attic of the academy.

Hillel encapsulated the teachings of Judaism in two maxims which concern the relationship of God and man, and human beings with each other: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5), and “What is hateful to you, do no not do to your neighbor.”⁸⁶ This is a concrete and practical formulation of the Golden Rule as stated in the Bible, “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18), which Jesus of Nazareth, who lived at approximately the same time, also quoted.

Fortunately, some of Hillel’s sayings are preserved in the rabbinic literature. They are witness to his extraordinary humility and wisdom. Here are a few of them:

My humiliation is my elevation, my elevation is my humiliation.⁸⁷

If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am for myself only, what am I? And if not now, when?⁸⁸

Hillel was constantly aware that life is transient, and that the cultivation of his soul was his most important duty. This is illustrated by the following story:

Once, Hillel was about to take leave of his disciples in the school. When they asked him where he was going, he replied: “To do *hesed* to the guest in my home. When they asked him whether he had a guest every day, he said: “Is not

my poor soul a guest in the body, as it is here this day, and tomorrow no longer here?”⁸⁹

In the Jewish tradition, Hillel is revered as someone who had merited the holy spirit, the *ruah ha-kodesh*. Exactly what he did to merit it, is not said, but the passage above implies his attentiveness to his spiritual well-being. In one of the baraitas (supplementary mishnahs) about him, it was said that Hillel “is worthy of God’s presence, the Shekhinah, to rest on him; this also means the gift of prophecy.”⁹⁰ The same baraita tells about Samuel the Small, a disciple of Hillel’s, who was sitting with some fellow scholars. He was called “the small” because he made himself small (humble). The baraita says that “he was designated by a heavenly voice as the only one worthy of the holy spirit.”⁹¹ There were in fact many more of Hillel’s disciples who merited the stage of *ruah ha-kodesh*. According to another tradition, thirty of Hillel’s eighty disciples were evolved spiritually to that degree. The scholar Adolph Buchler remarked: “The numbers may be exaggerated, but the connection between the learning of the disciples and their character on the one hand, and their worthiness of the prophetic gift and their ability to work miracles on the other, is evident.”⁹² It would appear that even the talmudic rabbis recognized that prophecy had not ended with the biblical prophets.

Hillel’s legendary greatness as a teacher of morality and love is epitomized in the following maxims:

Be of the disciples of Aaron, love peace and pursue peace,
love your fellow creatures and bring them near to the Torah.⁹³

Do not judge your fellowman until you have been put in
his position.⁹⁴

Hillel taught the law of equivalent compensation for one’s actions – the law of action and reaction.

He [Hillel] once saw the skull of a man floating on the face of the waters, and recognizing it, said: "Because you drowned others, they drowned you. And those who drowned you will in the end be drowned."⁹⁵

Another sage of this period emphasized the need for a master or teacher to guide one on the correct way. Joshua ben Perahya said:

Get yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a companion; and judge all people favorably.⁹⁶

Humility in practice, in all respects, was the key quality to imbibe. Judah ben Tema is quoted in a later version of the Ethics of the Fathers:

If you have done your neighbor a little wrong, let it be in your eyes great; if you have done him much good, let it be in your eyes little; if he has done you a little good, let it be in your eyes great; if he has done you a great wrong, let it be in your eyes little.⁹⁷

Many of the sages of the Roman period, like Hillel and the others of his academy, would have been considered Pharisees. Despite the negative picture painted of this group in some later texts, the authentic story of the Pharisees, who were active from 70 BCE to 70 CE, is still uncertain. It appears, however, that like the sect at Qumran, they rejected the corruption of the Temple and priesthood. But instead of re-creating their own community as a substitute priesthood, they tried to re-create the entire country, and indeed every home, as a sacred space where God could dwell.

Their attention was focused on creating a way of life that would circumscribe everyday behavior with virtue. The table in

the home became a holy table. It took the place of the sacrificial altar of the Temple. Table fellowship became a normative social and spiritual activity. Compassionate, ethical, and moral behavior became the benchmark of their way of life. Jacob Neusner, arguably the preeminent scholar of rabbinic Judaism, reflects:

How should the holy people serve God? They should purify themselves – sanctifying themselves by ethical and moral behavior. They should offer the sacrifice of a contrite heart, as the Psalmist had said, and they should serve God through loyalty and through love, as the prophets had demanded.⁹⁸

To bring devotion to God into the home and the sphere of everyday life, they devised certain rituals or practices that would serve as reminders of one's duty to remember God in all one's activities. They created prayers for specific occasions, which were based on biblical texts. They wrote prayers to be recited on recovering from illness, when embarking on a journey, or when seeing a lightning storm. They instituted the use of the amulet-like *mezuzah* and *tefillin*,* filling them with important passages from the Bible concerning remembrance of God.

* The *mezuzah* is a small receptacle containing parchment scrolls inscribed with the biblical passages from Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21, which remind the devotee of his duty to remember and love God with all his mind, heart, and soul. It is attached to the doorposts of the Jewish home and normally one kisses it on entering the room, while reciting the passages. The *tefillin* are two small leather boxes containing scrolls with the same biblical passages and also Exodus 13:1–10 and 11–16. During the morning prayers, one of the boxes is strapped on the head and hung on the middle of the forehead; the other is strapped onto the inside of the left arm, so that it is held close to the heart during prayer. Pious Jews wear the *tefillin* during their morning prayers in fulfillment of the biblical injunction to “lay up these words in your heart and in your soul; and ye shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes” (Deuteronomy 11:18).

The Pharisees tried to provide the people an alternative focus for their worship of God, based on a contemporary interpretation of the Bible and its adaptation to the needs of the time. They introduced a new source of legitimacy, not based on divine revelation, biblical lineage, or priestly claims, but rather on the interpretation of sacred texts that had been inspired by earlier revelations. And after the destruction of the Temple, the Pharisees gained power and became known as the rabbis. This represents a true turning point in the history of Judaism, which was transformed into a religion of text and learning. Even mystic practice became dependent on study of sacred texts and knowledge of the secrets of Hebrew as a sacred language.

Jesus of Nazareth

When we reflect on the history of Jewish spirituality and mysticism, certainly the figure of Jesus Christ needs to be included in our thinking, regardless of the historic differences between the two sister religions – Judaism and Christianity. Before Christianity became a separate religion, before the belief became prevalent that Jesus was the only messiah for all time, it must be recognized that Jesus was an important Jewish spiritual master who brought a sublime spiritual teaching very much in the tradition of the biblical prophets and other mystics, which was expressed in clear terms appropriate to the time in which he lived. Jesus has to be appreciated within the context of first-century Judaism, regardless of how he came to be looked at later by both Christians and Jews. He has to be viewed as a master in the long chain of Jewish spiritual masters.

Jesus was Hillel's contemporary and there are parallels between his teachings and those of Hillel and other early rabbis, as well as with the teachings of the biblical prophets and texts found at Qumran. Even Jesus' baptism or anointing by John the Baptist "lies within the tradition of prophets anointing prophets,"⁹⁹

writes Harris Lenowitz in *The Jewish Messiahs*. The modern rabbinic scholar Shaye Cohen writes:

The Jews of Galilee who beheld Jesus thought that he was “one of the prophets,” probably because he performed many miracles (Matthew 16:14 and parallels). . . . The image of Jesus in the Gospels and in later Christian tradition has been shaped by the belief that classical prophecy had returned and that Jesus was a prophet like Moses.¹⁰⁰

Daniel Matt, a noted expert on Jewish spirituality and mysticism, writes beautifully about Jesus as a Jewish spiritual master, a hasid, “someone passionately in love with God.”¹⁰¹ He draws a parallel with the hasid Haninah ben Dosa who lived at the same time, and whom we discussed earlier:

There were other hasidim in first-century Palestine [Judea], one of whom was strikingly similar to Jesus: Haninah ben Dosa. Haninah lived in Galilee, about ten miles north of Jesus’ home town of Nazareth. Like Jesus, he was praised for his religious devotion and healing talents. Once, Haninah was praying when a scorpion bit him, but he did not interrupt his prayers. His pupils went and found the scorpion dead at the entrance to its hole. They said, “Woe to the man bitten by a scorpion, but woe to the scorpion that bites [Haninah] ben Dosa,” Similarly, Jesus said, “Those who believe may step on snakes . . . and nothing will harm them.” Haninah’s prayers were widely regarded as being immediately accepted by God, so he was frequently asked to pray for the sick and those in trouble. According to the Talmud, Haninah cured the son of Gamaliel from a distance; according to the New Testament, Jesus cured the son of the Roman centurion from a distance. Haninah, like

Jesus, was known for his poverty and lack of acquisitiveness. Both had no expertise in legal or ritual teachings, but were famous, rather, as miracle workers whose supernatural power derived from their intimacy with God.¹⁰²

There are numerous other parallels between the teachings of Jesus and those of the hasidim of his period. For example, as a test of his adherence to Jewish tradition, a scribe asked him about the essence of the Torah, and in response Jesus gave two of the key commandments, to love God and love your fellowman, just as Hillel did. He phrased the latter commandment as “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and elsewhere he says: “Whatever you wish that people would do to you, do so to them. For this is the [essence of the] Torah and the prophets.”¹⁰³ Similarly, Hillel had said, “What you would not wish others to do to you, do not do to your fellowman.” Matt remarks that Jesus is actually more demanding, more hasidic in his rendering of the principle.¹⁰⁴ And that is true in numerous other instances. Matt points out:

Jesus was a charismatic teacher and healer. He did not seek death in Jerusalem, but he pursued with inflexible devotion a path that led to his death, from which he did not try to escape.

Jesus condemned hypocrisy and injustice among his own people and sought to prepare his followers for the coming redemption, for the kingdom of heaven [*malkut shamayim*]. For Jesus, the kingdom was not a pious theory or a far-off promise. It was an immediate reality that could not be denied or evaded. . . . The kingdom is here and now. Jesus was compelled to make his fellow Jews aware of this awesome,

* Whether Jesus or Haninah actually performed miracles or whether certain symbolic actions and statements were interpreted literally is not known.

humbling fact. To enter the kingdom, Jesus said, you must be like a child. Innocence is a window to the infinite, unavailable to the skeptical mind until it pauses and reflects.

Like later hasidim, Jesus felt that it was not enough to follow the Torah: One must *become* Torah, living so intensely that one's everyday actions convey an awareness of God and evoke this awareness in others.¹⁰⁵

Jesus' message was to be innocent. Like the prophets, he taught that one had to become pure in heart and mind, and worship God within, through the word or name of God. The pride of the intellectual had no place there. The common man could find salvation by following Jesus and making his life conform to his teachings, by loving God and loving his fellow human being. Jesus' appeal was that his teaching was not complex or intellectually demanding but drew on man's inherently spiritual, devotional inclination.

We are fortunate to have so many of Jesus' sayings preserved in the New Testament; they give us an insight not only to Jesus as an important spiritual master, they also reveal the consistency of Jesus' teachings with the nature and language of spirituality among the Jews of his time, as we saw earlier with the fragment from the Dead Sea Scrolls, that explores "the signs of the messiah."

Many of Jesus' early followers looked to him as the messiah who would fulfill the hopes and predictions that were current at that time, as expressed in the apocalyptic messianic literature that was under wide circulation among all sects of Jews. Not only was he seen as a prophet and potential spiritual redeemer, most of the Jews viewed him as someone who would redeem them from Roman tyranny. Most did not or could not understand that Jesus came only as a spiritual master, a prophet, functioning solely on a spiritual level, and not as a political leader.

The longing for a messiah continued to propel the Jews to seek a master who would combine the roles of prophet, king, priest, and political liberator all in one. To the Jews of that period, political redemption and spiritual salvation were tied together, and they hoped for one messiah who would free them on all levels simultaneously.

Over the next twenty centuries the hope for redemption would find embodiment in a series of messianic figures who will be discussed in later chapters. Although their activity and teachings generally concerned the salvation of the Jewish people on a national and religious scale – the ingathering of the exiles and establishment on earth of the heavenly Jerusalem and kingdom of heaven on earth – many of them also had a spiritual and mystical dimension to their teaching. Indeed, there were always those people within the community who sought a spiritual return – a return to divine favor, to the state of higher consciousness where one can come in touch with the spirit of God and follow in his ways.

The rabbis at Yavneh and Tiberias

There were roughly three periods in which the sages became progressively more powerful, until they represented the normative, mainstream form of Jewish leadership that continues until today – the time of the early hasidim, the period of Hillel and other Pharisees, and the Pharisees' eventual transformation into the rabbis.

When the Second Temple was destroyed in the year 70 CE, the Pharisees fled to the town of Yavneh to reestablish their academy and court (the Sanhedrin) under the leadership of Yohanan ben Zakkai, who had lived for seven years in a cave to escape from the Romans. Yohanan was ideally suited for the task of reconstruction. He had studied under Hillel, and the venerable

master had proclaimed him “the father of wisdom” and “the father of coming generations.”

The scholars at Yavneh continued teaching and formulating an all-encompassing set of laws to govern everyday life, which eventually became the Mishnah. There was no more Temple, no more priesthood. Roman domination meant an absolute end to the Temple cult with no real hope for its reestablishment in the present reality, only the hope for a hazy messianic future. But how was one to live now? How was one to worship God? Fortunately, the social structure and thinking that the Pharisees had developed as an alternative to a corrupt Temple in the late Second Temple period provided the response. Was it the end of history? No. The Pharisees had responded to the challenge by taking their teaching inwards. God was understood as all-pervasive and immanent, the very ground of their being. The concept of God taught throughout this period was not of a being or power that needed to be worshipped in a temple, but as the formless One who is present in the entire creation. As Ben Zion Bokser, scholar of rabbinic Judaism, explains:

The rabbis repeatedly insisted that God is not a concrete being, with tangible form. . . . Such a being would be part of the universe, not its master. Indeed, one of the ways he is referred to in the Talmud is *Makom*, “Place.” God is the “place,” or the ground of creation. In the words of the Midrash: “The Holy One, praised be He, is the place of His universe, but His universe is not His place.”¹⁰⁶

Under the leadership of Yohanan and Rav (Abba Areka), the Jews were taught to accept the catastrophe as God’s will. They had total faith in God that all would be for the best. The rabbis’ response to the Temple’s destruction was to focus on the need for

compassionate and ethical behavior, and to pray for the coming of the messiah. The story is told of Yohanan's wisdom:

Once, as Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was coming forth from Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed after him and beheld the Temple in ruins.

"Woe unto us," Rabbi Joshua cried, "that this, the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste!"

"My son," Rabbi Yohanan said to him, "be not grieved. We have another atonement as effective as this. And what is it? It is acts of lovingkindness, as it is said, For I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6).¹⁰⁷

As the story shows, Yohanan taught that only positive individual action would please God; repentance was the key to removing sin and "restoring favorable relations between God and the individual Jew."¹⁰⁸

Yohanan is remembered for a parable that emphasizes the need for constant readiness to meet one's maker:

This may be compared to the case of a king who invited his servants to a banquet but did not specify the time. The wise ones dressed themselves and sat waiting at the entrance to the palace, saying: In a king's palace nothing is ever missing [we might be called at any time], while the fools continued with their work, saying: Can there be a banquet without preparation [he will give us plenty of time to prepare]? Suddenly the king invited his servants to come in. The wise ones came before the king properly dressed, while the fools entered with their clothes soiled. The king was happy with the wise ones, but he was angry with the fools. He declared: Let those who are properly dressed for the

banquet sit down and eat and drink, while those who are not properly dressed are to stand and look on.*¹⁰⁹

Rabbi Jacob also wrote about the need to be ready for death, to understand that this world is not our home.

This world is like a vestibule before *olam ha-ba* [the world-to-come]. Prepare yourself in the vestibule so that you may enter into the main chamber.¹¹⁰

Entry into the main chamber – the divine realm – is the result of great individual efforts in prayer and meditation, and living properly in this world. The “world-to-come,” a phrase in rabbinic literature that means life after death, mystically may refer to the *heikhalot*, the palaces or realms that one enters during mystic transport. Some scholars have translated the Hebrew phrase *olam ha-ba* as “the world that is coming,” meaning that it is continually coming. It is the realm of spirit, continually penetrating the material plane with its divine essence.

Following Yohanan, Gamaliel II became head of the Sanhedrin, and the stories that have come down to us about him also demonstrate his sympathetic character, embodying the qualities of *hesed*. Bokser writes:

The joy of having his colleagues as guests in his home was unbounded, and he insisted on taking the place of his servants in waiting on them. He was touchingly devoted to

* This is similar to a parable told by Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew (22:4–14) about many being people being invited to the wedding of the king’s son; some were not properly dressed and were banished, while those properly dressed in their “wedding garments” were welcomed to stay. The meaning of the parable is given as “many are called but few are chosen” to return to the Father.

his slave Tebi.* Members of his household were trained to call the slave “father” and the slave’s wife, “mother.” And when Tebi died Gamaliel sat in mourning as for a departed member of the family. “Tebi was not like other slaves,” he explained; “he was a worthy man.” “Let this be a token unto thee,” he once exclaimed, “so long as thou art compassionate, God will show thee mercy; but if thou hast no compassion, God will show thee no mercy.”¹¹¹

The next generation of scholars at Yavneh continued their teaching of ethical behavior. They emphasized the ephemeral nature of life and that we are all accountable for whatever we do. Unalterable destiny ordained by the divine law and based on previous actions was understood as the rule of life. Implied in their teachings is the soul’s reincarnation or transmigration from body to body to make payment for its actions in each life.† Rabbi Eliezer ha-Kappor used to say:

Those born are destined to die; and those that die are destined to live again; and those that live are destined to stand in judgment. Let men, therefore, know and proclaim and establish the conviction that He is God, He the Maker, He the Creator, He the Discerner, He the Judge, He the Witness, He the Plaintiff. In his judgment, praised be He, there is no unrighteousness; there is no lapse of memory; there is no favoritism and no bribery. But everything proceeds in accordance with an accounting. And do not imagine that the grave is an escape. For by divine determination are you formed; by divine determination are you born; by

* Slavery was permitted in ancient times under certain restricting rules.

† It is not clear whether physical resurrection was implied, although the following passage seems to imply reincarnation.

divine determination do you live; by divine determination will you die, and by divine determination are you due to stand in judgment before the Supreme King of kings, praised be He.¹¹²

Among the rabbis at Yavneh was Akiva, a brilliant young scholar and mystic, who used the metaphor of financial accounting to explain the law of action and reaction:

Everything is a loan given against a pledge, and the net is cast over all the living so that none may forfeit paying by escaping. The shop is open; the shopkeeper extends credit; the ledger is spread out and the hand makes entries. Whoever wishes to borrow may come and borrow, but the collectors make their rounds daily and exact payment, whether or not one is aware of it. They go by an unflinching record, and the judgment is a judgment of truth. And everything is made ready for the final accounting.¹¹³

Akiva also taught that everything is predestined and fore-known by God, yet we live in a paradoxical situation, as we are given freedom of choice. The saving grace is just that – the mercy and grace of God.

Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is given. The world is judged mercifully, yet all is in accordance with the preponderant quality of the work.¹¹⁴

Rabbi Tarfon taught about the importance of effort, and that our reward may not appear in this life but in future lives or the world-to-come.

It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it. If you have studied much Torah, you

will receive much reward. Your Employer may be trusted to compensate you for your labor. And remember that the true reward of the righteous [hasidim] is in the world-to-come.¹¹⁵

After the year 116 CE, the Jews renewed their rebellion against Rome, led by those who had returned to Judea after being scattered into the diaspora in the year 70. Hadrian became the Roman ruler in 117, and as part of his program of social reform and creating a common Roman culture across his empire, he decided to restore Jerusalem as a pagan city, renamed Aelia Capitolina, with a Greek temple dedicated to Jupiter at its center.

In 132 CE, a man named Bar Kokhba (son of the star) claimed to be the awaited messiah and led a rebellion against Rome, obtaining the support of the populace at large and many of the Yavneh rabbis who thought the messianic time had come. Initially Bar Kokhba was successful, but after winning a few battles and gaining even more supporters, he and his followers were defeated; Jewish casualties were estimated at about 600,000. The country was in ruins. The Romans then clamped down even harder; they forbade Jewish religious assemblies, study of Torah, and the rituals of circumcision and Sabbath observance.

Rabbis Akiva, Tarfon, and Yose the Galilean held a secret conclave and issued a joint statement to their people, urging them generally to comply with Roman edicts but to resist unto death any orders involving the commission of idolatry, murder, or unchastity.¹¹⁶ Akiva and his colleagues openly defied the Roman police by continuing to meet with their students for the study of Torah. Their attitude was best summarized in Akiva's famous parable of the fishes and the fox. Warned that his open defiance of Roman law would lead to imprisonment, he replied that a fox had invited some fishes to seek safety from the fishermen on dry land. The fishes replied, "If the water which is our normal habitat holds out no safety, what will happen

to us on the dry land which is not our habitat?” “Similarly,” expounded Akiva, “if we are in this state now when we sit and study Torah, . . . how much more precarious would our existence be if we neglected it!”¹¹⁷

Unfortunately, a reign of terror was released on the stubborn Jews, and many were imprisoned, banished, executed, or sold into slavery. There was a mass execution of ten renowned rabbis. Among those arrested was Rabbi Akiva. From his prison cell, he continued to defy his captors, dispatching secret messages to his followers. A hurried trial was held and he was condemned to death. According to tradition, he was flayed alive. Akiva remained steadfast to the very last, expiring with a resolute testament of faith: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” “He prolonged the word *ehad*, ‘one,’ and he expired reciting *ehad*. A heavenly voice came forth saying: ‘How fortunate are you, Rabbi Akiva, that your soul has departed with the word *ehad*.’”¹¹⁸ Akiva’s work was taken up by his devoted disciples, including Rabbi Meir and Simeon bar Yohai. Meir’s wife Beruriah was also considered a great sage and holy person.

Soon after the failure of the rebellion, pressure from the Romans eased, and in 138 the Sanhedrin court was reconstituted in a town called Usha. There the rabbis continued working on the codification of Jewish law, the Mishnah, eventually moving their school to Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The Mishnah was completed in 215.

After the Mishnah was completed, the next generations of rabbis began their work on its interpretation, which would eventually be compiled in the fifth century as the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud.* A second Rabbi Yohanan became the head of the academy at Tiberias. He extolled six commandments with

* Although the country was called Judea, in the year 132 CE it was renamed Palestine by the Romans in order to break the Jewish attachment to the land. The Talmud written there is called the Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud.

particular emphasis: hospitality to strangers, visiting the sick, careful prayer, rising early to go to the academy, raising children with knowledge of the Torah, and judging everyone according to his good deeds.

Yohanan II was a great humanitarian and broadminded in his thinking. He treated his slave as an equal and served him regularly the same food eaten by the rest of the household. "The slave," he explained, "is the same child of God that I am."¹¹⁹ He suspended all laws forbidding labor on the Sabbath if a sick person could be saved, who could then live to observe many Sabbaths. He ruled that the injunction to return a straying ox or sheep, as instructed in Deuteronomy 22:1, applied even if the owner was a Jew who had renounced his Judaism, and he called upon people to give full recognition to the truths discovered and taught by "pagan" wise men.

Although the work on the Jerusalem Talmud continued at Tiberias for some time, religious life declined in Palestine during the fourth and fifth centuries. There were more uprisings among the Jews, the Roman empire was weakening, and invasions from the west by Goths and Vandals brought chaos.

Babylonia

After the defeat of Bar Kokhba and the devastation of Judea, some of the rabbis from Yavneh fled to Babylonia, where they set up their own academies to teach the large Jewish community that had been living there since the days of the exile in the sixth century BCE. The rabbis who initially settled in Babylonia were colleagues or disciples of Rabbis Akiva and Ishmael, the leading Yavneh masters before the war.

One of the leading rabbis in Babylonia was Abba Areka, or as he was popularly known, *Rav*, signifying that he was *the* master above all others. He had studied in Palestine under the masters there, and returned to start teaching in Babylonia, setting up his

academy at Sura at the age of sixty-four. Rav had brought the text of the Mishnah with him from Palestine, and he based all his lectures on it, supplementing it with explanations, illustrations, and various new applications. He was equally interested in the exposition of moral lessons. The Talmud has preserved a number of his moral maxims and they are among the choicest ethical expressions in all literature:

Whatever may not properly be done in public is forbidden even in the most secret chamber.

It is better to throw one's self into the fiery furnace than to humiliate one's fellowman.¹²⁰

And, in a wry comment about the standard of morality by which the rabbis viewed the actions of all humanity, Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rav:

Most people are guilty of robbery, a minority of lewdness, and all of slander.¹²¹

Another academy was set up at Nehardea, a place with a large Jewish community. It was presided over by Samuel, who was often called *Mar* (Master) Samuel. He had also studied at the academy in Palestine, but was well educated in scientific subjects, including astronomy and medicine, and tried to raise the people out of their superstitious beliefs. The academy at Nehardea was later moved to Pumbedita after Nehardea was destroyed in a battle between the Babylonians and Romans. Both the academies at Sura and Pumbedita continued their teaching with little interruption through the end of the fifth century, when the Jews suffered renewed persecutions and prohibitions on religious life.

Under the leadership of their visionary rabbis, the Babylonian academies developed an ingenious educational institution which enabled them to reach large numbers of nonprofessional students. During the two months of the year when the average farmer was free from his work in the fields, special sessions called *kalla* were held in both academies. The subject to be taken up at each of these sessions was announced in advance, and laymen were encouraged to spend their hours of leisure in preparation. The lectures of the rector of the academy were supplemented with discourses by other teachers. The basic text discussed in all these gatherings was the Mishnah; one tractate was generally covered each month. It is reported that 12,000 students were enrolled in one such *kalla* session. These sessions significantly raised the intellectual and cultural level of the general populace and guaranteed that religious awareness and knowledge of sacred texts would be widespread.¹²²

The rabbis felt tremendous responsibility for the moral improvement of the population at large. All was centered around a perception that it was man's duty to imitate God in every possible respect. Thus, just as God provided for humanity, so each person should actively pursue the welfare of his neighbor.

The rabbi with his circle of disciples became the paradigm for the transmission of the deepest levels of spirituality as well as of religious law. Despite the availability of many written scriptures and other religious literature from the previous centuries, it was recognized that one needed to attach oneself to a master of one's time. There was more to learning about God than could be conveyed through words or writing. This would remain true throughout Jewish history, whether in Palestine or Babylonia during the talmudic period; among the rabbis of the merkavah (chariot) mysticism; and even later among the kabbalists and modern hasidim.

THE MASTER-DISCIPLE RELATIONSHIP

The rabbis who fled to Babylonia set up academies like the ones in Palestine, and the relationship between master and disciple was similar to what took place in the academies in Palestine. These were not only schools where students learned intellectually. They provided a place where the student could absorb the very spirit of his master and become like him. Disciples were attached to particular masters and served them in every aspect of life. To follow a rabbi required a special kind of devotion, of true discipleship. Jacob Neusner writes eloquently about the master-disciple relationship during the rabbinic period:

Disciples were not students who came to a master only to learn facts or holy traditions. They came to study the master as well as what the master said. . . .

The disciple, indeed, acquired more than a master. He gained a new father. . . . The master was truly and really the second father of the disciple, who would shape him for eternity as the father had for this world. The father had given the physical features. The master would sculpt the soul.

Entry into the rabbinical circle, like initiation into a mystery cult, marked the end of an old existence, the beginning of a new life, a new being. The disciple did not simply learn things; he was converted from one way of living to another.¹²³

It was said that “one who had studied merely Scriptures, and even Mishnah, remained a boor, learned but no different from a magus [magician], unless he had also ‘served’ a master through imitation of the master’s *way*, subjecting himself to his discipline and that of the schools.”¹²⁴

The most striking aspect of these schools was the rabbis' conception that in them lived holy men, men who more accurately than anyone else conformed to the image of God conveyed by divine revelation through the Torah of Moses our rabbi. The schools were not holy places in the sense that pious people made pilgrimages to them or that miracles were supposed to take place there, although pilgrimages were made and miracle-stories were told in a scholastic setting. The schools were holy because there men achieved sainthood through study of Torah and imitation of the conduct of the masters.... Thus obedience to the teachings of the rabbis led not merely to ethical or moral goodness, but to holiness or sainthood. Discussion of legal traditions, rather than ascetic disciplines or long periods of fasting and prayer, was the way to holiness.¹²⁵

Shaye Cohen gives an interesting perspective on the relationship of these early rabbis with their disciples:

As a rule ... the rabbis of the second century did not need a special place for the instruction of their disciples, because the disciples were always with the master. They would live, eat, sleep, and travel with him. They would listen to his discussions with other rabbis and watch him decide legal cases. There was little privacy for either party in this relationship; even on his wedding night Rabbi Gamaliel was attended by his faithful disciples. The master was sometimes addressed as "father," because he was the father to his disciples. According to rabbinic law a student's obligations to his master are similar to those of a son to his father: he had to stand up in his presence, to greet him, and perhaps even to bow down before him. He could not stand or sit in

his place, speak in his presence, contradict him, or respond sharply to him. This was the way of Torah. In effect, joining a disciple circle was like joining a new family. . . .

These small communities of devoted disciples gathered around a revered master have many analogies, of course, to the earliest community of the followers of Jesus. One of Jesus' major activities, as remarked above, was to teach, and the apostles were his beloved disciples. Jesus was not only a teacher, however; he was also a prophet and healer, and the traditions about him clearly derive in part from the biblical record about Elijah and his disciple Elisha. . . . Although the social settings are very different, the disciple circle of Jesus closely resembles the disciple circles of the rabbis in the second century.¹²⁶

Ironically, as we shall see in the next chapter, the divergence in approach between the prophetic-mystical Qumran sect and the intellectual rabbis found union in the merkavah mystics, who were active between approximately the first and the eighth centuries CE. Many of the rabbis of the Talmud, legalists and leaders of the community, were engaged in mystical practice alongside their legal discussions. Their small secretive circles of fellow mystics would become the model for all such fellowships of Jewish mystics from this time forward, until the eighteenth century, when the elite nature of Jewish mysticism was transformed by the spiritual masters of Hasidism, who made it accessible to all.



CHAPTER 6

Magic and Mystic Ascent

Rabbi as miracle worker

THE RABBI WAS REGARDED as an incarnation of the Torah. “The disciple revered the master as a living Torah and humbled himself before him as before God,”¹²⁷ writes Jacob Neusner. The rabbi shows us “the human face” of God, and his *deeds* (not just his teachings) were studied as a standard for daily living.

Although they were holy and “like God,” the rabbis were always regarded as human beings like all others, and this quality was the source of their strength as role models for the community. The rabbi was not considered to be a supernatural ascetic, removed from the hustle and bustle of daily life; instead, he reached out to the people and asked the people to become godly. In fact, there was a strong rabbinic bias against asceticism.

The rabbis in both Palestine and Babylonia acted as spiritual guides to the people not only on how they could please God and live their lives ethically and morally (which requires effort, self-control, and inner struggle!), they were also sought out as miracle workers – for healing, predicting the future, ensuring

good harvests and marriages, and to ensure fertility. Most people lived in the thrall of superstition, and they believed that the rabbis had power over evil spirits and demons and knowledge of spells and curses.

The Jews had a well-deserved reputation among the Greeks and the Romans as practitioners of magic and miracles, especially healings. Judean society in the first century BCE and the first century CE was marked by the presence of numerous predictors of the future, holy men, and healers. Many rabbis of the third and fourth centuries in both Israel and Babylonia were believed to be endowed with extraordinary powers. In some cases these figures are said to be “prophets” or to possess the gift of prophecy.¹²⁸

It was believed that the rabbis got their authority from their deep knowledge of Torah. Neusner emphasizes frequently that this did not only mean intellectual expertise, but the knowledge of the “secrets” of the Torah, particularly special esoteric names of God, which gave them supernatural powers.

The rabbis authenticated their claim to power not only by their teaching of Torah, but also by their knowledge of the secrets of creation – including the names of God by which miracles may be produced, and the mysteries of astrology, medicine, and practical magic – and by their day-to-day conduct as a class of religious virtuosi and illuminati. . . . They were seeking totally to reform the life of Israel so that it would conform to the Torah as they taught it.¹²⁹

People were afraid to displease the rabbis as they believed the rabbis had the power to hurt them. From a positive angle,

they depended on the rabbis to intercede with God on their behalf. But that same influence over God could also be used in a negative way, to hurt or kill someone, it was believed. Often people would visit the graves of past rabbis and worship there, because they were believed to possess the supernatural powers of the departed rabbis.

Rabbis, it shall be seen, could create and destroy men because they were righteous, free of sin, or otherwise holy, and so enjoyed exceptional grace from heaven. It follows that Torah was held to be a source of supernatural power. The rabbis controlled the power of Torah because of their mastery of its contents. They furthermore used their own mastery of Torah quite independent of heavenly action. They could issue blessings and curses, create men and animals, and were masters of witchcraft, incantations, and amulets. They could communicate with heaven. Their Torah was sufficiently effective to thwart the action of demons. However much they disapproved of other people's magic, they themselves were expected to do the things magicians did.¹³⁰

Magic per se, defined as the *illegitimate* use of "divine" powers, was frowned upon in ancient Jewish society, and there are many negative references to magic in rabbinic literature. This in itself should tell us that its practice was common, but the rabbis did not see themselves as magicians. They believed they were using the holiness of the Torah to fulfill the will of God, the one supreme being, and they separated themselves from the magic of Zoroastrian or other "pagan" holy men who (according to the rabbis) used the powers of demons and spirits. In effect, however, as many inscriptions have shown, they may have been doing very similar things.

To the extent that magicians were considered disreputable, no faithful community would regard its holy men as magicians. But where magic was an expected and normal trait of religious virtuosi, everyone supposed that the holy men of the community could produce magic. What was “Torah” or perhaps “white magic” to Jews may have been witchcraft or black magic to gentile neighbors.¹³¹

Thus the rabbis’ status as holy men derived to a great extent from their use of “magical” or supernatural powers for healing and miracles. *Theurgy* is a polite name for the use of certain techniques to obtain control over divine powers, a type of magic. It is not known precisely what the rabbis did as their theurgy, but it is believed to have included intensive study of Torah, concentration exercises, repetition of certain names of God, focused prayers, perhaps the concentrated performance of certain rituals. The “theurgical skills were regarded as an authentication – although not the only one – of the fact that rabbis were holy men, or saints, or righteous.”¹³² In a practical, functional sense, the rabbi’s personal merit and supernatural powers were as important as his learning and teaching of scriptures. What was extraordinary about the rabbi was “his mastery of a body of theurgical learning, the power of which rendered him exceptionally influential both in heaven and earth.”¹³³ “Healing arts, exorcisms, incantations – these all testified to the grace of God no less than did mastery of Torah or other forms of saintliness. The rabbis took pride in their theurgical attainments, which, they said, were made possible by Torah.”¹³⁴ Study was regarded as a divine force that gave them supernatural powers.

It was believed that the rabbis’ study of holy texts and their other practices gave them knowledge of the structure of the universe, including all the upper heavenly realms, the essence of God and his secret names, the angelic hosts, demons, and the

ascent in the chariot; blessings, spells, omens, curses, dreams, divining, astrology; and the use of magical formulae and prayers.

Neusner comments on the nexus between miraculous powers and virtue in all of ancient society:

The ascription of supernatural power must . . . be seen as a primary attribute of leading masters in the schools. It is the attribute which most closely paralleled those of the “divine-man” of antiquity – a man believed to embody divine power and virtue – for the unity of faith, wisdom, and unusual ability was everywhere taken for granted. “Knowing” and “doing” were in no way separable; the rabbi’s “wisdom” derived from Torah, and so did his supernatural, or magical, skills. To no one in antiquity could such a conception have been alien.¹³⁵

The power of numbers, letters, and names

There were probably several stages in the development of practices related to the name of God in Judaism. In the Bible, when we read that the prophets trusted in the name of the Lord, taught remembrance of the name, or meditated on the name, it would seem that they were referring to an ineffable divine essence, a vibration beyond language, the essence of God himself, a truly unpronounceable name that can be apprehended only in a state of higher consciousness. It is a name only insofar as it is a way of pointing to his divine presence, his creative and sustaining power, his all-encompassing existence which fills the entire creation. The beauty and purity of the references to God’s name in the Bible imply that it is an essence beyond any use of language.

Bless the Lord, O my soul;

And all that is within me, bless His holy name.

PSALMS 103:1

O Lord, our Lord,
How glorious is Thy name in all the earth!

PSALMS 8:2

I called upon Thy name, O Lord,
out of the lowest dungeon.

LAMENTATIONS 3:55

This name is also called God's word, *mimra* (utterance) or song, the divine creative power, his voice or command, on which we can meditate within:

By day the Lord will command His lovingkindness,
and in the night His song shall be with me.

PSALMS 42:9

Looking comparatively at other mystical traditions, we find that meditation on this inner or unspoken name of God is sometimes used as a means of attaining God-realization. For example, in the Surat Shabd Yoga teachings of India, one is taught a method of uniting one's soul with the *dhunatmak nam* (the name of unutterable sound) – a divine essence and not a name at all. This name is considered to be the true spiritual expression or manifestation of God himself, and is not the external, spoken *varnatmak nam* (the name made of syllables).

It is possible that a practice of meditating on the unutterable name originally existed among the prophets and was later lost, when outer name practices – even of esoteric names – developed in Judaism. People would have been aware that the Bible spoke of meditating on the name, hearing the word of God, and so forth, and would have sought to understand what that name practice was. By the second century BCE, probably even earlier, people

had come to believe that there was power in God's outer names, and they identified that power with magical manipulations and uses of the letters of written and spoken words and names. The four-letter name YHWH, called the ineffable name, was considered too holy to be uttered by anyone except the high priest at the Temple, and that only once a year.* It is believed that after the destruction of the Temple, or even earlier when the priesthood was discredited, knowledge of the esoteric names passed into the hands of laymen – the rabbis. In talmudic times the number of these supposedly ineffable names grew. There were 12-letter, 24-letter, 42-letter, and 72-letter names and many more, created from an almost infinite number of combinations of the letters of YHWH, all of which were thought to have esoteric significance. Even the descriptive names of God used in the Bible (Almighty, El Elohim, Tseva'ot [Sabaoth], Adonai) were used by Jewish and Christian mystic adepts in incantations and charms.

Joshua Trachtenberg, in his path-breaking book *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, traces the evolution of this practice. He explains that the Greeks had ascribed numerical and symbolic values to the letters of their alphabet as early as the eighth century BCE and the concept had spread across the Mediterranean following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE. It was from this influence that the Jews began to use the letters of the alphabet to designate numerical values. Meanwhile, the Egyptians had developed a practice of creating meaningless syllables (often called barbarous syllables and words) for magical incantations. Both practices penetrated Judaism, and by the second century CE during the time the Mishnah was being composed, the Pythagorean concept of the creative power of numbers and letters was quite well known among the Jews. In

*The rabbis were displeased with the “use” or “misuse” of these names for magical purposes; hence, the prohibition.

fact, the famous sage of the Mishnah, Rav (about 200 CE), said of Bezalel (the legendary architect of Solomon's Temple) that "he knew how to *combine* the letters by which heaven and earth were created."¹³⁶ It was thought that the creation literally took place through language, by God combining and manipulating the letters and words of the Hebrew alphabet. When the Bible said that God created the universe through speech, this was understood to mean that he did so by using the spiritual origin or root of the letters of the alphabet. Techniques to use the alphabet for concentration in meditation, as well as for predictions, charms, and spells, also developed. The Jewish mystics of the centuries that followed used this lore as a foundation of many of their practices.

The use of the names of God and the angels was viewed as especially powerful, and occupied the primary place in the hierarchy of names to be used in such meditative and magical practices. "Instinct [instilled] with the very essence of omnipotence, they were surrounded from early times with an aura of superlative sanctity and awe."¹³⁷

The invocation of angelic names in Jewish magic may be regarded as in part the parallel to the pagan invocation of many deities, and in part as invocation of the infinite [personified] phases and energies of the one God. Both Jewish and pagan magic agreed in requiring the accumulation of as many names of the deity or demon as possible, for fear lest no one name exhaust the potentiality of the spiritual being conjured.¹³⁸

The merkavah and the power of names

It would seem in hindsight, from our vantage point fifteen to twenty centuries later, that the rabbis of antiquity had several missions and spheres of activity: They were the legal advisors and adjudicators, the guides to proper moral and ethical behavior

to the entire Jewish population. They wanted control over the Jewish way of life in all social spheres, to ensure it conformed to the Torah, with an aim to create a perfect people and hasten the messiah's coming. That was one aspect. But many of them also were actively teaching and sharing their mystic practices of merkavah (chariot) travel within confined circles of rabbis and disciples, in secret from the rest of their society.

How did they attain the level of merkavah travel, raising their consciousness to higher realms within? When we read that through their intense study of Torah and their prayers they gained power over supernatural forces, we have to ask what that study and prayer consisted of. In some cases it could have been simply a level of deep concentration; in other cases it would have been the manipulations of the names of God. It is likely that, by fully immersing their minds in these name-repetition exercises, they were able to come in touch with the spiritual realms and gain some psychic powers, although the rabbis ascribed these powers to the holy names themselves and their various permutations, which were used as magical formulae. These practices gave the mystics the mental concentration that enabled them to leave the confines of the physical body and ascend to spiritual realms. In their ascent, through their concentration, they gained certain powers to perform miracles, to heal the sick, and so forth, which they used in their ministry to the common people. They had visions of God and attained knowledge of "divine secrets."

In addition to its meaning of "chariot," the term *merkavah* carries the meaning of combination or assembly; thus the merkavah practice was not only a description of the inner ascent, but a clue to the method they used to experience it, in which they used the alphabet as building blocks of the chariot. Interestingly, in modern Hebrew, *ma'aseh merkavah* means anything that is made up of a combination of separate elements.

The journey to the throne realm of God is first described in detail in the account of the vision of the prophet Ezekiel of the sixth century BCE, who ascended through the various heavens on a chariot made of angels whose wings created transcendent sounds, accompanied by supernal lights and colors (Ezekiel 1). Earlier, the Bible narrated a brief account of the ninth century BCE prophet Elijah ascending alive to the heavens in a chariot of fire at the time of his death (2 Kings 2:11–12). Ascent in the chariot also appears in the Qumran literature. Similarly, Isaiah described the awe-inspiring experience of the ascent of his consciousness to the angelic throne region of God. The existence of these texts attests to the use of the language of the chariot by mystics even earlier than the rabbinic period. Although there has been no link established concerning the actual practices of Isaiah and Ezekiel in biblical times with those of the Jews of late antiquity, some six to ten centuries later, it is possible and probable that the esoteric tradition was transmitted secretly from master to disciple throughout all those years.

Joseph Dan, the well-known historian of Jewish mysticism, writes that the practice of merkavah mysticism is the first documented mystical movement in Judaism:

While the problem of the mystical nature of some biblical texts, prophetic or poetic, and some parts of apocrypha literature, is mainly a problem of definition, there seems to be little doubt that, from a historical point of view, the first major mystical phenomenon in Jewish culture known to us is the appearance of the *heikhalot* and *merkavah* literature. This literature is not the work of a lonely mystic, but a historical school, which probably developed throughout a period of several centuries, and had a profound impact upon later Jewish mysticism. . . . [Some of] this literature is attributed consistently in our sources to a group

of *tanna'im*, the mishnaic sages, most prominent among them being Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha, Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Kanah and Rabbi Eliezer the Great.¹³⁹

There are not many references in the Talmud to the merkavah, but when the rabbis do mention the practice, it is generally to warn of its dangers. In one well-known story, Rabbi Akiva (the moral teacher and political martyr of the second century) and his companions entered the king's *pardes* (orchard, garden) – a metaphor for the supernal regions of God, the state of higher spiritual consciousness.

Our rabbis taught: Four entered an orchard and these are they: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva said to them: “When you reach the stones of pure marble, do not say: ‘Water, water!’ For it is said, ‘He that speaketh falsehood shall not be established before mine eyes’” (Psalms 101:7). Ben Azzai gazed and died. Of him Scripture says: “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” (Psalms 116:15). Ben Zoma gazed and was stricken. Of him Scripture says: “Has thou found honey? Eat as much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it” (Proverbs 25:16). Aher cut down the shoots. Rabbi Akiva departed in peace.¹⁴⁰

The passage is quite esoteric and difficult to comprehend. Entering the orchard or garden of the Lord, the king, is easily understood as an allusion to the vision of ascent on the merkavah. Descriptions of the entry to the sixth realm in other heikhalot literature can help us understand the allusion to water and marble: countless waves appear to be dancing and scintillating, although “in reality there is not a drop of water there, only the sparkling ‘atmosphere’ given off by pure shining marble.”¹⁴¹ This

perhaps refers to the mystic falling prey to illusions of one sort or another on his inner journey and getting misled. The concept may be parallel to the Indian term *maya*, “illusion.” Thus Akiva is warning them not to get caught by this visual illusion as the Lord will not tolerate “falsehood.”

Ben Azzai gazed and died, perhaps meaning a physical death – as the spiritual illumination was too powerful and his body could not bear it. Yet he was still regarded as a *hasid*, a saint, so perhaps this referred to his transcending the physical body rather than his physical death. Ben Zoma, it is believed, lost his sanity, as his mind couldn’t handle the visions he saw, all of which were overwhelming and some of which were terrifying. Aher (meaning “other” or heretic) was the name given to Elisha ben Abuyah, who became consumed by doubts after his inner experience, as he thought he saw two powers in heaven – God and the chief angel, Metatron (the transformed Enoch). Thus it is said that he cut down the shoots of the king’s trees in the orchard, a metaphor for the doubt that undercut his faith. Only Akiva entered in peace and returned in peace.

It is Akiva who takes the mystical journey through the *heikhalot* and returns with divine wisdom, an understanding of the mystery of God. In the text known as the *Lesser Heikhalot*, the entire account of Rabbi Akiva’s ascent in the *merkavah* is told in detail. He is depicted traveling through the seven heavenly realms to the divine throne, on which sits a divine figure of astronomical proportions whose infinite body is covered with the letters of the divine names. This figure is called the *Shiur Komah* (measure of His stature), which is also the name of an early anonymous mystical text attributed to Rabbi Akiva.* Through this metaphor

* In later Jewish mystical literature, the figure of the *Shiur Komah* appears as the divine cherub or angel, the “visible” glory seated on the divine Throne (the “invisible” glory). He is the blueprint of man, the “image of God” in which man was created; the *Adam Kadmon* (the primal Adam); the First Cause who

the author teaches that God is his infinite holy name which fills the entire creation.

The description of the Shiur Komah is based on a mystical interpretation of several verses from the scroll of the Song of Songs of the Bible:

My beloved is white and ruddy,
distinguished among ten thousand.
His head is like the finest gold, his locks are wavy,
and black like a raven.
His eyes are like doves by the water courses,
washed with milk, and fitly set.
His cheeks are like a bed of spices, like fragrant flowers;
his lips like lilies, distilling liquid myrrh.
His hands are like circlets of gold set with emeralds;
his belly is like polished ivory overlaid with sapphires.
His legs are like pillars of marble,
set upon sockets of fine gold;
His countenance is like Lebanon, excellent like the cedars.
His mouth is most sweet; and he is altogether lovely.
This is my beloved, and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.

SONG OF SONGS 5:10–16

Because of their mystical understanding of these passages and, indeed, of the entire scroll, Rabbi Akiva and his followers taught that the Song of Songs was the holiest part of the scriptures. The similarity between the form of God that Akiva saw on his inner journey and the description of God in the Song of

contains the entire creation with him. He is identical with Metatron, the figure whose vision awakened doubt in Elisha ben Abuyah on his inner journey, when he thought he had witnessed two powers in heaven. In some of the Jewish mystic literature he is identified with one's own spiritual self – one's divine potential.

Songs reveals why he held this biblical text in such high esteem and why he and his followers used it in their mystic practice.¹⁴²

Before a person could embark on the merkavah, he had to purify himself. He had to give up all types of negative behavior and be faithful to all the commandments laid out in the Bible and the Talmud. Rabbi Hai Gaon (939–1038) wrote of the prerequisites to attempting the merkavah practice, and of the required posture and concentration techniques.

You may perhaps know that many of the sages hold that when a man is worthy and blessed with certain qualities and he wishes to gaze at the heavenly chariot and the halls of the angels on high, he must follow certain exercises. He must fast for a number of days, he must place his head between his knees whispering softly to himself . . . certain praises of God with his face towards the ground. As a result he will gaze in the innermost recesses of his heart and it will seem as if he saw the seven halls with his own eyes, moving from hall to hall to observe that which is therein to be found.¹⁴³

A disciple of Hai Gaon's comments in his master's name that through this practice, the mystics had a contemplative vision of the merkavah, in the innermost recesses or "chamber of their heart." He says: "They did not ascend on high but rather in the chamber of their heart they saw and contemplated (*ro'in ve-tsofin be-hadre libban*) like a person who sees and contemplates something clearly with his eyes, and they heard and spoke with a seeing eye (*eyn ha-sokheh*) by means of the holy spirit."¹⁴⁴ In other words, according to Hai Gaon, these early mystics took their attention, their mind, to their "seeing eye" – what in modern times is sometimes called the "third eye" – and penetrated within themselves to a higher state of consciousness where they would have the mystic vision.

The texts tell us that they figuratively “ascended” or “descended” to the spiritual regions on a chariot made of glorious lights, colors, sounds, music, and other heavenly, nonphysical creatures. Scholars don’t know why it was often called a descent – perhaps out of humility, because the practitioner prepared himself for God’s effulgence to flow down to him, rather than him ascending to God’s level, which was perceived as arrogance.* The traveler would traverse several realms, called palaces or sanctuaries (*heikhalot*), until he reached the highest level, the throne region. Sometimes the chariot itself would *become* the throne, on which the vision of God’s “being” or presence would appear. As the chariot journey is also the journey within oneself in contemplation in the “innermost recesses of the heart,” so the throne becomes the seat of one’s soul.

As the meditator advanced, he would meet various angels, some of whom were gatekeepers to the various stages. He would repeat certain words or formulae or names of God, or give them a “seal” to gain entry to those realms. The commentator Rashi (eleventh century) says that they “ascended to heaven by means of a divine name,” i.e., by using name techniques.¹⁴⁵

On the throne would be seated either God himself or one of the angels. During the journey the meditator would be taken upwards while hearing the beautiful music of the angels singing hymns of praise to God. In some accounts, it was the prayers of the Jews that were ascending to God. One of the hymns the mystic would hear was the biblical passage from Isaiah’s vision of God seated on his heavenly throne, surrounded by angels singing, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is filled

* Another explanation for the use of the term “descent” comes from a possible influence of Greek mystics from the sixth century BCE, who recorded their descent to the nether regions in a chariot, where they were greeted by various goddesses. Others speculate that ascent and descent signify different meditation techniques.

with his glory” (Isaiah 6:3). The passage may have been repeated by the mystics in a mantra-like fashion during their meditation.

In these visions, God would be seated on his throne and the angels would place the crown on His head. The crown was made of the hymns of praise sung by the angels and the prayers that ascend to God. This is a poetic metaphor for the transformation of audible sound and music (prayer and hymns) into the inner divine music or sound through spiritual transport to the level of the holy spirit. Mystics of non-Judaic traditions have also called this inner, nonsensory sound the unstruck music, music of the spheres, and audible life stream. Some Jewish mystics also describe the crown as being made of the actual names of God, or the letters of the names. This alludes to Jewish meditation practices of concentrating on letters and names of God, which were believed to ascend to the divine realms where they adorn the Lord.

In some accounts the crown takes on more importance than the angels. It gets larger and larger as it ascends to the highest throne region, becoming alive, as it were. The augmentation of the crown relates to the belief in the theurgic effect of the prayers on the deity itself – as if the prayers of the human beings, or repetition of the divine names, has the power to augment the divine power or deity itself. The knowledge of God that the mystic would gain in his vision of God enthroned and crowned is often called the secret of divinity (*sod ha-elohut*).

The *Greater Heikhalot* (*Heikhalot rabbati*) is the most important document of the heikhalot and merkavah mysticism, and was probably written in the sixth century by an anonymous mystic who used the character of Rabbi Ishmael to describe his inner experiences. Ishmael lived in the second century CE and was one of the early rabbis who wrote the Mishnah.

Said Rabbi Ishmael: What song should be sung by one who desires to contemplate the mysteries of the chariot, to enter upon it in peace and return in peace?

The greatest of his rewards is that it brings him into the celestial chambers and places him before the divine throne and he becomes knowledgeable of all future events in the world: who will be thrust down and who will be raised up, who will be weakened and who will be strengthened, who will be impoverished and who will be made affluent, on whom will be decreed death and on whom life, from whom will be taken away an inheritance and to whom will be given an inheritance, who will be endowed with Torah and who with wisdom.¹⁴⁶

In another passage from the *Greater Heikhalot*, when Rabbi Ishmael takes his attention into a meditative state, an angel shows him a vision of the great sufferings that will befall the Jewish people as a result of the Roman persecutions of the Jews. He is very disturbed, but then another angel tells him of the ultimate deliverance by a messiah symbolized as King David.

I said to him: Noble, heavenly majesty, perhaps there is no longer hope for the Jews? He answered me: My friend, come and I will take you to the hidden chambers of consolation and deliverance. He took me into the hidden chambers of consolation and deliverance and I saw groups of angels weaving robes of deliverance and making crowns and setting in them precious stones, and pounding all kinds of spices and preparing wines for the righteous in the hereafter.

I saw one crown especially distinguished; the sun and the moon and twelve constellations were set in it. I said to him: Noble, heavenly majesty, for whom is this special crown? He said to me: It is for David, king of Israel. I said to him: Noble, heavenly majesty, show me the honor due to David. He said to me: Wait, my friend, three hours, until David, king of Israel, enters, and you will see him in his glory.¹⁴⁷

Rabbi Ishmael sees the inner light, which he describes as streaks of flashing light; then he sees various types of angels or beings (*ofanim* or wheels, *serafim* or angels, and the holy *hayot* or creatures). In eloquent poetic phrasing he talks of the inner lights as the treasure houses where snow is stored, as clouds of glory, as the stars, as flaming fire, as stormy sound, and so forth. Ultimately he sees David wearing the most beautiful radiant crown, signifying the divine light emanating from him. David sits on the fiery throne facing the throne of God.

After David entered the heavenly Temple he found a fiery throne set for him, forty miles long in height and twice the length and twice the width. David seated himself on the throne facing the divine throne, all the kings of the house of David sat before him, and all the kings of the kingdom of Israel sat behind him. Then David stood up and chanted songs in praise of God, the like of which no one in the world ever heard before. When David began and said: "The Lord will reign forever," the chief angel Metatron and his angelic host responded: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts," The *hayot* offered praise saying: "Praised be the Lord from His place." The heavens recited: "The Lord will reign forever." The earth chanted: "The Lord is King, the Lord was King." All the kings of the house of David joined in the chant: "The Lord will be King throughout the earth."

Said Rabbi Ishmael: When I came and disclosed all this from the proceedings from the throne of glory, all my colleagues rejoiced and arranged a day of celebration.¹⁴⁸

The mystic uses the image of angels singing in unison and answering one another to express the beauty of the sound to be heard within. The angelic singing mimics the sound of the Levites and priests singing hymns of praise to God in the Temple.

In another chapter, the question is asked: What is the secret of the merkavah?

What is it like [to know the secret of merkavah]? It is like having a ladder in one's house [and being able to go up and down at will]. This is possible for anyone who is purged and pure of idolatry, sexual offenses, bloodshed, slander, vain oaths, profanation of the Name, impertinence, and unjustified enmity, and who keeps every positive and negative [biblical] commandment.

Rabbi Ishmael said: Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Kanah said to me: son of the Proud Ones, happy is he and happy is the soul of everyone who is purged and pure of those eight vices, for Totarkhiel-YHWH, and Surya his servant despise them.¹⁴⁹

These are the eight prerequisites before one can take the merkavah journey, which is likened to climbing a ladder. Rabbi Nehuniah (who was an early rabbi in the mishnaic times) plays a major role in the *Greater Heikhalot* as the guide of Rabbi Ishmael. He also figures in some later mystical texts, so he may have been a renowned mystic of antiquity. The angels mentioned are Totarkhiel-YHWH, who is considered the chief angel and has YHWH, the most holy name of God, attached to him, and Surya, who is called the angel of the divine presence. Rabbi Ishmael expresses dismay, as no one is free of all these vices. Rabbi Nehuniah gives him a way out, by which the mystics can still experience the secrets of the supernal realms and the creation.

He then said to me: ... Go and bring before me all the courageous members of the group [*havura*] and all the mighty ones of the academy [*yeshiva*] so that I may recite in their presence the secrets and mysteries which have been

suppressed, [the] wonders and the weaving of the tractate upon which the betterment of the world, the setting [of the world] on its path, and the beautification of heaven and earth depend, for all the ends of the earth and the universe and the ends of the upper heavens are bound, sewn, and connected, dependent upon it [the secret knowledge]. And the path of the heavenly ladder whose one end is on earth and whose other end is in heaven at the right foot of the Throne of Glory [depends on it too].¹⁵⁰

The mystics would often practice their meditation in a group, called a *havura*, a pattern to continue through the entire trajectory of Jewish mystical practice for many centuries. The next passage describes them coming together as Rabbi Nehuniah explains the process of the merkavah ascent and descent.

Then, the [following men] came: Rabban Simon ben Gamaliel, Rabbi Eliezer the Great, Rabbi Elazar ben Damah, Rabbi Eliezer ben Shamua, Rabbi Yohanan ben Dahavai, Hananya ben Chanichai, Jonathan ben Uzziel, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Judah ben Baba. We [all] came and sat before him while the mass of companions [*haverim*] stood on their feet, for they saw that globes of fire and torches of light formed a barrier between them and us. Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Kanah sat and set in order for them [the whole group] all the matters of the merkavah: the descent to it and the ascent, how to descend, who should descend, how to ascend, and who should ascend.¹⁵¹

Rabbi Ishmael then travels through the various palaces, or *heikhalot*, finally reaching the seventh palace. In each palace he shows his seals to the guards at the gate. At the seventh palace

he has to show his great seal and the “awesome crown” to the terrifying guards. The guards

then conduct him before the Throne of Glory. They bring before him all types of music and song, and they make music and a parade before him until they raise him and seat him near the cherubim, near the wheels [*ofanim*], and near the holy *hayot*. He sees wonders and powers, majesty and greatness, holiness and purity, terror and meekness and righteousness, at the same time.

Rabbi Ishmael said: All the *haverim* [initiates] liken this to a man who has a ladder in the middle of his house, who ascends and descends on it and there is no creature who stops him. Blessed are you, Lord, God who knows all secrets and is the Lord of hidden things. Amen. Amen.¹⁵²

We then read the overwhelming description of the initiate’s experience at the seventh palace. The image of the brilliance of the light from the eyes of the holy *hayot* might be a symbolic way of describing the darting light that he seeks, like flashes of lightning.

As soon as that man [the initiate] entreats to descend to the merkavah, Anaphiel the prince opens the doors of the seventh palace and that man enters and stands on the threshold of the gate of the seventh palace and the holy *hayot* lift him up. Five hundred and twelve eyes, and each and every eye of the eyes of the holy *hayot* is hollow like the holes in a sieve woven of branches. These eyes appear like lightning, and they dart to and fro. In addition, there are the eyes of the cherubim of might and the wheels of the Shekhinah, which are similar to torches of light and the flames of burning coals.

This man then trembles, shakes, moves to and fro, panics, is terrified, faints, and collapses backwards. Anaphiel, the prince, and sixty-three watchmen of the seven gates of the palace support him, and they all help him and say: "Do not fear, son of the beloved seed. Enter and see the King in His magnificence. You will not be slaughtered and you will not be burnt."¹⁵³

He bursts forth in a hymn of praise, which is an acrostic with a hypnotic rhythm. It brings him into a trance-like state. Possibly this duplicates one of the repetition practices that created the concentration needed to raise one's consciousness on entering the inner realms. The hymn is an endless repetition of praises for God as king.

Illustrious King, glorious King, masterful King, blessed King, chosen King, luminescent King, distinguished King, heroic King, sublime King, omniscient King, remarkable King, disciplining King, splendiferous King, majestic King, affluent King, eternal King, aristocratic King, infinite King, memorable King, worthy King, radiating King, living King, merciful King, pious King, valuable King, chaste King, righteous King, esteemed King, redeeming King, astounding King, adorned King, worshiped King, sympathetic King, commanding King, fervent King, comprehending King, possessing King, prosperous King, gilded King, faithful King, resplendent King, secretive King, wise King, modest King, benevolent King, patient King, embellished King, rescuing King, virtuous King, joyous King, radiant King, sanctified King, esoteric King, commended King, revered King, compassionate King, moderate King, attentive King, tranquil King, serene King, ornamented King, perfect King, supportive King. Blessed be He.

They give him strength. Immediately, they blow a trumpet from “above the vault which is over the heads of the *hayot*” (Ezekiel 1:25). And the holy *hayot* cover their faces and the cherubim and the wheels turn their faces away and he stands erect, turns, and poses himself before the Throne of Glory.¹⁵⁴

God is a “king adorned and ornamented with embroidery of hymns.” The description of the angels’ chants that follows, and the love and devotion that inspires them to chant these hymns, appear to be an attempt to describe in words the great glory and awesomeness of the experience of God’s ineffable presence. The chants are probably meant to mimic the spiritual music heard within. Possibly, these were also encrypted phrases which were used in the meditation practices. The text of the *Heikhalot rab-bati* could have been used as a manual for meditation as well as a description of the inner journey. We will give another example of these hymns of praise.

As soon as he stands before the Throne of Glory, he begins to chant the hymn that the Throne of Glory recites every day: a prayer, laud, song, blessing, praise, extolment, exultation, appreciation, acknowledgment, victory, melody, meditation, homage, joyfulness, celebration, rejoicing, worship, gracefulness, modesty, luster, magnification, faithfulness, righteousness; virtuous, treasured, decorated, valorous, jubilant, elated, superior, contented, restful, consoled, tranquil, serene, peaceful, benevolent, invincible, valued, compelling, compassionate, graceful, magnanimous, elegant, embellished, adored, revered, merciful, luminescent, resplendent, privileged, brilliant, phenomenal, crowned, glittering, far-reaching, distressed, miraculous, liberating, redolent, illuminating, royal, remedying, daring, dynamic, grandiose, precious, powerful, commanding, valiant, pleasurable,

majestic, splendorous, courageous, heroic, sanctified, chaste, pure, proud, eminent, magnificent, royally dignified; honor and splendor to Harariel-YHWH, Lord of Israel, a King who is adorned and ornamented with embroidery of hymns, the One who is beautified in splendor, esteemed in glory, reverence, and beauty, abundant in majesty, an awesome crown whose name is sweet to Him and whose memory is pleasing, and a beautiful crown. To Him they give thanks. He is exquisite, and His palace glorifies Him. His attendants sing pleasingly to Him, and the righteous [sing pleasingly] of His power and wonders:

King of the king of kings, God of Gods, and Lord of Lords,
 Who is surrounded with chains of crowns,
 Who is encompassed by the cluster of the rulers of radiance,
 Who covers the heavens with the wing of His magnificence,
 And in His majesty appeared from the heights,
 From His beauty the deeps are kindled,
 And from His stature the heavens are sparked.
 His stature sends out the lofty,
 And His crown blazes out the mighty,
 And His garment flows with the precious.
 And all trees shall rejoice in His word,
 And herbs shall exult in His rejoicing,
 And His words shall drop as perfumes,
 Flowing forth in flames of fire,
 Giving joy to those who search them,
 And quiet to those who fulfill them.¹⁵⁵

More and more poetic descriptions of God's love and greatness and perfection follow. It is a shame we cannot include them here, but these quotations give a good example of the kind of mystic practice this *havura* of rabbis were engaged in.

The Nag Hammadi scrolls discovered in a cave in Egypt in 1945 reveal that there were some mutual influences and borrowings between merkavah mysticism and ancient gnosticism. But it is not known if the mystics themselves ever met. The fear of gnostic “heresies” among the Christians gave the impetus for suppression of mystic practices in Christianity, and it is thought that the same atmosphere of suppression and secrecy also affected the Jewish attitudes to these mystical practices. Gershom Scholem, considered the greatest Jewish scholar of mysticism in the twentieth century, explains why an atmosphere of secrecy prevailed:

We are dealing with organized groups which foster and hand down a certain tradition: with a school of mystics who are not prepared to reveal their secret knowledge, their “Gnosis,” to the public. Too great was the danger, in this period of ubiquitous Jewish and Christian heresies, that mystical speculation based on private religious experience would come into conflict with that “rabbinical” Judaism which was rapidly crystallizing during the same epoch. The *Greater Heikhalot* show in many and often highly interesting details that their anonymous authors were anxious to develop their Gnosis within the framework of *halakhic* [legal] Judaism, notwithstanding its partial incompatibility with the new religious spirit; the original religious impulses active in these circles came, after all, from sources quite different from those of orthodox Judaism.¹⁵⁶

However, the teachings did spread, through the travel of people and manuscripts. It is known that copies of the heikhalot texts and merkavah mystics’ writings were brought from Babylonia to Italy and Germany in the eighth and ninth centuries, where they would inspire other lineages of Jewish mystics.

The Sefer yetsirah

Sefer yetsirah (The Book of Formation) is one of the most important works of Jewish mysticism, though it is very short and cryptic – only two thousand words in all. It was probably written in the first or second century CE (though some scholars date it as late as the ninth century) by an anonymous Jewish mystic who wanted to present a mystical alternative to the Genesis story of creation. He also gives the conceptual rationale behind the use of letters and names in mystic ascent.

The author explains that the creation took place through thirty-two paths, which are made of the ten numbers and twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, all of which derive from Wisdom, which is the primal inexpressible name, word, or utterance. It is this spirit which alone permeates all the worlds of the creation and gives them life. These are also the paths through which one can return to God and attain divine union and knowledge. They link the divine with the human and the human to the divine. Sometimes this is explained as the flow of the divine energy from Nothing (*ayin*, beyond substance, spirit) to Being (*yesh*, substance, physical being); the reverse of the flow is the mystic's ascent from the level of Being to Nothing.

With thirty-two mystical paths of Wisdom engraved Yah*
 the Lord of Hosts
 the God of Israel
 the living God
 King of the universe
 El Shaddai
 Merciful and Gracious
 High and Exalted
 Dwelling in eternity

*Yah is the short form of YHWH; El Shaddai is another name for God.

Whose name is Holy –
He is lofty and holy –
And he created His universe
With three books [*sefarim*], namely:
 with text [*sefer*]
 with number [*sefar*/cipher]
 and with narrative/communication [*sippur*].¹⁵⁷

Through a play on words with the Hebrew root *s-f-r* he states that the Lord created the universe through three “books” or dimensions: letters, numbers, and narrative. Narrative suggests the flow or immanence of the divine will in the creation, as in the passage from Psalms, “And the heavens declare (*mesaprim*) the glory of God” (19:2). Also implied are other aspects of meaning of *s-f-r*: spheres or dimensions, and the luminosity of sapphire (*sapir*), used in the Bible to convey the sense of spiritual light.

Twenty-two foundation Letters:
 He engraved them, He carved them,
 He permuted them, He weighed them,
 He transformed them,
And with them, He depicted all that was formed
 and all that would be formed.¹⁵⁸

He [God] made a covenant [with Abraham]
 between the ten fingers of his hands,
And this is the holy tongue [the Hebrew language].
He bound the twenty-two letters on his tongue,
And the Blessed Holy One revealed to him their mystery:
He drew them in water,
 ignited them with fire,
 agitated them with breath,
 burned them with the seven planets,

and directed them with the twelve constellations
[the signs of the zodiac].¹⁵⁹

The Hebrew alphabet and numerals were understood as having a divine source. Each letter has its counterpart on a spiritual plane; the physical letter is a hint to a particular spiritual vibration. Therefore, human language is a lower reflection of the abstract divine “language,” speech, or utterance through which the creation took place. (“And God said, Let there be light,” as Genesis 1:3 states, for example.) The Hebrew alphabet that we can see or speak conceals, and hints at, a higher spiritual form of those letters and numbers. In this cryptic fashion, the *Sefer yetsirah* explains the divine source of language: that each letter and number in its spiritual, nonmaterial “form” is related to human language.*

What is powerful and important is that through this symbolism the author is not only describing how the divine being brought forth the creation through his “utterance” of the spiritual or causal (archetypal) letters or sounds. He is also informing us that the physical letters provide a connection to the higher reality and can provide a path leading back to it. By meditating on the letters or syllables made from the letters it was believed that one could connect with the higher vibration or spiritual source of the letters. The deconstruction of the names into their component letters was a way of rising beyond meaning, beyond physical language.

Later, the Ba’al Shem Tov, first of the hasidic masters in the eighteenth century, taught that “in each and every letter there are

* It is worth noting that there is a parallel belief about the fifty-two letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. Each letter is associated with a spiritual, nonphysical sound. At the spiritual centers traversed within on a mystical journey, the mystic sees lotuses composed of various numbers of petals. A unique letter is associated with each petal of the lotus. It is believed that the creation took place through the letters.

worlds and souls and divinity,” and that one needs to create an opening or a window in the physical letters through which the spiritual light may shine and allow one to reach the spiritual.¹⁶⁰

The rabbis engaged in these methods to ascend from physical language to the spiritual realm, deconstructing and recombining the letters of various names of God, and meditating on the combinations and permutations. Through these techniques, they would achieve concentration and experience various degrees of mystic transport, as we saw with the merkavah mystics.

In terms that seem a direct continuation of the *Sefer yetsirah* but written nineteen centuries later, another hasidic master, Meshulam Feibush of Zbarazh, also writes of the connection and relation between the letter techniques of the mystics and the creative power of God:

When a human being recalls the letters he shakes the upper vitality. And when he wholeheartedly cleaves in his mind to the Name, blessed be He, he reanimates the vitality that has been emanating from the highest Thought until it is ready to be spoken and put in the mouth of the human, and through the words of the prayer he yearns for the name, blessed be He, and by it he blows the letters back up to their source.¹⁶¹

Sefer yetsirah contributed to the development of a mystical vocabulary and terminology that would have a profound impact on later generations. The term *sefirot* in all its meanings became the cornerstone of kabbalistic symbolism. The teachings of later mystics were often presented in the form of commentaries on the *Sefer yetsirah*.



CHAPTER 7

Early Messiahs

IN THE FIRST FEW CENTURIES after the completion of the Bible, the concept of the messiah developed as a joining of the anointed priest, prophet, and king in one figure who would lead the people to redemption and salvation from their sufferings in the world. For some Jews in the first century, Jesus fulfilled that ideal. A century later, others looked to Bar Kokhba, who promised liberation on the political level. Associated with the struggle for political liberation was the idea that all history was headed towards the apocalypse, the day of catastrophe, when terrible worldly conditions would lead to a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. This “end of days” was associated with the messianic period, when the forces of good – led by a divinely appointed leader – would prevail.

Because the dream of national, worldly liberation was intertwined with spiritual redemption in many periods of Jewish history, many of the messiah figures played both roles – the spiritual and political – the esoteric and exoteric. This is what we find in the numerous messiahs who appeared in Persia and

Arabia among the Jewish diaspora of the pre-Islamic and Islamic period. We know of them from accounts written by Jewish and non-Jewish observers of the period.

These messiahs may have been associated with the Mourners of Zion, a subgroup within the Jewish community that gave expression to the aspiration for a miraculous return to the Holy Land, which was linked with the legend of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel who would reappear and join the returning masses. The Mourners were vegetarian and did not drink wine; they engaged in fasting in order to bring about the return to the Holy Land. The Mourners drew a sharp distinction between man's spiritual and physical tendencies. Their religious practices tended to be more strict and ascetic than mainstream rabbinic Judaism and they rejected the centralized authority of the Babylonian rabbis, though not totally cutting themselves off from it. The group first appeared during the Roman period and came to the forefront again in Persia and other nearby countries after the Muslim conquest.

Like the Mourners, most of these messiahs taught vegetarianism and abstinence from alcoholic drinks, as well as the immortality of the soul. On the other hand, they were also militants with a local, rural base; their purpose was to lead their followers back to the Holy Land and conquer other peoples. They generally associated themselves with Moses, whom they called the Faithful Shepherd, and they connected their mission with the story of the Exodus.

All these messiahs taught the concept of a lineage of prophets continuing into their own time, who had the authority to reform religious practice. In fact, they asserted that Jesus and Muhammad were the prophets for their time, and that the prophetic lineage always continued. They also taught that their teachings superseded the laws laid down by the rabbis of Babylonia.

In this section, we will focus on the eighth-century Persian messiahs Abu Isa and Yudghan. They appeared during a period of social upheaval, of conflict between Sunni and Shiite, when Islam had not yet defeated Christianity.

Abu Isa

Originally named Yits'hak ben Ya'akov, Abu Isa lived near Isfahan in the eighth century. His name Abu Isa contains the Arabic form of the name "Jesus." He was also called Obadyah (God's servant), hearkening back to the "servant of God" mentioned in Isaiah. Miracles were associated with his selection by God as the messiah. An uneducated, illiterate tailor, he was able to write spiritual books without being taught to read or write. After leading a revolt against the Muslim government, he was killed. His followers believed that he was not dead but hiding in a secret cave – in "incubation" (suspended animation). Here is an account of his life by Abu Yusuf Yaqub al-Qirqisani, in *The Book of Lights and Watchtowers* [*kitab al-anwar wal-marakib*], which was written in early tenth-century Persia:

We said above that Abu Isa proclaimed himself a prophet; [he composed works even though he was illiterate] and this could only have been by prophecy. As far as his teachings and ideas go: he prohibited divorce, as did the Sadducees and the Christians; he instituted seven prayer services a day, drawing upon the words of David: "I praise you seven times a day" (Psalms 119:164); he prohibited the eating of flesh and the drinking of distilled liquors, not on the basis of scripture but because God ordered him to do so, through prophecy.... He said that God told him to pray the Eighteen Benedictions and the passages of the Shema, according to rabbanite [rabbinical] practice. But he did this

only to attract the masses of the people and the leadership to him. The rabbanites and the public leaders reject the *Issuniyim* [followers of Isa] but do not identify them with the followers of Anan [ben David] and the Karaites.*...

Abu Isa confessed the prophetic nature of Yesu ben Miriam [Jesus] and that of the Instructor of the Moslems [Muhammad] and said that each of them was sent [by God] to his people. He ordered [his own disciples] to read the Gospels and the Koran and to gain an understanding of their meanings. He said that the Christians and Moslems are required to observe their faiths just as the Jews are required to observe the one they claim.¹⁶²

It is important to note that by accepting Jesus and Muhammad, he was teaching that prophecy was not restricted to any particular place, people, time, or religion.

Another interesting account of Abu Isa's life was written in 1127 by the Muslim writer Abulfatah Muhammad al-Shahrastani, in his *Book of Beliefs and Sects of Opinions*:

The *Issiyim* are so called after Abu Isa Isak ben Ya'akov of Isfahan who was also known as Oved Elohim: that is, "one who worships God." He lived during the time of al-Mansur and his revelation began during the time of the last Umayyad king, Marwan ibn Mahmad al-Himar. Many Jews followed him. They say that he displayed signs and wonders. They believe that he marked a line around his men with a branch of myrtle when embattled and said to them, "Stay within this circle and the enemy's sword cannot touch you." And when his enemies approached the

* Another messianic sect that started after the eighth century under the leadership of Anan ben David.

circle they retreated because they were afraid of the amulet or of the charm he used.*

Then Abu Isa alone crossed over the line on his horse and fought the Muslims and killed many. Then he went to the tribes of Moses the son of Amram who lived beyond the wastelands in order to preach the word of God to them. They say that after he attacked the forces of al-Mansur at Regaes, he was killed together with his men.

Abu Isa claimed that he was the emissary and prophet of the expected messiah, and he believed that the messiah had five emissaries who preceded him one after another. He believed, moreover, that God spoke to him and ordered him to redeem the Jews from the evil nations and their villainous kings. He also believed that the messiah is the most select of humans and that he himself was superior to the prophets who preceded him. He elevated the status of the Shepherd [Moses] and was of the opinion that the Shepherd was also the messiah.

In his writing he annulled the sacrifices and forbade the eating of any animal, bird, or beast. He ordered ten prayers a day and decreed their times. He departed from many of the important commandments of the written Torah.¹⁶³

Yudghan and Mushka

Abu Isa's disciple and successor, Yudghan (Yehuda) continued his master's spiritual ministry. Accounts by al-Qirqisani and al-Shahrastani attest to his spiritual focus in the tradition of the biblical prophets. He was able to frame his teachings within the context of traditional Judaism by asserting that the Torah has both inner (esoteric) and outer (exoteric) meanings, and that

*The legend about the miraculous protection he gave his followers by tracing a circle around them was symbolic of the protection they experienced through his spiritual power.

he had the ability to interpret the true inner meaning through intuition. He also taught the principle that punishment and reward are dependent on our own actions. He was followed by Mushka, another messiah about whom little is known. Mushka was slain in battle.

Account by al-Qirqisani

Yudghan [called by his followers “the Shepherd,” meaning that he was the shepherd of the people of Israel] also proclaimed himself a prophet, and his disciples say that he is the messiah and lives yet, and they look forward to his return. The people of Yudghan forbid the eating of meat and the drinking of distilled liquors and engage in much prayer and fasting. And they say that the Sabbaths and holy days have been annulled in this era and are only remembrances. Some of the Karaites join them in this opinion.¹⁶⁴

Account by al-Shahrastani

[The name of this sect] comes from Yudghan of Hamadan, also known as Yehuda. He preached asceticism and earnest prayer, forbade the eating of meat and the drinking of liquor. Among those things that are passed on in his name is also his esteem for the degree of the Shepherd. . . . And he thought that the Torah has an inner and outer meaning, . . . as opposed to the explanations of other Jews. He differed from them as well in his opposition to the use of logical analogy [for interpreting Scripture] and in his belief in free will, and was of the opinion that humans act as they wish. He was one of those who found reward and punishment a [theological] necessity. . . .

The followers of Mushka are to be accounted with them [the followers of Yudghan]. [Mushka] followed the teaching of Yudghan, except that he supported opposition to those

whose opinions differed from his and was in favor of warring against them. He rode at the head of nineteen men and was slain near Qum. About one of the sects of the Mushkanites it is said that they recognized the prophecy of the Elect One [Muhammad] as valid for the Arabs and other peoples, other than the Jews, since they already had a religion and a book that had come to them revealed by God.¹⁶⁵

His assertion that the Torah has an inner and outer meaning is interesting, as it anticipates the later mystical teachings of Kabbalah, which looks for deeper symbolic meanings in the ordinary texts or events of life. The belief in reward and punishment also gives a good rationale for a vegetarian diet.

The Karaites were another messianic group who started after the eighth century, but in totally rejecting the authority of rabbinic Judaism they embarked on their own path and eventually became a separate sect, and were sometimes even treated as a separate religion. Anan ben David was their messiah.

Other early messianic figures were a self-declared messiah named Sirenus in eighth-century Syria, and David Alroy (al-Ruhi), from Kurdistan in the early twelfth century. In the wake of the Crusades, Alroy led an armed insurrection bent on the redemption of the Jews in Persia's borderlands and a return to the Holy Land. Alroy was well-educated in Islamic culture, mysticism, law, Arabic language, philosophy, and the sciences. He was known as a miracle-worker and magician, but it is difficult to know if he brought any distinctively spiritual teaching. It should be remembered that throughout Jewish history, the religious authorities have generally held a negative view of messianic individuals and portrayed them as swindlers and charlatans.



CHAPTER 8

Philosophers and Sufis

Jews in the world of Islam

THE MAIN FOCUS OF THE MYSTICS of the pre-Muslim period was the exploration of the mysteries of the creation and the nature of God, through the use of various meditation techniques including the inner journey on the merkavah. On the exoteric level, this same spiritual-religious leadership continued developing the legal and religious code by which to guide and define the community in both Palestine and the diaspora. This work was continued under the *geonim* (sages), the officially appointed leaders of the Jewish community in Persian-ruled Babylonia from the sixth to eleventh centuries. It is they who preserved many of the heikhalot and merkavah texts.

Mostly the *geonim* were a conservative influence, bent on the establishment of talmudic law. However, there were some who also provided a more spiritual form of leadership, particularly men like Saadia Gaon in the tenth century. Born at the end of the ninth century in Egypt, Saadia moved to Babylonia in 922 and a few years later became head of the academy at Sura. He wrote an illuminating commentary on the mystical *Sefer*

yetsirah as well as many books on Hebrew grammar, Jewish law, the calendar, the liturgy, and philosophy. As he was primarily a philosopher, perhaps Saadia did not teach a purely mystic path to God-realization; however, his work provided the vocabulary and intellectual context for Jews to interact with the Muslim world and come in touch with its philosophers and mystics.

Mystically inclined Jews found kindred spirits in the Muslim Sufi mystics among whom they lived. There was a long history of mutual influences between Jewish and Muslim Sufis from the beginnings of Islam through the end of the Islamic empire in the fifteenth century. Paul Fenton is a contemporary scholar of Jewish Sufism who has translated Jewish Sufi texts. He summarizes the earliest periods:

Historically, it was Judaism, through the edifying legends of the rabbis that circulated in the Islamic world under the name of *Isra'iliyyat*, that first influenced the ascetic trends in Sufism in its formative years. . . . [Later,] Jews were to be found attending the lectures of early masters of Baghdad, and the eleventh century historiographers of Sufism have conserved stories about the miraculous conversion of Jews to Islam through contact with Islamic mystics. . . . Traces of Muslim ideas on the vanity of the nether-world and the felicity of the hereafter, gained through ascetic devotions, are to be found in the works of the tenth century Jewish authors of the East who display an appreciable degree of familiarity with the Sufi way of life. More pronounced evidence of Sufi influence on Jewish literature is to be found in Muslim Spain, where there had been a widespread flowering of Sufism in the tenth century.¹⁶⁶

In the eleventh century, Jewry flourished in Spain under a tolerant Islamic rule. There was a porous relationship between

Jewish and Muslim philosophers and mystics from the ninth century through the twelfth century, at which time the intolerant Almohad dynasty came to power. The influence of Sufi teachings on the writings of Jewish philosophers like Solomon ibn Gebirol and Bahya ibn Pakuda was marked, but it is unclear whether they themselves followed an internal mystic path under the guidance of Sufi masters. Some of the works of these Jewish authors were almost direct copies of Sufi manuals. Yosef ibn Aqnin (the twelfth–thirteenth century author of a Sufi-inspired commentary on the Song of Songs), in his work *Therapy of Souls*, quotes extensively from the sayings of earlier mystics such as al-Junayd (d. 910) and ibn Adham, whom he calls respectively *sayh at-ta'ifa* (elder of the community) and *ar-ruhant al-akmal* (the perfect Saint).¹⁶⁷

Solomon ibn Gebirol, also known by his Latin name, Avicbron, was born in Malaga, Spain, and lived in Saragossa. In his epic poem “Crown of Royalty” (*Keter malkut*) and his treatise *The Fountain of Life* (*Mekor hayim*; in Latin, *Fons Vitae*), he taught a philosophic system that incorporated Neoplatonic concepts as well as Sufism. It is known that he was influenced by the school of the Andalusian Sufi of Cordoba, ibn Masarra.¹⁶⁸ However, it is difficult to know whether ibn Gebirol was a practicing mystic himself or a philosopher writing about Sufi concepts. Quite possibly, he may have functioned in both arenas.

The title of *The Fountain of Life* comes from a passage in Psalm 36, “For with thee is the fountain of life; in thy light do we see light” (36:11). To summarize the main ideas of his book: Both “universal form” and “universal matter” are created within time, as a series of emanations from the primal source of Light. All activity proceeds from the divine will, which is a force that pervades everything in the creation. Beyond lies the realm of the divine being, which can only be known through knowledge of the will. This knowledge leads to bliss. To attain it one has to give up worldly pleasures and attach oneself only to God.

In “Crown of Royalty,” which in many respects is based on *The Fountain of Life*, he writes about the state of the soul, saying that all creatures yearn to come closer to God on the royal route, but they have strayed and fallen. He says that the true disciple, “marching on the correct road, turns neither to the right nor to the left, until he enters the court of the palace of the King.” He then describes God as the one who supports all the creation by his divinity, and sustains all existence by his unity. There is no distinction between the Lord’s divinity, unity, eternity, and existence because it is all one mystery. All life flows from God. He describes the destination of the inner journey: “Thine is the hidden name, from the habitations of Wisdom. . . . Thou art the Living One, and he who reaches to thy mystery finds eternal delight; he eats and lives forever.”¹⁶⁹

Bahya ibn Pakuda of the same period wrote an influential mystical work in Arabic, called *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart* (*al-Hidaya ila fara'id al-qutub*; in Hebrew, *Hovot ha-levavot*). Translated into many languages, it has been greatly loved throughout the Jewish world since it appeared. Its subject is the life of the true servant, the devotee yearning for the mystical life. In it, he distinguishes between the “duties of the limbs” – the practical and ritualistic commandments, and the “duties of the heart” – the spiritual commandment to worship God with the heart. This work is groundbreaking, as it directs the devotee to rise above the senses and outward, physical worship of God; he holds inward worship as preferable to all the traditional precepts and prayers of Judaism. Although this concept was almost heretical, it was adopted by medieval Jews without controversy. Bahya doesn’t totally discard outward rituals and prayers and urge substitution of inward prayer and meditation, but he does stress the importance of an intense, inward focusing of the soul towards God even while performing the outward acts. He urges the devotee to acquire an understanding of the divine unity; of

faith, trust, and love of God; of spiritual repentance rather than ritualized atonement, and so forth. All of these have mystical aspects.

It can't be said whether Bahya undertook the inner spiritual journey himself, as almost nothing of his life is known. However, scholars believe that he knew Muslim Sufis and read their works. *Duties* reads like a literary effort imitating the style and content of Sufi devotional manuals, which were current in those times.

Meanwhile, the Almohad persecutions in Spain and the Crusades in the Holy Land had caused a large number of refugees to swell the Jewish population of Egypt. Fenton writes:

These social upheavals together with mounting intolerance both from without and within the Jewish fold, encouraged mystical aspirations amongst Egyptian Jewry. Indeed there arose a spiritual elite, who, . . . drawing their inspiration from a form of Sufism which owed much to al-Ghazzali, introduced a creative change in the flow of intellectual life and paved the way for the rapprochement of philosophy and mysticism which was to characterize subsequent Jewish thought for generations to come. The exact time and personalities involved in the emergence of this tendency remain shrouded in mystery but it seems that at the time of the great scholar and leader Moses Maimonides, and perhaps even in preceding generations, a number of Jews had begun to adopt Sufi practices.¹⁷⁰

The Maimonides family

Among the refugees who fled Spain for Egypt was the Maimonides family. Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) shouldered difficult and time-consuming duties as a physician to the Sultan, the nobility, and the general populace, yet he also served as the official head of the Fostat (old Cairo) Jewish community. And,

despite all these social obligations, he still found time to act as a spiritual guide and write important works in philosophy, science, and religion. His best-known work is *The Guide of the Perplexed*, which he wrote over a period of eleven years for a close disciple. He also wrote works on logic, astronomy, medicine, and law; commentaries on the Mishnah and Talmud; and a systematic code of Jewish law. He composed topical essays on issues of his time, and carried on an extensive correspondence with people all over the world who consulted him on problems in philosophy and religion.

Maimonides' key achievement from the intellectual standpoint is that he was able to synthesize the Greek intellectual and logical worldview – dependent on reason as the basis for knowledge of oneself and the divine power – with the rabbinic worldview, which depended on faith, scripture, and revelation. In his writings he examined scriptural injunctions and traditional Jewish beliefs using the tools of Aristotelian logic and analysis. But there are also sections of his writings on prophecy which imply that he was influenced by Islamic Sufi teachings, and that he appreciated the value of meditation to induce the mystic state. So, although his importance historically is as a philosopher and intellectual, it was Maimonides' view of prophecy as something attainable in all periods that strongly influenced the concept of the spiritual master in subsequent times.

Some ask why the *Guide of the Perplexed* is written in a difficult and often veiled language. Although Maimonides had many admirers during his day, he also had many detractors who did not like his systematic presentation of the code of Jewish law, nor did they appreciate his radical scientific approach to other aspects of Judaism. After his death, in fact, his teachings were considered heretical and many of his books were burned. The rational approach was seen as a threat to traditional religion which was

based on rabbinic authority, not intellect or reason. Perhaps this is the reason that he expressed his fondness for mysticism in an oblique and indirect way, buried within his intellectual works.

In a letter to a colleague, he wrote explicitly of the limitations of intellect and of the potential for superior spiritual knowledge through prophecy, which is “the vital energizing condition that establishes the channel linking man with God.”¹⁷¹ In order to attain true knowledge, one must rise to the state of prophecy, where logic and reason do not apply. Human knowledge stays within the realm of nature, but knowledge of the divine can only be achieved through prophecy, beyond the intellect. Maimonides wrote:

I maintain that human knowledge is limited, and as long as the soul is in the body it cannot know what is beyond nature. It cannot see beyond, because it is confined within nature. Thus when our intelligence should seek to probe the beyond it will be unable to do so, for this subject is outside its reach. It is only what is within nature that it can know and contemplate. . . . But know that there is a level of knowledge beyond that of the knowledge of the philosophers, and this is prophecy. Prophecy is another world, and proof and argumentation do not apply here. Once it has been authenticated that we have before us a prophetic vision, there is no need for supporting evidence.¹⁷²

Writing about the limitations of the mind in obtaining true knowledge of God, Maimonides wrote: “No matter how greatly the mind may strive to know God, it will find a barrier; matter is a powerful dividing wall.”¹⁷³ He saw the state of *hitbodedut* (self-isolation), the meditative state of mentally cutting oneself off from the world, as the way to develop inner love for the Lord:

It is well known that the love of the Holy One, praised be He, cannot become fixed in a person's heart unless he meditates on it constantly . . . and he must withdraw from everything else in the world.¹⁷⁴

Maimonides devoted a long section of the *Guide* to a discussion of prophecy. It was his description of the nature of the prophet and the various levels of prophecy as presented in the Bible which informed all future Jewish thinking about the concept of the prophet as a mystic and spiritual master. Prophecy, according to Maimonides, is not restricted to the biblical prophets; rather, it is a term that describes a level or state of consciousness attained through inner, mystic experience, in which a continuous emanation from the divine being is transmitted through the medium of the Active Intellect.* It can be achieved by mystic practitioners in any period of history if they possess certain qualities – a superior imaginative faculty, and moral and mental perfection achieved by self-training and self-discipline.

Several modern scholars of Maimonides have provided a new reading of Maimonides as a mystic. For example, Louis Jacobs comments about chapter 51 of the third part of the *Guide*:

The conventional understanding of Maimonides as the supreme rationalist and philosopher requires considerable qualifications. This chapter is a remarkable illustration of the mystical tendencies in Maimonides' thought, but . . . a careful reading between the lines demonstrates even more,

* Maimonides borrowed the term Active Intellect from Aristotle. Maimonides believed that there are ten Intelligences that emanated from God which direct the universe. The last of these, the Active Intellect, directs the physical sphere. He held they were created by God in time, and equated them with the angels of rabbinic lore. The Active Intellect channels the divine influence to the prophet or mystic.

that, in fact, what Maimonides is offering his pupil – for whom he wrote this book – is a method for attaining to the gift of prophecy, which Maimonides believed he himself had attained, at least in its lower stages.¹⁷⁵ ... Seen in this way, as it should be, the statement is a kind of manual for the attainment of the lower degrees of prophecy.¹⁷⁶

In this chapter of the *Guide*,¹⁷⁷ Maimonides outlines how the disciple should undertake *hitbodedut*, the worship of God that will lead to knowledge of Him. The fact that Maimonides uses the term *hitbodedut* in the same way as it was used by his son, Abraham Maimonides, an avowed Sufi mystic practitioner, implies that the senior Maimonides was also engaged in teaching the practice of meditation. I am taking the liberty of giving a few lengthy quotations from Maimonides' teachings here, as it is quite interesting to follow this great philosopher's methodical approach to the practice of meditation, and to acknowledge his role as a teacher of the spiritual path. He begins with a quote from the Bible:

“To love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 11:13). Now we have made it clear several times that the love of God is proportionate to one's knowledge of Him. After love comes this worship to which attention has also been drawn by the Sages, may their memory be blessed, who said: “This is the worship of the heart.” In my opinion it consists in concentrating one's mind on the First Intellect and meditating [*hitboded*] on it as far possible according to one's capacity... It has thus been demonstrated that one's aim, after having attained enlightenment, should be to give oneself over to [God] and make his Intellect yearn for Him at all times. In most cases, this is accomplished through seclusion and isolation. Every pious individual should therefore

strive for seclusion and meditation [*hitbodedut*], not associating with others except when absolutely necessary.¹⁷⁸

He stresses that an individual has the option of strengthening his bond with God through total immersion in thoughts of him and meditating on him, or of weakening the bond by thinking of worldly affairs. In fact, it is the holy spirit, the divine power, which he calls the Active Intellect, that is the everflowing bond. Elsewhere he extends this thought by maintaining that as long as a person's mind is totally focused on God and not involved in any worldly affairs, no evil or mishap can befall him. He is under God's protection during his meditation. But once his mind slips into concerns of eating, or household or business matters, he becomes vulnerable.

A call to attention. We have already made it clear to you that that Active Intellect [creative power or spirit] which overflowed from Him, may He be exalted, towards us, is the bond between us and Him. You have the choice: if you wish to strengthen and to fortify this bond, you can do so; if, however, you wish gradually to make it weaker and feebler until you cut it, you can also do that. You can only strengthen this bond by employing it in loving Him and in progressing toward this, just as we have explained. And it is made weaker and feebler if you busy your thought with what is other than He. . . . You would not be with Him then, nor He with you. For that relation between you and Him is actually broken off at that time.¹⁷⁹

He continues by emphasizing the importance of total concentration and elimination of all other thoughts during meditation. Through this type of training, one will become worthy of knowledge of God:

On the other hand, while performing the actions imposed by the Torah, you should occupy your thought only with what you are doing, just as we have explained. When, however, you are alone with yourself and no one else is there and while you lie awake upon your bed, you should take care during these precious times not to set your thought to work on anything other than that intellectual worship consisting in nearness to God and being in His presence in that true reality that I have made known to you and not by way of affections of the imagination. In my opinion this end can be achieved by those of the men of knowledge who have rendered their souls worthy of it by training of this kind.¹⁸⁰

On achieving this level, one would be able to keep his attention in God while being in the company of other people.

And there may be a human individual who, through his knowledge of the true realities and his joy in what he has perceived, achieves a state in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities while his intellect is wholly turned toward Him, may He be exalted, so that in his heart he is always in His presence, . . . while outwardly he is with people, in the sort of way described by the poetical parables that have been invented for those notions: "I sleep, but my heart waketh; it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh," and so on. I do not say that this rank is that of all the prophets; but I do say that this is the rank of Moses our Master.¹⁸¹

How should one meditate? He says one should repeat the Shema, the declaration of God's unity, for lengthy periods of time, with full concentration, eliminating extraneous thoughts from the mind. This training takes years to perfect.

From here on I shall begin to give you guidance with regard to the form of this training so that you should achieve this great end. The first thing that you should cause your soul to hold fast on to is that, while reciting the Shema prayer, you should empty your mind of everything and pray thus. You should not content yourself with being intent while reciting the first verse of Shema and saying the first benediction. When this has been carried out correctly and has been practiced consistently for years, you should cause your soul, whenever you read or listen to the Torah, to be constantly directed – the whole of you and your thought – toward reflection on what you are listening to or reading. When this too has been practiced consistently for a certain time, cause your soul to be in such a way that your thought is always quite free of distraction and gives heed to all that you are reading of the other discourses of the prophets and even when you read all the benedictions, so that you aim at meditating on what you are uttering and at considering its meaning.¹⁸²

Now he explains that love is the key quality needed in approaching God. “The individual’s heart overflows with love as a result of his contemplation on God.”¹⁸³ The following passage from the *Guide* particularly influenced the hasidic masters in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Poland in their conception of *devekut* – devotion or merging in God. Quoting from Psalms, he says:

“Because he hath set his passionate love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him on high, because he hath known My name.” We have already explained in preceding chapters that the meaning of “knowledge of the Name” is: knowledge of Him [enlightenment]. It is as if

the Psalm said that this individual is protected because he hath known Me and passionately loved Me. You know the difference between the terms “one who loves” [*ohev*] and “one who loves passionately” [*hoshek*]. An excess of love [*mahabbah*], so that no thought remains that is directed toward a thing other than the Beloved, is passionate love [*ishk*].¹⁸⁴

He describes the state a person eventually achieves as he follows this path of total devotion through meditation, controlling his passions and the evil inclination that had impeded his progress in his youth. Ultimately, at his death, he will have perfected himself, and the soul will leave his body “in a state of pleasure”:

The philosophers have already explained that the bodily faculties impede in youth the attainment of most of the moral virtues, and all the more that of pure thought, which is achieved through the perfection of the Intellects that lead to passionate love of Him, may He be exalted. For it is impossible that it should be achieved while the bodily humors are in effervescence. Yet in the measure in which the faculties of the body are weakened and the fire of the desires is quenched, the Intellect is strengthened, its lights achieve a wider extension, its ability to perceive is purified, and it rejoices in what it perceives. The result is that when a perfect man is stricken with years and approaches death, this enlightenment increases very powerfully, joy over this enlightenment and a great love for the object of knowledge becomes stronger, until the soul is separated from the body at that moment in this state of pleasure.¹⁸⁵

In some of his other writings Maimonides discussed the importance of meditation as a way of entering the “mysteries”

(the *pardes* or secret garden), achieving the level of the holy spirit and ascending to the level of God, the Throne of Glory.

An individual having all the necessary qualifications can delve into the mysteries [*pardes*], advancing in these deep, subtle concepts and gaining a firm understanding and perception of them. At the same time, he must also sanctify himself and separate himself from the ways of the masses, who grope in the darkness of the times. He must achieve constant diligence in not even thinking of nonessentials or considering the current vanities and intrigues.

Such a person must work on himself until his mind is constantly clear and directed on high. He must bind his intellect to the Throne of Glory, striving to comprehend the purity and holiness of the transcendental. He must furthermore contemplate on the wisdom of God in each thing, understanding its true significance, whether it be the highest spiritual entity or the lowest thing on earth. The individual who does this immediately becomes worthy of *ruah ha-kodesh*.

When he attains this spirit, his soul becomes bound up on the level of angels . . . and he becomes a completely different person. He can now understand things with a knowledge completely different than anything that he ever experienced previously. The level that he has attained is far above that of other men, who can merely use their intellect. This is the meaning of what [the prophet Samuel told] King Saul, “[The spirit of God shall descend upon you,] you shall prophesy with them, and you shall be transformed into a different man” (1 Samuel 10:6).¹⁸⁶

It was Maimonides who was the first to formulate and teach the modern Jewish conception of prophecy and how the individual could rise to the prophetic level.

Because scholars have found a strong Sufi influence in Maimonides' writings, especially in the last chapters of the *Guide*, they have presumed that he himself had made some inner progress along these lines. More openly following Sufi mystic practices was Maimonides' son, Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237), some of whose manuscripts were discovered in the Cairo Genizah, a hidden library concealed in the attic of an ancient synagogue, which was unearthed in the late nineteenth century.

The Genizah brought to light a collection of mystical writings from the thirteenth century, which reveal the nature of spiritual mastership and spiritual practice of the Jewish Sufis of that period. It also demonstrates the great Jewish interest in Sufi-related mystic practices. There were many Islamic Sufi manuscripts copied into Hebrew characters, and some in the original Arabic. There were also writings by the early Jewish Sufis, including correspondence between Abraham Maimonides and his disciples, and between Abraham he-Hasid, another mystic of that period, and one of his followers.

The Jewish Sufi mystics were called *hasidim* (pietists, devotees) in many of the manuscripts found in the Genizah. As we have seen in other periods, the term refers to the followers of a spiritual master, and sometimes to the masters themselves. Bahya ibn Pakuda, in his *Duties of the Heart*, "equates the hasid with the highest degree of devotion, that of the 'prophets and saints.'"¹⁸⁷ *Hasid* has also been related to *hasidah*, the "stork," alluding "to those who shun the corruption of mankind and, like the stork, seek the solitude of the wilderness in the sole company of their master."¹⁸⁸ Fenton remarks that "several generations of Maimonides' ancestors are referred to with this title, which seems to connote something more than just 'piety.'"¹⁸⁹ By reviewing these manuscripts, we can get an idea of the spiritual practices of the *hasidim* and how they adapted Islamic Sufi terminology and literary styles for their own purposes.

Abraham he-Hasid and the Maimonides family

One of the most important hasidim was Rabbi Abraham he-Hasid (d. 1223), who was often confused with Abraham Maimonides because they shared the same name. He was probably Abraham Maimonides' master, as the younger Maimonides refers to him as "our master in the Path of the Lord."¹⁹⁰ Some of Abraham he-Hasid's writings were found in the Genizah, including a commentary on the Song of Songs, which is viewed as a guide for the spiritual practitioner to rise through the various levels to union with God. Like other literature produced by the circles of Jewish Sufis, his writings were probably strongly influenced by Muslim Sufi mystical writing, yet they reflect "an original and specifically Jewish doctrine."¹⁹¹

Abraham Maimonides, like his father Moses, was an important figure active in both worldly and spiritual spheres. He was a devoted hasid, as can be seen in his work *Kifayat al-abidin* (*The Compendium for the Servants of God*, known as *Kifaya*) – a manual for spiritual living, which was similar to Bahya ibn Pakuda's *Hidaya* in its intention but more openly recognizes the spiritual attainments of the Muslim Sufis. He equates "the discipline of the Islamic mystics with that of the old prophets of Israel," stating: "Do not regard as unseemly our comparison of that to the behavior of the Sufis, for the latter imitate the prophets (of Israel) and walk in their footsteps, not the prophets in theirs."¹⁹²

Abraham illustrates his teachings with quotations and examples from the Bible and rabbinic literature "in an attempt to portray his pietist (hasidic) innovations as a restoration of practices that were formerly those of the prophets of ancient Israel and which had now fallen to the lot of the Islamic mystics.... It is noteworthy in this respect that the Jewish pietists often referred to themselves as the 'disciples of the Prophets.'¹⁹³

Abraham Maimonides' eldest son, David, who succeeded Abraham as the leader of the Egyptian Jewish community, was

probably also a hasid, but does not seem to have taken the role of a master. Abraham's younger son, Obadyah (1228–1265), however, was the spiritual guide of a group of Jewish Sufis in his generation, for whom he wrote his book, *The Treatise of the Pool*.

Obadyah was regarded with great reverence by the Jews of his time as a master of esoteric secrets and divine wisdom, as attested by a letter found in the Genizah:

As for our glorious teacher and Master Obadyah the eminent Sage to whom mysteries are revealed, in whom "light, understanding, and wisdom like the wisdom of the angels are to be found" (Daniel 5:11), "no secret mystifieth him, he lieth down and all is revealed to him" (Daniel 4:6).¹⁹⁴

Because Obadyah's influence was on the esoteric level, and perhaps because he was less involved in the affairs of the community than his brother David, he and his work fell into obscurity after a few generations, when the Jewish Sufis disappeared. The *Treatise* was lost until rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century, and it was only validated as Obadyah's work recently.¹⁹⁵

The style of Obadyah's writing is rambling and mystically lyrical, and relies on his father's and grandfather's writings. In some respects it is an enlargement of the final chapters of his grandfather's *Guide of the Perplexed*, which we have cited above, but with a more explicitly mystical emphasis.

The *Treatise* is a manual for the person who travels the spiritual path. He emphasizes the importance of the spiritual master, and alludes to the presence of spiritual masters throughout Jewish history. He urges the seeker to prepare himself adequately to travel the path and serve God, separating himself from sensual or vulgar material activities, and attaching himself to the higher activity – Reason (an allusion to the Active Intellect or *logos*). He also urges that a seeker keep the company of the virtuous,

the hasidim, the spiritually advanced. The goal of traveling the mystic path is to attain divine communion, a state of bliss so all-encompassing that one will never want to feel separated from God again. This is an individual experience, Obadyah emphasizes:

Lo, after having attained to this state, so passionate will be thy rapture, that thou shalt not suffer to be separated from Him, even for an instant. And as thy bliss increaseth, so will thy passion increase and thou wilt no longer delight in food nor drink nor rest. In the end, however, thou alone art the one to gain [from this], “if thou growest wise thou growest wise for thyself” (Proverbs 9:12).¹⁹⁶

Even though he is very open about his Sufi influence and his mystical perspective, Obadyah still feels the need to conceal his true meaning. At one point he states:

Know thou that meditatest this treatise that the matter to which we have alluded here cannot be more openly expounded. Thus upon happening on a verse that can be interpreted in several manners, my goal is merely to open the gate and rely upon the disciple’s comprehension. If he be endowed with insight and intuition [*dawq*] then he will arrive at the true significance through his own resources.¹⁹⁷

Obadyah brings symbolic interpretations for certain biblical terms or concepts. As much of his writing is concerned with the conflict between soul and body, he interpreted biblical allusions to a city being besieged by enemies as the soul being besieged by the passions. For example, the rebellion of the biblical prophet Balaam’s donkey is understood as the rebellion of mind and matter, which his soul was unable to dominate.

He understands the “tree of life” as the ultimate spiritual knowledge that brings reunion of the soul with its divine source. He interprets the *manna* (the food on which the Israelites survived during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness) as the spiritual nourishment, the divine knowledge, “which was intended to bring the generation of the wilderness to spiritual perfection (*kamal*).”¹⁹⁸ Permeating the entire work are references to water on a symbolic level, as the spiritual nourishment in the desert of the world. In the biblical narratives, for example, when the patriarchs dig wells, he interprets that to mean they are seeking a higher level of spirituality through the practice of meditation. In Chapter Ten, he compares man’s heart to a cistern or pool that is to be filled with pure water, reminiscent of Jeremiah’s prophecy:

Great care is to be exercised that no impurity seep into the heart for this could be the cause of fatal errors on the spiritual path, such as that of Elisha [ben Abuya], who mistook the marble for water. Once the heart is completely cleansed of all but God then the living water will pour into it and wonders will be revealed. . . . One should ever strive toward the perfect waters and avoid “the broken cisterns” (Jeremiah 2:13). . . . The well or pool as a life-giving symbol so natural in the parched lands of the East, plays a great role in both Islamic and Jewish esotericism.¹⁹⁹

As we saw earlier in the discussion on the prophet Moses, the hasidim believed that they were reviving an ancient spiritual tradition that had begun with Adam, was passed to the patriarchs and then to Moses, who had imparted it to Israel. This was the substance of the revelation on Sinai. With the exile it had been lost, they believed, but it now had the potential to be revived under the mastership of the hasidim. Obadyah used the term “intercessor” for the spiritual guide, who mediates between man

and the Lord, explaining that a person without an intercessor is considered to be dead:

It is clear that he who hath not gained an intercessor to mediate between himself and his Beloved is considered as dead. Once thou hast realized this principle, then thou wilt be ashamed to call on the Lord without having achieved this.

Indeed, “Who is he and where is he who could bear to stand before the Lord” (Esther 7:5) without having recourse to a mediator, for this is sheer impertinence! Thus it is incumbent upon us to seek diligently after an intercessor and to find one without delay, for he is our guardian in the nether world and our guide to the world everlasting, and think not otherwise.²⁰⁰

He counsels the disciple to honor and value his intercessor:

O my son, honor him that mediateth between thee and thy Creator, may He be extolled inasmuch as he intercedeth for thy good, since he is “the interpreter between them” (Genesis 42:23). Take great pains to retain [his mediation] for its loss is irretrievable.²⁰¹

Paul Fenton, translator of Obadyah’s *Treatise of the Pool*, remarks on the role of the Jewish Sufis as inheritors and transmitters of this divine revelation, the state of prophecy. Not everyone was qualified to become a hasid; rather it was the province of the elite. Abraham he-Hasid believed that at the time of revelation of the Torah, God meant to grant the ability to rise to prophetic state to all Israel, and that this could have been maintained by a “continued observance of a spiritual discipline,”

meaning the Jewish Sufi doctrine, but not everyone was of the level to make use of this potential of inner spiritual realization. The external law or Torah was therefore given to them so that the mass of the people could “draw near to this state.”²⁰² Fenton quotes an anonymous hasid of that time:

The Torah was revealed through the Chosen Apostle who was the elite [*safwa*] of the descendants of Abraham, His beloved, and the result of the purest lineage: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kehat, Amram, and then Moses, all of whom had been instruments of the Divine Word [*hussil bihim al-amr al-ilahi*]. So that through the Torah which was revealed to him, they may become prophets, and he that does not attain to prophecy shall draw nigh to its state through commendable deeds.²⁰³

According to Abraham Maimonides, travelers on the “special path” had to follow a strict, moral, and disciplined way of life and have the capacity to delve into the deeper, mystical meaning of the scriptures. Abraham and Obadyah insisted on adherence to the traditional Jewish law as the foundation of the path. This may have been a way of deflecting criticism of their Muslim Sufi-influenced esoteric movement.

The virtues and moral behavior to be cultivated on the path are discussed by both Abraham in his *Kifaya* and Obadyah (less systematically) in his *Treatise of the Pool*, “a spiritual itinerary which owes much to the ethical manuals current among the Sufis: sincerity, mercy, generosity, gentleness, humility, faith, contentedness, abstinence, striving, solitude. Passing through ‘fear,’ ‘love,’ and ‘cleaving to God,’²⁰⁴ he will be uplifted to true sanctity and will comprehend the nobleness of the bond between himself and God.”²⁰⁵

Practices

Although the core of the practices the hasidim followed is probably universal to most mystical paths, some of the specific techniques reflect the influence of the Islamic Sufi model, including ablution, prostration, kneeling, weeping, spreading of the hands, orientation to the ark, and night-long vigils and fasting. Solitary retreats for forty days and nights, called *halwa*, was another Sufi technique they adopted, during which they sometimes practiced “incubation” (a meditation technique akin to suspended animation).

Halwa was emphasized by Abraham and Obadyah as the highest of mystical paths, especially the inward seclusion (*halwa batina*) that brings about inner illumination (*nur batin*) and prophetic communion (*wusul nabawi*) while still living in the company of other people. Obadyah wrote that the biblical patriarchs’ spiritual practice involved solitary meditation, which the hasidim were imitating through their own practice of *halwa*. An important aspect of *halwa batina* is the control of the mind, which does not depend on running to mountains or caves. It can be accomplished while living anywhere, but they warned about the importance of discretion in safeguarding one’s inner experience:

Realize that the state to which thou hast attained or to which thou hast drawn near is to be likened to the case of one who hath found a precious object. If he be conscious and appreciative of the value of his find, then he will evermore be beholden unto the Most High, who hath bestowed upon him this [gift] without [his having suffered] either effort or hardship. Then he will utilize it in perfecting his soul, for the sake of Him who hath been merciful towards him. . . .

Safeguard then this [gift] O Seeker, for it is a most precious and valuable commodity. . . . Remain sincere to it and withdraw from those occupations which turn thee aside from it whilst thou art among thy family and thy kinsfolk.

Do not believe, like the poor in spirit, that seclusion [*inq-ita*] is meant for the mountains and caves and that by merely withdrawing thereunto they will accomplish aught, for it is not so.²⁰⁶

Obadyah wrote that after subduing the passions one should engage in solitary meditation in order to attain the mystic experience of divine communion:

When thou remainest alone with thy soul after having subdued thy passions, a Gate will open before thee through which thou wilt contemplate wonders. When thy five external senses come to rest, thine internal senses will awaken and thou wilt behold a resplendent light emanating from the splendor of Reason. Thou wilt perceive mighty and awesome voices which leave a man bewildered.²⁰⁷

The austere way of life prescribed for the hasidim included simplicity in dress and conduct, and control of sleeping, eating, and speaking. Normally they would defer marriage until at least age forty in order to pursue their spiritual life more intensively.

Dikr ceremonies, involving dancing and singing, which were common to the Muslim Sufis, were not adopted by these Jewish hasidim. However the significance of inner *dikr*, “*dikr* of the heart,” practiced during the *halwas*, is mentioned in Jewish texts. Abraham he-Hasid wrote:

One can attain to the spiritual world through the practice of outward and inward holiness, excessive love of God, and the delight in His recollection [*dikr*] and holy names.²⁰⁸

Fenton also mentions another mystic who incorporated Sufi elements into his teachings though he was not considered a Sufi

himself. The kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (died c. 1295) taught meditation using breath control and repetition of sacred formulae until he arrived at a state of *mehikah* (effacement) of self. It is presumed he was influenced by Muslim and perhaps Indian teachers whom he met during his extensive travels in the East.

One could continue bringing examples of Jewish mystics and masters who, for hundreds of years, throughout the Arab and Muslim world, were influenced by the vocabulary and practices of Muslim Sufism. Suffice it to say that traces of Sufism can be found in the teachings of other early and later kabbalists, like Isaac of Akko (Acre) in the thirteenth and fourteenth century and Hayim Vital in the eighteenth century, and many others in the intervening centuries who lived in Egypt and the Holy Land. The copying into Hebrew characters of Persian Sufi poetry, such as that of Rumi and Sa'adi, greatly contributed to the circulation of Sufi ideas among Persian Jews. However, the specific hasidic Jewish Sufi movement itself declined, as there was a lessening of tolerance within Muslim society at large, and the knowledge of classical Arabic diminished among Jews. The works of Abraham he-Hasid and the mystical sections of Abraham Maimonides' writings and those of other Jewish Sufis fell into oblivion.

Yet for several hundred more years, the influence of Islamic Sufi mysticism continued to infuse Jewish spiritual life in Egypt, Damascus, Jerusalem, Baghdad, and elsewhere in the Arab world, as demonstrated by numerous manuscripts that have been found synthesizing the Sufi and Maimonidean approach with the rabbinic and (later) the kabbalistic. Presumably, the anonymous author of the fifteenth-century Jewish Sufi manuscript *al-Makala fi derekh ha-hasidut*, which outlines the stations or levels of the mystic path using deeply Sufi terminology, was a spiritual master to the Jews of the Arab world.

Fenton's fascinating and ground-breaking study of the hasidim of Egypt, and Sufism among Jews elsewhere in the Muslim world,

is important because it demonstrates the strong influence of Islamic Sufi masters on a little-known period of Jewish mysticism. These hasidim used a Sufi vocabulary, but in every sense they saw their teaching as authentic to Judaism; Sufism represented a means for them to get in touch with the prophetic tradition, which (according to Obadyah) had been lost to the Jews for many generations. This study also enlightens our understanding of the role of the spiritual master in all subsequent spiritual movements in Judaism.

The Sufi model of mysticism and spiritual mastership reentered Judaism even farther east, when in the seventeenth century a Jew named Sarmad settled in India. Born into a rabbinical family of Kashan, Persia, he went to India as a trader and experienced a spiritual transformation. Sarmad is still revered throughout India as a Muslim, yet little is known about the details of his life. From his writings, however, there is evidence that Sarmad was a mystic of the highest order, a saint who transcended the boundaries of religion and found the Lord within himself. He wrote of union with the divine name as union with the inner divine music. Some sources say he converted to Islam and then to Hinduism, but if one reads his *rubaiyats* (poems) carefully, it is clear that although he examined all religions, he rejected their external limitations, embracing the universal experience of the divine which he recognized as the true teaching. Like the Muslim Sufis, he extolled the power of love and boldly sang of his unconventional love for the Lord and the master and inspired others to do the same. In 1659/60, because of his unorthodox approach to worship, he was beheaded as a heretic by Aurangzeb, the Mogul emperor of India.

Through his love for his master, Sarmad's consciousness was elevated and he experienced union with him. Using Sufi terminology, he calls his master "the Friend." He refers to both the master and the Lord with this term:

The love of the Friend has exalted me
 and made me needless of the favor of others.
 I was set aflame like a candle in this gathering,
 and through this burning I became his intimate.²⁰⁹

Seek a Friend who will never be unfaithful,
 nor wound your heart in friendship –
 One who is ceaselessly in your embrace,
 never even a step away.²¹⁰

In the following *rubai* (poem) Sarmad explores the seemingly paradoxical relationship between the Lord and the master and then offers the practical response of the mystic: If you have love, then you will transcend the mind's limited understanding and experience the oneness of the master and the Lord.

The madness of my heart is the perfection of wisdom,
 but the chaos of love
 is beyond the grasp of the mind:
 Can the ocean be contained in a pitcher?
 Impossible, it [my mind] says,
 even though some may claim it so.²¹¹

Sarmad agrees that ultimately it is impossible to understand with our limited intellect how God can manifest in a human being. The only way we can understand this paradox is to go within, to the inner regions, and see for ourselves how the microcosm (the human body) can contain the macrocosm (the Lord and his creation). Spiritual seekers must experience this truth for themselves; otherwise, it does indeed seem like a play of the imagination.



CHAPTER 9

The Middle Ages: Hasidei Ashkenaz

BY THE END OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY, there were probably four or five independent schools of Jewish mysticism in different parts of Western Europe, simultaneously engaged in mystic practices. They were also in the early stages of formulating a symbolic presentation of the nature of God and the creation that would deeply influence Jewish mysticism for the next eight centuries. These schools had no relation with the Jewish Sufis of Egypt and the Holy Land. Nor did they seem to incorporate the rationalism of Maimonides. Rather, they developed independent of the spiritual ferment in the Maghreb (North Africa) and, in some respects, in opposition to it.

In Germany, we find the Hasidei Ashkenaz (German Pietists), whose influence spread to England, France, and Spain. In Provence, in southern France, there were several circles of early kabbalists – among them the anonymous authors of the *Sefer ha-bahir* (Book of Brilliance); the religious scholars of the academies in Narbonne, Posquieres, and Lunel; and later the Gerona

group in northern Spain. There were also the Cohen brothers of Castile and the Iyun (Contemplation) circle. Among these groups there were certain similarities and some important differences. Some groups influenced one another and others functioned in isolation. But all of them drew on the heikhalot texts of the merkavah mystics of antiquity, as well as the vocabulary of Neoplatonist philosophy transmitted through the works of Saadia Gaon, Abraham ibn Ezra, and the Arabic philosophers. It was at this time in history that these and other influences joined to create the right environment to nurture numerous mystics in their sincere quest for spiritual realization.

From the time of the Middle Ages in Babylonia and Europe, virtually all Jewish spiritual teachers – whether mystic adepts, guides to law and morality, or masters of scriptural knowledge – always referred to a body of “received” written literature in their teachings. Although the mystics based their teachings on personal experience, they generally referred to an accepted body of esoteric literature based on the process of creation (called *ma’aseh bereshit*) and the experiences of mystics of previous generations who took the inner journey to the higher realms (*ma’aseh merkavah*).²¹² Joseph Dan remarks that even from the time of antiquity, in the rabbinic period, it was not considered acceptable by the normative Jewish establishment to discuss personal experience of the divine through mystic ascent. Thus there is little evidence in the literature of this period of personal mystic experience. Instead, they refer to manuscripts that describe mythical characters of the past taking the inner journey, and most new accounts were written under the names of legendary past masters. Nevertheless, according to scholars like Dan, there are a few documents in which the descriptions are so intense and immediate that one can assume they result from personal experience.²¹³ There are also oral traditions that bear witness to the involvement of many generations of Jewish teachers in mystic practice.

By the tenth century, the esoteric writings and techniques of the merkavah and heikhalot mysticism were known throughout Italy. According to the family history of the Kalonymus family (also known as the Kalonymides), these teachings had been imparted to their ancestors by Abu Aaron ben Samuel of Baghdad, a ninth-century scholar of Talmud who traveled widely in southern Italy. Aaron was known as the “father of all the secrets”; his wisdom and magical powers were legendary. By the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries the Kalonymides had moved to Germany, where they had evolved into a remarkable lineage of spiritual masters, called the Hasidei Ashkenaz. (Ashkenaz is the Hebrew word for Germany.) Their teachings were based in large measure on the esoteric secrets of prayer and meditation which their ancestors had received from Aaron of Baghdad and the heikhalot and merkavah texts that they preserved and transmitted to even later generations.

Samuel the Hasid ben Kalonymus, the first of the German Hasidim whom we know about, lived in the early twelfth century, prior to the Crusades. According to legend, when Samuel was still very young, his father died after entrusting the secrets of mystic practice to another scholar with the agreement that he would initiate the child when he became mature.²¹⁴ Not many of Samuel’s writings have survived; he wrote a short book, *Sefer ha-yir’ah* (Book of the Fear of God) and probably contributed the first few chapters of *Sefer hasidim* (Book of the Pious), which was written mostly by his son and spiritual heir, Rabbi Judah the Hasid of Regensburg.

Judah was the towering figure of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, and his work, the *Sefer hasidim*, reveals a new form of devotion and mystical prayer in Judaism. Judah conceived of a “new community” of pious Jews, whose social interactions would be based on strict ethical principles. Their religious life would also be strict, based on prayer and austerities. In order to effectively carry out

their mission in life, the hasidim needed to limit their contact with non-Jews and non-pietist Jews so as not to be distracted from their real work. Although the Hasidei Ashkenaz probably never were able to create the kind of community they projected as their ideal, they were accepted as the “representatives of an ideally Jewish way of life even where their principles were never completely translated into practice.”²¹⁵

The *Sefer hasidim* also instructs the common man who loves God how he can follow the spiritual path and worship his Creator. In other words, these hasidim did not see themselves as an aristocratic elite of scholars or spiritual leaders like the early kabbalists of southern Europe. Despite their rather austere way of life, the hasidim functioned as the caring masters of the ordinary person who aspired to sainthood.

The *Sefer hasidim* begins with a simple statement:

This is called “Book of the Pious.” Its contents are sweet and most desirable. It is written for those who fear God and revere his name. There is a hasid whose heart desires the love of his Creator, to do His will completely. But he does not know which matters to assume, which matters to avoid, or how to immerse himself thoroughly to do his Creator’s will. The reason is that hearts have become deficient. There is a hasid who undertakes a great deal and there is one who does little, but if he knew and understood matters of piety he would do a great deal more than those who do much. It is for this reason that the Book of the Pious was written, so that all who fear God and those returning to their Creator with a sincere heart may see, know, and understand all that they must do and all that they must avoid.²¹⁶

Rabbi Judah has been likened to St. Francis of Assisi, his Christian contemporary, and the Hasidei Ashkenaz compared

to the monastic movements of medieval Christianity who probably influenced them. Judah, like Samuel his father before him, believed in keeping the esoteric aspects of the teachings secret, to be taught only to a few trusted disciples.

Judah died in 1217 and was succeeded by his disciple and family member, Eleazar of Worms, who made the teachings of Rabbi Judah and the Hasidei Ashkenaz more public. Known as the *Roke'ah* (meaning “merchant of perfumes and medicines” – presumably a reference to his mystical knowledge of how to perfume and heal the soul), he died in approximately 1237, leaving a voluminous literature codifying the hasidic mystical doctrines, as well as works of religious law, commentary, poetry, and guidance for daily life. Above all, to subsequent generations Eleazar became known for his “magical” writings. His five-volume *Sodei razaya* (Secret of Secrets or Secrets of the Mysteries) includes the section called “*Sefer ha-shem*” (Book of the Holy Name), which explains the secrets of using holy names of God.²¹⁷ In other sections he transmits the entire group of heikhalot treatises and other esoteric documents. His teachings of “mystical prayer” and magical uses of sacred names are discussed below.

A defining moment for Rabbi Eleazar was the murder of his son and daughters before his eyes in 1217, during one of the Crusades, when he himself was wounded. At about the same time, he experienced the passing of his master, Rabbi Judah. He believed that the messianic age would begin in the year 1240, and that the Jews needed to be ready for it. It is thought that these factors may have spurred him to make the esoteric teachings he had inherited through his lineage available to a wider audience.

Some of Rabbi Eleazar’s students traveled south and came in contact with mystics in Provence and Spain and in turn transmitted the teachings to them. According to legend, Eleazar himself miraculously appeared in Spain at the end of his life to bring the secret wisdom of mystical prayer to Nahmanides (Moses ben

Nahman), an important Spanish kabbalist of the Gerona school, thus acting as a link in the chain of transmission of the esoteric teachings from Aaron of Baghdad through the Kalonymides, from Italy to Germany and France, and then to Spain, where they merged with other influences to create the mystical teachings of the early kabbalists.

Teachings of the Hasidei Ashkenaz

THE GLORY

One of the key issues facing Jews of that period was, quite simply, how to pray? To whom does one direct one's prayers? Prior generations had prayed to a personal God who acts in history, according to the traditional rabbinic conception. However, with the growth of the philosophical mindset, incorporating the Aristotelian concept of a transcendent God as the Prime Mover, a distinction was drawn in people's minds between the transcendent God who is unchangeable and eternal, and the immanent God who revealed himself to the prophets and who responds to humanity. Both the Hasidei Ashkenaz (and later the kabbalists) created a technique of approaching God through mystical prayer, which resolved the apparent contradiction between the immanent and transcendent aspects of God.

A new concept had been introduced into Jewish philosophy in the ninth century by Saadia Gaon, that of an immanent, omnipresent God, who reveals Himself to man.²¹⁸ In a few places, the Bible refers to God's "glory," the *kavod*, which is normally understood as a kind of visual manifestation of the divine power, through which God revealed himself to the prophets and other biblical personalities. Saadia interpreted the *kavod* to mean a created angel or intermediary, and taught that there were numerous such intermediaries, *kavods* manifesting above *kavods*. This concept was quite different from the transcendent God who sits

high above and remote on his throne, to whom hymns and songs of praise are sung by hierarchies of angels, but who never reaches down to the human level.

Saadia had in turn inspired the Spanish philosophers, Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164) and Abraham bar Hiya (died c. 1136). Ibn Ezra taught that the kavod was indeed the instrument of revelation, but it was “not a created angel but a semi-divine power whose interface with the Godhead is as divine and transcendental as the Godhead itself.”²¹⁹ Judah the Hasid of Germany elaborated on ibn Ezra’s concept by injecting the element of emanation. For him, the kavod was a metaphor for God’s first creation or emanation – the creative power, the primal light itself, identical with the Shekhinah, the divine presence or radiance.

God, who remains infinite and unknown also in the role of Creator, has produced the glory as “a created light, the first of all creations.” This kavod is “the great radiance called Shekhinah” and it is also identical with the *ruah ha-kodesh*, out of whom there speaks the voice and word of God. This primeval light of divine glory is later revealed to the prophets and mystics.²²⁰

In explaining that God has both transcendent and revealed qualities, Eleazar of Worms wrote that He “maintains his silence and (at the same time) carries the universe.”²²¹ The kavod was a divine intermediary between the supreme Godhead and the created world; it had two aspects – the upper aspects were hidden from the prophets and the creation; its lower aspects were revealed to the prophets and sometimes to humanity at large.

The belief in God’s immanence meant that he was approachable as a friend. The hasid had to direct his prayers to the abstract or unseen aspect of God, but the immanent God was the friend who responded. (If one prayed to the revealed aspect, there was

the fear that one would be perceived as worshipping an entity lower than God.) This was of key importance to the hasidic conception of prayer. Eleazar of Worms wrote:

God is omnipresent and perceives the just and the evil-doers. Therefore when you pray, collect your mind, for it is said: I always place God before me; and therefore the beginning of all benedictions runs “praise be to Thee, O God” – as though a man speaks to a friend.²²²

Immanence or omnipresence also meant that God could be perceived by anyone in every created being or object. It became more than simply an abstract notion of God being “everywhere.” It implied that he could be found in the physical world, in one’s own life, as the unifying principle that allows human beings to experience him in time and space. The Ashkenazic Hasidim expressed this by saying that God is closer to humanity than the soul to the body. He is the inmost ground of the soul. In the early twelfth century, Samuel ben Kalonymus, father of Rabbi Judah the Hasid, expressed this in his hymn, “The Song of Unity”:

Everything is in You
and You are in everything
You fill everything and you encompass it all;
When everything was created,
You were *in* everything;
Before everything was created,
You *were* everything.²²³

In some of their writings, Judah and Eleazar divided the kavod into two kavods. One, *kavod penimi* (inner glory) or *kavod nistar* (hidden or invisible glory) is the unmanifested divine will, the holy spirit or word of God. It is identical with the Shekhinah,

the indwelling holy spirit that is omnipresent and inherent in all creatures, but which doesn't project itself into the creation.* The other is the visible glory, which may take on a variety of manifested forms according to the will of God. It is sometimes conceived of as a series of ten or more visible glories, much like the kabbalistic sefirot.† The concept of the visible glory allowed for a sense of nearness and immediacy with God, although prayer was still to be directed towards the inner or invisible glory. This notion of a visible and invisible glory was further expanded upon by the Unique or Special Cherub circle of mystics.

The Special Cherub circle

In the heikhalot texts of antiquity, the merkavah mystics recounted their inner ascent to the realm of the Throne of Glory, where they saw a divine being or angel seated on the throne. This being is equated in the writings of the Hasidei Ashkenaz with the visible glory. It is described in terms related to the physical human body, in keeping with the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Bible.

The concept of the glory as an embodied being gave its identity to another, more secretive school of mystics, probably a branch or subgroup of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, called the Unique

* The reader has probably noticed that the term *Shekhinah* sometimes seems to mean the immanent divine power that manifests in the creation, and sometimes it signifies an immanent power that does not manifest. Terms were not used consistently by all the mystics, especially as they took certain notions, such as transcendent and immanent, and divided and subdivided them into various "inner" and "outer" aspects.

† The concept of a hidden and revealed glory was based on the passage in the Bible describing Moses' encounter with God. Moses asks: "Please show me your glory." God replies: "You cannot see my face and live . . . but you shall see my back, but my face will not be seen" (paraphrase of Bible, Exodus 33:18–23). The "face" was interpreted as the hidden glory, which is imperceptible; the "back" as the visible glory, which is perceptible. (See discussion in Verman, *Books of Contemplation*, pp. 134–141.)

or Special Cherub school (*keruv ha-meyuhad*).* They viewed the visible kavod as the cherub, “seated on” (covering) the invisible or hidden aspect of God – the Throne of Glory itself. The cherub is the form through which God revealed himself to the prophets, and through which humanity can know him. It is a symbol of his immanence manifested in human or angelic form. However, prayer was to be directed to the transcendent, concealed glory, the Throne itself; to the hidden aspect of God, which has no human likeness. As explained earlier, to pray to an embodied power, which appears as an angel with physical features, would have been idolatrous.

In the Special Cherub literature, the Throne or invisible glory is also called his holiness, which resides in the west. The revealed, visible aspect of God, the cherub, is called his greatness, his kingdom, and is located in the east. The west is also metaphor for the most-hidden spiritual location of the Shekhinah, the source of divine immanence; from the holiness the divine power shines onto the greatness, the visible glory. The hasidim believed that their prayers should be directed to the holiness itself, the hidden source of all emanation. In the *pesak*, a summary of the teachings of the Cherub circle which was written for the general public, we read:

All God-fearing people, when they pray, have to direct their prayers, when they say “Blessed is God,” and when they kneel before Him and thank Him and direct their prayers in their hearts, only to His Holiness alone, which is His Glory and which has neither form nor image, only voice, spirit,

* The cherub is a symbol or entity that figures from time to time in Jewish mysticism; it first appears in the Bible as the guardian of the entrance to Eden. It is not the cute, cupid-like angel who shoots arrows of love on Valentine’s Day. It is an angelic being, a personified power, which intervenes between man and God, the earthly and spiritual realms.

and speech, and so Isaiah said: “To whom then will ye liken God? Or what likeness will ye compare unto Him?” (Isaiah 40:18).²²⁴

The real object of their prayer and meditation, the goal of mystical contemplation, lies beyond the greatness – it is the “hidden holiness of God, His infinite and formless glory, wherefrom there emerges the voice and the word of God. The finite word of man is aimed at the infinite word of God.”²²⁵

The ancient text of the *Shiur Komah* (Measure of His Stature), according to legend written by Rabbi Akiva in the second century, describes an angel or divine being seated on the Throne of Glory. The Special Cherub of the hasidim is none other than this classic symbol of antiquity, the divine being of astronomically large physical proportions, covered all over with the letters of the sacred names of God.* He is depicted as sitting on the Throne of Glory wearing *tefillin* (phylacteries) on his forehead – portable cube-shaped containers holding scrolls of key passages from the Bible. The *pesak* text describes him as having been initially emanated from God’s great fire, after which –

He [God] created for him an image and a form, the form of a man, eyes and hands and hips, and on his forehead is engraved “Yah Akhatriel,”† and there are phylacteries on his head . . . and he has the Measurement of the Height [Shiur Komah] of Rabbi Ishmael, and man was created in his image, and he sits on the Throne of Glory.²²⁶

* The *Shiur Komah* uses the exaggeration of physical size into absurdity to convey that, mystically, God who fills the entire creation but who is imperceptible can be apprehended as an “image” or blueprint of the human form of gigantic proportions.

† One of the names of God, Yah, coupled with the name of the chief angel.

The hasidim believed that the Cherub, the Shiur Komah, was the spiritual “form” or model from which man was created, thus the biblical statement that man was created in God’s image. The *pesak* describes the Cherub as having been brought to life when God’s name Yah Akhatriel was inscribed on his forehead – perhaps symbolic of the third eye, the spiritual gateway where the divine power enters the human body.

The Special Cherub circle lived in northern France and England, and was related to the Hasidei Ashkenaz. Unlike them, however, they did not publish their writings under their own names but under the names of legendary figures like Joseph ben Uzziel, the grandson of the biblical prophet Jeremiah. Perhaps anonymity was a way of protecting what would have been considered heresy – a secondary god in the form of man, seated on the divine throne – even if their prayers were not directed to him.

Practice

MYSTICAL PRAYER

In the Judaism of antiquity, as we saw earlier, the mystics were engaged in the manipulation of holy names to induce mystic experience, but probably not openly or systematically. In the heikhalot mysticism such techniques were used by those who attempted the inner ascent, but there is no record of them having been used in the liturgy and prayers recited by ordinary Jews in the synagogue.

A key innovation of the Hasidei Ashkenaz in the history of Jewish spirituality was “mystical prayer.” Prayers and hymns to God had been written by poets and rabbis over the centuries. Collections of psalms and other biblical verses had been drawn from the scriptures into the liturgy, but never before had the emphasis been placed on the need for strict precision in the recitation and writing of the words and letters of the prayers.

Earlier, the attitude to the liturgy allowed for creative input and on-the-spot improvisation. Now even the number of words in a prayer took on importance.

For example, if the name of God appeared in a prayer nineteen times, and similarly Israel is called God's son nineteen times in that prayer, there is a significance in the correspondence that has an esoteric meaning. If you were to add one more sentence in which the name of God appears, it would throw off the mathematical symmetry.

Rabbi Judah wrote to a group of Jews who didn't understand this important truth:

You inhabitants of France and the Islands of the Sea [England] who err utterly and completely, for you invent lies and add several words in your prayers of which the early sages who formulated the prayers never dreamed, when they commanded us to say the prayers in place of the sacrifices in the Temple. Every benediction which they formulated is measured exactly in its number of words and letters, for if it were not so, our prayer would be the song of the uncircumcised non-Jews. Therefore, give heed and repent, and do not go on doing this evil thing, adding and omitting letters and words from the prayers.²²⁷

Scholar Joseph Dan explains that for Rabbis Judah and Eleazar and their disciples, "every addition or omission of a word, or even of a single letter, from the sacred text of the prayers destroys the religious meaning of the prayer as a whole and is to be regarded as a grave sin, a sin which could result in eternal exile for those who commit it."²²⁸ Humanly mandated changes would make the prayers secular and remove their potency. By ascribing a mystical significance to the very words and letters, it elevates the prayer from mere repetition to a mystical process.

There was a logic behind this. The Ashkenazic Hasidim believed in divine providence and destiny, of even the minutest details of life. They believed that there is a divine master plan, which is revealed in everything that happens in history, and it can be seen as the underlying pattern or blueprint woven through the sacred texts of the Bible and the prayers.²²⁹ Thus the divine design can be understood by finding the embedded codes hidden within the texts. Dan writes that Rabbi Judah and his disciples

evolved a mystical theory, according to which the words of the various prayers are not accidental, nor are they only vehicles for their literal meaning. Their order, and especially their numbers, reflect a mystical harmony, a sacred divine rhythm, which was introduced by the rabbis who formulated the daily prayers.... This mystical harmony can be discovered in historical events, directed by God; in nature, ... and first and foremost in the Bible. According to Rabbi Judah and the Ashkenazi Hasidic school in general, there can be nothing accidental in the Bible, not even the forms of letters.... It sometimes seems that where other readers would see letters and meanings in the Bible, the Ashkenazic Hasidim would see only rows of figures and numbers, mystically connected.... The mystical harmony inherent ... in the biblical text is to be found also in the text of the prayers.²³⁰

From this perspective, one can understand why people would avoid deviating from the prescribed prayers! There would be cosmic implications, and harm could fall on the Jews. The purpose of mystical prayer was not necessarily to preserve or improve the relationship between man and God, it was to affect

the realm of the divine. This almost borders on magic, or theurgy, an attempt by man to control divine powers through his actions. The hasid becomes an adept at maintaining the balance in the divine realm, and the universe depends on his efforts for its continued existence.

There were three techniques the hasidim used for extracting esoteric meanings from words and passages of the Hebrew language, all based on the fact that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet have numerical values. The main one is *gematria*, the principle of finding a numerical value of the Hebrew words and searching for other words or phrases of equal value, thus establishing a connection between their meanings. Other techniques included *temurah*, interchanging the letters of a word according to certain systematic rules, and *notarikon*, interpreting the letters of a word as abbreviations of other words.²³¹ These techniques are still in use by people wishing to find codes or esoteric meanings in the letters and words of the Bible.

Of course, it was not only the esoteric significance of the letters and words that were the focus of the prayers. *Kavanah*, a mind directed with intention and concentration, was the foundation of all prayer. The words were supposed to be drawn out and repeated slowly, with concentration and intention concerning both the meaning and the letters themselves. For the uneducated, the meaning alone was sufficient; simple sincerity was tolerated and appreciated. But the sage was to engage in mystical prayer at both levels – of external meaning and esoteric significance. Melodies were also attached to the prayers to enhance concentration. The hasidim put their shawls over their heads to avoid seeing others. To prevent laughter during prayers, they shut their eyes, ground their teeth, and pulled in their stomachs. They also avoided sitting next to non-hasidim so that their minds would not be distracted from God.

PROPHECY AND MAGIC

It was only a short leap from the practice of mystical prayer as described above, to the use of the words and letters of the prayers for magical purposes. As mentioned earlier, theurgy is often considered a polite word for magic. The works of Eleazar of Worms are filled with pages of magical formulae and permutations of the texts of the prayers and names of God, ostensibly for the purpose of maintaining the divine balance or augmenting the divine realm.* However, there is evidence that practitioners often used these texts for magical purposes and personal motive, justified as religious or spiritual in nature. There are numerous legends and accounts of hasidim who had prophetic revelations or gained psychic powers through these techniques, which they used for healing or to give guidance to devotees.

As in rabbinic times, in those days there was a pervasive fear of demons, spells, and curses. Also, the Crusades had added an element of uncertainty to Jewish life. The threatening atmosphere of the world around them made the Jews receptive to a belief in magical practices. On the advice of the hasidim, the

* Moshe Idel, in his book *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, suggests that augmentation theurgy was organic to Jewish thought and was brought into the practice of the Ashkenazic Hasidim from prior theurgic traditions of the rabbinic, and perhaps even the biblical eras. It is also found in the writings of the early kabbalists. To summarize the process: Through their good deeds and prayers, the practitioners tried to “draw down” the divine grace into the realm of the sefirot (the causal or archetypal realm of the creation) thereby expanding it. They would even pray that the sefirah of mercy be enhanced over the sefirah of judgment, thereby increasing the chance that the divine being would forgive the sins of the Jews. If they neglected their spiritual duties, it was believed that the divine would recede into the transcendent spiritual realm of the Godhead and its influence no longer be manifest in the creation. The concept of theurgy and augmentation demonstrated the belief that the influence of the divine in the creation depends on human participation. The divine depends on the human rather than the human depending on the divine will. See Appendix #3 for a more thorough discussion of theurgy and augmentation.

common people would wear amulets and charms with scrolls containing divine names and magical formulae that held the promise of effectively disempowering all such negative forces. These forms of magic continued to be practiced throughout the succeeding centuries right through to the hasidic movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the *ba'alei ha-shem* (masters of the name) traveled through Poland creating charms and using holy names to influence people's destiny.

The knowledge of magical names and techniques, which brought the gifts of prophecy and inner visions, testified to the reputation of the Ashkenazic Hasidim as mystics of intensity with divine powers. For although many were renowned as Talmud scholars and ethicists, they were also practicing mystics and magicians. Among them were the French ethicist, Isaac of Dampière, routinely referred to as a visionary, Elhanan ben Yakar of London and his disciple Ezra of Montcontour, called the *navi* (the prophet and miracle worker).^{*} According to popular legend, Ezra ascended to heaven in the merkavah and asked the last of the canonical prophets – Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi – when the messiah would come. His ascents to heaven were attested to by witnesses who watched him go into mystic trance. Other scholars, including Eleazar of Worms himself, “after days of fasting and prayer, were granted the revelation that all his words were truth and not deception. He also produced talmudic explanations the like of which had never been heard before, and he revealed the mysteries of the Torah and the prophets.”²³² His prediction that the messianic age would begin in 1226 and culminate in 1240 caused excitement throughout the Jewish community.

^{*} In the Middle Ages, the term “prophecy” was used for mystic activity in which information was received from within (from the heavens or from spirits) concerning forthcoming events and life on earth. It can be considered as an aspect, or result, of mystic ascent, in which some of the spiritual experience gained within is divulged to others, ostensibly to help them.

As in the earlier centuries, community members would routinely ask their rabbis questions concerning the application of religious law to affairs of daily life and the correct performance of rituals. The responses would normally be based on precedents found in the Talmud and other codes of religious law. Not so with Rabbi Jacob of Marvège – a hasid of the late twelfth–early thirteenth century; he would formulate a question before going to sleep at night and receive the response during his sleep in a dream, presumably from heaven – implying that it came either from a spirit or from God himself. He would also fast beforehand and use combinations of divine names in meditation to induce the heavenly response. His responses are included in a collection called *Responsa from Heaven*, which was brought to light as recently as 1957. Although this method of contact with the astral or psychic world was normally frowned upon as a misuse of spiritual energy, Rabbi Jacob was admired as a prophet for doing so. He was certainly not the only one to use such methods to respond to questions of daily life, and such collections of *responsa* demonstrate the ambivalent attitudes about the use of magic.

PENANCES

Hand in hand with the practice of mystical prayer and magic, the Hasidei Ashkenaz established a system of penances. Earlier in Jewish history, repentance was not of much concern to the mystics; now, as Scholem remarks, “it became the central fact of their existence. . . . In the place of the heavenly journey of the self-absorbed ecstatic, and parallel to the new emphasis laid on the now enormously important act of prayer, the technique of penitence was developed into a vast and elaborate system until it became one of the cornerstones of true *hasidut* [the hasidic way of life].”²³³

The hasidic perspective on the world was that it was an illusion, governed by the unrelenting laws of destiny. Human beings were considered above all sinners who need to make restitution

to God by their individual acts of repentance. This was probably the way the Ashkenazic Hasidim were able to cope with the terrible events being perpetrated by the Crusaders, when armies of Christian soldiers on their way to the Holy Land to fight the “infidels” would regularly victimize Jews and other nonbelievers unfortunate enough to be living along their route. The suffering the Jews experienced could be explained as the result of sin. One needed magical prayer and penances to counteract such sins.

So the hasidim created a system of penances as appropriate payment for specific sins. The concept was probably taken from the elaborate penances devised by the Church in that period and adapted to the Jewish milieu. Some of these were extreme and bizarre and led to fanatical acts of asceticism. For example, a story is told of a hasid who had mistakenly erased the “name of God” from a scroll of parchment containing prayers. Of course, given the importance of precision in the texts of the prayers, lest a negative power be unleashed, his concern was understandable. “He said to himself: ‘I have despised God’s honor, therefore I shall not think higher of my own. . . .’ So every day when the congregation entered and left the synagogue, he lay down on the doorstep, and old and young passed over him; and if one trod on him, whether deliberately or by accident, he rejoiced and thanked God. Thus he did for a whole year.”²³⁴

Another story is told of a man who was not guilty of any particular grievous sin, but decided that he would sleep on the floor in summer, among the fleas, and place his feet in a bucket with water in winter, until they froze into one lump with the ice. When he was asked why he did this, he said, “the messiah is suffering for our sins . . . and I don’t want anyone but myself to suffer for my sins.”²³⁵

Constant vigilance over one’s behavior was necessary because of the active nature of man’s evil inclination. In the *Sefer hasidim* Rabbi Judah wrote:

If you withstood a great test, do not be confident of yourself until the day of death, to say: "Since I did not sin in this great matter, I will no longer sin." Because the evil inclination today is not the same as yesterday, therefore perhaps in the very same matter tomorrow you will be unable to endure.²³⁶

Conclusion

The hasidim of medieval Germany became the proprietors of divine secrets concerning the creation and the nature of the Godhead, the secrets of divine names and mystical prayer. They had deep knowledge of ancient writings, including the merkavah and heikhalot literature as well as Bible and Talmud. The techniques they created and expanded upon, of focusing on the numbers of the words and letters of the prayers, later became associated with kabbalistic practices, especially the teachings of Abraham Abulafia, but they had originated with the Hasidei Ashkenaz, particularly with Eleazar of Worms.

The extraordinary history of the Hasidei Ashkenaz with their revolutionary forms of worship and repentance, and their concepts of the visible and invisible glory, prepared the way for a revolution in Jewish mysticism in southern Europe in the succeeding centuries.



CHAPTER 10

The Middle Ages: Early Kabbalah

The Bahir

IN RECENT YEARS, THE SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT called Kabbalah has spread globally and become popularized as a path to enlightenment. The term *Kabbalah* means “receiving,” implying a teaching that has been received or transmitted from generation to generation. It had its origins in twelfth-century Provence, in southern France, with the appearance of a short, anonymous work called the *Sefer ha-bahir* (Book of Brilliance). The *Bahir* gives a fascinating portrayal of the nature of God, the soul, and the creation through an opaque symbolism encapsulated in brief narratives and parables.

The *Bahir*'s authorship has mystified scholars for decades, and even today there are only theories about how it came to be written and by whom. Some consider it an oddly truncated or mutilated version of a much longer text, perhaps assembled in incorrect order. Today many scholars believe that it was written

in Provence in the late twelfth century by one or more mystics who were reshaping older materials in the light of their own spiritual experiences, using terminology and a conceptual framework drawn from the gnosticism of antiquity and Neoplatonist philosophy. Certain pieces are thought to have originated in Babylonia in the ninth and tenth centuries.

The orthodox scholar and kabbalist Aryeh Kaplan proposed a different origin. He takes the authorship of the book, or at least some of its layers, at face value, from within the circle of the legendary Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Kanah, a Talmud scholar who was a disciple of Rabbi Akiva in the second century. (His name means “son of the staff” – the staff being a common metaphor for the prophet or messianic leader in late prophetic writings.) In the *Greater Heikhalot* text of the merkavah period, one of Rabbi Nehuniah’s disciples describes how his master guided him through the higher realms, teaching him about the heavenly palaces and imparting the secret of the names of the angels guarding their gates. Kaplan writes:

A clear picture emerges of Rabbi Nehuniah as a master of the mystical arts and teacher of his entire generation. In one place, the *Heikhalot* describes how he taught the correct method for projecting oneself into the supernal universes. Sitting before him as disciples were the luminaries of his time: Rabbis Simon ben Gamaliel, Eliezer the Great, Akiva, Jonathan ben Uzziel, and many others. When there was a decree to kill the sages, it was Rabbi Nehuniah who ascended to heaven to ascertain the reason.²³⁷

Nehuniah’s name occurs only once in the *Bahir*, in the first passage, in a veiled message to maintain the secrecy of the teachings discussed in the book. Elsewhere in the text, a Rabbi Amorai is referred to. Historically, there was no Rabbi Amorai, but since

Amorai means “speakers,” Kaplan concludes that this was a pseudonym for Nehuniah. Other prominent sages mentioned in the text were Rabbi Rahumai and Rabbi Berakhia. Rahumai became the master of the circle after Nehuniah’s death, and Berakhia succeeded Rahumai. Nehuniah’s mystical school was active during the entire talmudic period, according to Kaplan.

It is significant to note that whoever the author was, he used the format of the master in discussion with his group of disciples as a vehicle to explain the transmission of his esoteric teachings. He does not just publish the principles he wants the book to convey, he puts them in the mouths of a group of mystics – great rabbis and mystics of previous eras – some real, some legendary, and some perhaps fictional. This was a common technique in the spiritual literature of antiquity, which probably originated as a way of avoiding too much scrutiny of teachings that could have been deemed heretical, and giving these texts the legitimacy of tradition. It was also a way of preserving the secrecy of teachings considered dangerous for the spiritually immature.

On looking at the *Bahir*, what stands out is the use of parables and allegories with a repeating cast of characters: the king, queen, princess, prince, palace, kingdom, and so forth. We also find in the *Bahir*, for the first time in Judaism, a division of the divinity into male and female polarities; thus the Shekhinah, synonymous with the glory as a projection of the divine power, is now clearly feminine. She is portrayed as a princess, the king’s “daughter from the side of the light.”

What is the meaning of “from its [the glory’s] place”?²³⁸
 Because no one knows its place. This is like a princess who came from afar, and nobody knew where she came from. When they saw that she was a fine lady, beautiful, and just in all that she did, they said: “She undoubtedly was taken from the side of the light, for her deeds give light to the

world.”²³⁹ Then they asked her: “Where are you from?” She answered: “From my place.” They said: “If so, the people of your place must be great! Blessed are you and blessed is your place!”²⁴⁰

An important but simple revelation in the *Bahir* is that while people say that they want to find God, they don't look for him where he resides, which is within themselves. This is stated cryptically:

People want to see the King, but they don't even know where to find his house. First they [must] ask, “Where is the King's house?” Only then can they ask, “Where is the King?”²⁴¹

Elsewhere in the *Bahir*, we learn that the heart has “thirty-two paths of wisdom” hidden within it.²⁴² In Jewish mysticism, the concept of the thirty-two paths is a symbolic representation of the stages of the spiritual journey to God-realization. The number 32 comes from the 10 numbers and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Wisdom, or *hokhmah*, is a reference to the divine word, the projection of God's will. Thus there are thirty-two paths of wisdom within oneself leading to the experience of God.

Other important symbols used in the *Bahir*, which could have a gnostic origin, are the life-giving tree and the *All* (Hebrew: *malei*, fullness). In fact, Dan comments that the *All* is a literal translation of the Greek *pleroma*, which contains everything and is the source of everything. It is from where everything emanates and is the highest spiritual realm. From it the souls descend to earth, and eventually they return there. From it, the divine powers or stages of His will are emanated in sequence. As the symbolism of the Kabbalah developed, the term *sefirot* was used

for these emanations.* In the *Bahir*, these powers are more frequently called God's *ma'amarot* (utterances) or *midot* (qualities).

I am the One who planted this tree in order that all the world should delight in it. And in it, I spread *All*. I called it *All* because all depend on it, all emanate from it, and all need it. To it they look, for it they wait, and from it, souls fly in joy. Alone was I when I made it. Let no angel rise above it and say, "I was before you." I was also alone when I spread out my earth, in which I planted and rooted this tree. I made them rejoice together, and I rejoiced in them.²⁴³

Said Rabbi Rehmei: From what you say, may one infer that what was needed for this world, the Holy One, praised be He, was created before the heavens? He said to him: Yes. To what may this be likened? To a king who wanted to plant a tree in his garden. He searched the entire garden to find a spring with flowing water to nourish it, but he could not find one. He then said: "I will dig for water, and bring forth a spring to nourish the tree." He dug and brought forth a spring flowing with living water, and then he planted the tree, which bore fruit. It was rooted successfully, because the roots were always watered from the spring.²⁴⁴

And what is this tree that you speak of? He said to him: It refers to the powers of the Blessed Holy One, in graded

* The term *sefirot* became the most important symbol of the Kabbalah. Here it is found for the first time with the sense of a sequence of graded emanations. The term was first used in the *Sefer yetsirah*, but only to mean fixed numerals, symbolizing powers that were static and did not interact with one another. In the *Bahir* they are arranged in sequence, one above the other. Later, the kabbalists developed the concept further and envisioned the *sefirot* interacting with one another, the divine power perpetually flowing between them.

order, one above the other; and they are like a tree. Just as a tree, when it is watered, bears fruit, so the Holy One, by means of water, increases the powers of the tree. And what is the water of the Blessed Holy One, praised be He? It is wisdom. And this also refers to the souls of the righteous. They fly from the spring to the great channel, and ascend and attach themselves to the tree.²⁴⁵

Another principle the *Bahir* introduces is reincarnation, which is more fully developed in later Kabbalah. Although the subject is only briefly discussed in earlier rabbinic texts, it is hinted at in the rabbinic mishnah *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) in almost the same language as the *Bahir*, which says:

Why is it that there is a righteous person who enjoys good, and there is a righteous person who suffers affliction? It is because in the latter case that righteous person was formerly wicked, and he is now suffering punishment... I do not refer to misdeeds in the course of the person's life. I refer to the fact that that person pre-existed prior to his present life... How long does this go on? He said to them: For a thousand generations.²⁴⁶

First kabbalists in Provence and Gerona

At the same time as the German Hasidim were sharing their esoteric teachings with followers living in northern Europe, there was a flourishing of mystical activity in the great talmudic academies of Provence. Narbonne, Posquieres, and Lunel are a few of the cities where Jews gathered to study Bible, Talmud, and other texts of antiquity, and pursue the mystic path. Scholars still do not know what triggered this intense mystical ferment among highly respected legal and biblical scholars like Rabbis Abraham ben David, Jacob of Lunel, Isaac the Blind, and Yehuda ben

Yakar, but they conjecture that there was a unique confluence of mystical, intellectual, and cultural influences that created the right soil for this extraordinary movement to grow in.

For one thing, the *heikhalot* texts, which recounted the inner mystic journeys of earlier generations of *merkavah* mystics, were available to these scholars thanks to the Hasidei Ashkenaz, who had also spread the symbolism of the hidden and visible glories (*kavod*) and special cherub, as well as their intensive practices of mystical prayer and theurgy. Secondly, the appearance of the *Bahir* in Provence injected the revolutionary concept of a dynamic and continuous emanation of the creative power from the concealed Godhead into the material creation, symbolized as the *sefirot*. And in the *Bahir*, the conception of God changed from a strictly patriarchal power to incorporate both feminine and masculine qualities. These elements underlie the kabbalistic theosophy as it developed from that time onward.

Until recently, most scholars, including Scholem and Dan, believed that the appearance of the Kabbalah in the twelfth century “might best be regarded as an eruption of gnostic attitudes in the heart of rabbinic Judaism of southern Europe. But where did these gnostic symbols come from? How did they suddenly appear in the late twelfth century after languishing for more than a millennium in the labyrinths of obscure and largely ignored *heikhalot* and *merkavah* texts?”²⁴⁷ Contemporary scholars of Jewish spiritual history, however, recognize that those elements of “gnosticism” are not alien to Judaism, erupting from nowhere. They are aspects of a mythic nonlinear side of Jewish life that had persisted from the time of antiquity, perhaps even earlier, side by side with the rabbinic and rationalistic, despite attempts at suppression from rabbinic authorities.

The question still remains, however, why the Kabbalah appeared when it did, why this mythic side of Judaism burst into the light just at that time. It would seem that there must have

been an outside influence to trigger a sea change in Jewish spiritual orientation that would allow for the balancing of the intellectual and rabbinic with the mystical. Several important scholars have conjectured that the close proximity of the Cathars to the early centers of Kabbalah in Provence could have served as the catalyst. The Cathars, a sect whose origins are often linked with the gnostic Manicheans of Iran and the Bogomils of Bulgaria, were quite influential at that time, despite attempts at suppression by the Catholic Church. Gershom Scholem remarks that the Cathars' lifestyle of renunciation and scrupulous honesty, their condemnation of the corrupt clergy, and their mystical view of God and the creation could have created a mood and atmosphere that would have resonated with Jewish mystical leanings and validated many of the elements in the ancient esoteric documents. And although no direct influences in terms of precise terminology or doctrine have been found, some scholars presume there was some sort of mutual reinforcement and appreciation.²⁴⁸

Scholem writes about the possible cross-influences of the Cathars and other Christian mystics with the early kabbalists:

The revival of mythical elements in the faith of the Cathars has been noted by many scholars. In this regard, one can perhaps speak of a common mood. In the early phases of the Kabbalah, one also sees a religious movement that transcends the boundaries separating Judaism from Christianity and breathes new life into such elements. This tendency gained strength in certain circles of Provençal and, later, Spanish kabbalists, up until the Zohar. There is no uniform and simple answer to the question of the origin of these elements. . . . On the other hand, we must take into consideration the possibility of one-way [Cathar-Jewish] influence, or a reciprocal influence of Cathar and Jewish ascetics upon one another.²⁴⁹

How did the mystics live? Renunciates and ascetics

The early kabbalists brought a particular intensity to their transmission of the mystic practice and self-consciously referred to their teachings as *Kabbalah*. They were known among themselves as *mekubalim* (literally, “those who had received the teachings,” i.e., initiates), and seemed united by a common sense of dedication to the mystic path, to the secrets they shared.

What type of lives did these mystics live? The mystics of Provence were scholars of the Torah and Talmud; many lived as renunciates, called *perushim* (sing. *parush*, literally meaning separated, dedicated), a name given in the Mishnah to scholars who devoted themselves exclusively to study of Torah. They were also called *nezirim* (sing. *nazir*, meaning nazirite, ascetic), the biblical term for those dedicated to the Temple or to God.* They seemed to have constituted a subgroup devoted to the religious and mystical life. In fact, a law was passed in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century empowering communities to “appoint scholars whose vocation it is to occupy themselves incessantly with the Torah, so that the community might fulfill the duty of the study of the Torah, and in order that the reign of heaven sustain no loss, ... and this detachment [from worldly affairs] leads to purity.”²⁵⁰

Naturally, the study of Torah for these mystics meant more than scriptural reading and repetition; they ascribed symbolic, mystical equivalences to the narratives and personalities of the Bible, and invested its *mitsvot* (commandments) with mystical importance. They also practiced the inner contemplation of

* In the early rabbinic period, the *perushim* were one of the reformist subgroups within Judaism, known as the Pharisees. In the Bible, *nezirim* were those who renounced physical indulgences in order to dedicate themselves to the Temple or to God. The prophets Samuel and Samson are described as nazarites. It has also been suggested that John the Baptist was a nazirite and that even Jesus may have been a nazirite and not from a place called Nazareth. By the medieval period the terms seem to have been applied more generally.

God's mystery by meditating on various qualities of God and his holy names. These *perushim* lived a pure lifestyle, with some, at least, refraining from eating meat and drinking alcohol. Scholem writes about the ambience that nurtured the phenomenon of *perushim*, and draws parallels with Christian monasticism, the Cathars (who also did not eat meat), and Ashkenazic Hasidism:

The origin of the *perushim* is, rather, connected with the religious enthusiasm that gripped France in the twelfth century, finding expression in the Jewish milieu as well as in the surrounding Christian world, including the reform movements and their religious heresies. Naturally, the very choice of words already reflects the spirit of asceticism that characterized the period. These *perushim* took upon themselves the "yoke of the Torah" and completely detached their thoughts from the affairs of this world. They did not engage in commerce and sought to attain purity. The similarities between this phenomenon and Christian monasticism on the one hand and the condition of the *perfecti* or *bonshommes* among the Cathars on the other, are especially striking. . . . What is important for us is the existence of a stratum within society that by its very definition and vocation had the leisure for a contemplative life. It goes without saying that such a stratum could give rise to men with mystical tendencies.²⁵¹

Jacob the Nazarite of Lunel was only the first to be mentioned in the earliest kabbalistic sources as a representative of a mystical tradition or lineage. In 1165, Rabbi Asher ben Meshulam ha-Parush was described by the renowned traveler Benjamin of Tudela as someone "who has withdrawn from the affairs of the world and who devotes day and night to study, practices asceticism, and does not eat meat."²⁵²

Isaac the Blind, known as *Sagi Nahor* (literally meaning “rich in light”), was the chief disciple of his father, Rabbi Abraham ben David, a leading scholar and mystic in Posquieres who was known by the acronym of his name, as the Rabad. Isaac had the reputation of being spiritually attuned, able to see the condition of a person’s soul and read his thoughts. According to tradition, Isaac was blind from birth. However, some modern scholars believe he could not have been born blind because his writings employ an evocative visual and color imagery. It is possible that his descriptions point to vivid inner spiritual experiences. It is also possible that his blindness may have been a reference to his being blind to the distractions of life, to the material world, and that he had a clear vision of the spiritual realms.

Isaac was the first “full-time” kabbalist that we know of, and was considered the seminal mystic of his period. He undoubtedly belonged to the group of *perushim*, as he and his disciples advocated the life of the renunciate for anyone seeking to strengthen his spiritual commitment. In his commentary to the *Sefer yetsirah*, he praised the disciple “who renounces his [other] qualities and devotes himself exclusively to thought, combining everything in thought, elevating thought and lowering the body, in order thereby to give predominance to his soul.”²⁵³

Of course, a pure, disciplined, and devoted life was important for mystics throughout Jewish history – from the merkavah period, to the Hasidei Ashkenaz, and continuing through the development of Kabbalah as a mystical path – even if the particular forms or requirements varied somewhat in different periods. A common term for the group of disciples with their master was the *havura* or *hevra*, and members were called the companions, the *haverim*. They were supposed to treat each other with love, as members of a family, and had a duty to help one another in all aspects of life. Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century especially emphasized the importance of loving relations among his disciples.

For kabbalists of all periods, the prerequisites for the spiritual life include a high level of moral integrity, compassion for others, truthfulness, humility, and control over anger, greed, pride, lust, and gluttony. An Italian kabbalist of the seventeenth century wrote: “And purity of heart is important to the Blessed One more than any wisdom and science that are not pursued for their own sake, heaven forbid. But one should remove pride and arrogance and the evil way (cf. Proverbs 8:13) from his heart, and should minister to the masters and consult with those who know it [the Kabbalah].”²⁵⁴ A kabbalist also needed to adhere faithfully to the *halakhah*, the religious law, ensuring that he did not engage in heresy or deviate from tradition despite his immersion in mystical practice. He had to be of a high intellectual level and be capable of engaging in legal discussions. The general guideline was that the practitioner should be at least forty years of age and married, but this was not agreed upon by all – there were disciples aged twenty or even less. Isaac Luria himself was a master of Kabbalah and yet he died at age thirty-eight, so he must have been initiated into the practice at a much younger age.

Kabbalists were to cultivate solitude and silence, equanimity of mind, periodic fasting, purification of the body through cleanliness, and be willing to make great efforts in their meditation practices. Jewish mystics of all periods had a practice of “night vigils.” They would get up at midnight, meditate, and study. In their meditation, they probably used the posture described in the story of Elijah meditating as he hid on Mount Carmel, and in descriptions of merkavah mystics sitting with their head between their knees.

Selections from an anonymous account that dates from the sixteenth century give us a detailed picture of the lifestyle of the kabbalists as well as their meditation practices. At the end it also reveals that the true “depth of the matter” cannot be written; it must be imparted orally, from one person directly to another.

In clarifying the ways of solitude and *devekut* [devotion, adhering to God] and the appropriate preparation required of the recluse, suffice it [to state] that he should reach the essence of devotional intention and actually attach his soul to the Intellect, so that the holy spirit rests upon him. Know that the proper preparations required of the recluse in order for him to find precious things by divesting his intellect of corporeality are diverse and numerous. First of all, as far as the body is concerned, he ought to diminish his corporeal desires. Eating must be restricted to food of little quantity and high quality, including small intakes of cooked portions and wine. . . . What is proposed here is that even if he possesses great wealth, he should enjoy it only for the purpose of maintaining the soul in his body. And he should aggravate his beastly powers, depriving them of what they desire, for by enfeebling them the soul is strengthened and the intellect is set free from the imprisonment of the instinctual powers and cleaves to its Maker. . . .

In this way he will reach the level of equanimity . . . [which] brings him to the solitude of the soul, and solitude leads to the Holy spirit, which in turn leads to prophecy, which is the highest rung. Thus, one of the principles that the recluse needs to follow is that first he must attain the level of equanimity, namely not to be impressed by anything. On the contrary, he must experience spiritual joy and be content with his lot and consider himself the sole ruler of this base world, having no one, near or far, to either care for him or pay him homage or do him any good. For all the world's prosperity and abundance is in his hands. So that there is nothing that he needs. . . .

And after having made all these preparations, then, while you prepare yourself to talk with your Maker, make sure you empty your thoughts of all the vanities of the

world, wrap yourself in your prayer shawl and place the phylacteries [*tefillin*, prayer containers] on your arm and around your head so as to be awestruck and fearful of the Shekhinah, which keeps you company at that time. Then sit down and take ink and pen and paper and start combining letters quickly and zestfully . . . in order to separate the soul and purify it of all material forms and things that preceded it and to divest yourself of them so as to focus your heart and thought and intellect and soul on the mental image. . . .

And in this state he [the mystic] should prepare his true thought to imagine in his heart and intellect that he is sitting above in heaven before God, amidst the splendor and glory of His divine presence and that the Holy One, blessed be He, is sitting on His throne like an exalted king and the hosts of heaven are all standing before Him in awe and fear and trembling and he too is amongst them. . . . And precisely in this state, he will firmly close his eyes and in fear and trembling will shake his entire body and will take deep breaths as far as possible for him, until all the parts of his body, the external and the internal ones alike, will weaken. Then he will ascend, attaching and cleaving his soul and thought from one rung to another in those spiritual matters as far as it is possible for him to bring it up, . . . to the hidden supernal world of emanation, so that he will be almost like a virtual intellect without any sensation of the material things, for he has emerged from the human realm . . . and entered the divine realm.

It is then that his soul expands and is refined by cleaving to the root of the Source from which it was hewn. . . . But know that permission is not given to every man – though it is worthwhile to draw everyone nearer to the holy labor of uttering the holy name – unless he is well accustomed and experienced in this practice, . . . and know that the matter

of *devekut*, which is mentioned in this chapter, is a wonderful thing, serving as a ladder to the rung of prophecy. When the pious and the pure man attaches his soul to the supernal world and meditates and brings up his soul and intellect, divesting his thought of material things, . . . then, know that every thing and every matter upon which he concentrates his mind and soul at that moment immediately comes true as he willed, for better or worse. . . . And comprehend this matter because it requires subtle consideration. For it is impossible to write about it in a precise manner that conveys the depth of the matter – this must be imparted orally.²⁵⁵

Kabbalists of the sixteenth century in Safed, Palestine, engaged in many penances, rigorous self-mortification, and other austerities. Influenced by the Hasidei Ashkenaz, as well as Muslim Sufis living in close proximity, they engaged in intensive fasting, weeping, wearing sackcloth and ashes, self-flagellation, and so forth. As individuals, they were attempting to atone for the sinful behavior they had engaged in prior to beginning their life of discipleship, but as members of the Jewish community, they were asking forgiveness for the communal sins they felt had precipitated Jewish suffering during the Spanish Inquisition. This aspect of life in Safed will be discussed further in the section on the Safed mystics and Isaac Luria.

How the teachings were revealed and passed down

REVELATION: FROM ABOVE TO BELOW

Abraham ben Isaac of Narbonne, president of the rabbinic court and an eminent talmudist, was the first link in the chain of Provençal kabbalists. Abraham ben Isaac attributed his higher understanding to a revelation from the prophet Elijah, which was channeled to him through his master of Talmud, the greatly

revered scholar, Yehuda ben Barzillai of Barcelona. Yehuda possessed an extensive collection of esoteric manuscripts, which he incorporated into a commentary on the *Sefer yetsirah*; it is thought that he secretly practiced the mystic path, guided by revelations from Elijah, and that he passed the esoteric teachings to his pupil, Abraham ben Isaac.

At the same time that Abraham ben Isaac was president of the Narbonne court, his son-in-law, Rabbi Abraham ben David (the Rabad) was active as a scholar and mystic in Posquieres, a nearby city. Abraham ben David and his close colleague Rabbi Jacob of Lunel also attributed their mystic understanding to *giluy Eliyahu* – the revelation of Elijah – an indication that they had discovered inner sources of knowledge and mystic wisdom.

Among the secret teachings attributed to Abraham ben Isaac and the Rabad were techniques of mystical prayer, in which names of God and secret combinations of letters and words were used. These methods were revealed in inner communion with the spirit of Elijah, with reference to the practices of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, particularly Eleazar of Worms and his direct disciples, who had also experienced *giluy Eliyahu*.

In fact, *giluy Eliyahu* was not an isolated phenomenon. Most of the Hasidei Ashkenaz and kabbalists, as well as many earlier mystics, attributed their illumination to Elijah. Scholem remarks that “it is by no means the mystics alone who encounter him; he may just as well reveal himself to the simple Jew in distress as to one perfect in saintliness and learning. As the zealot of God in the Bible, he was the guarantor of tradition.”²⁵⁶

Elijah was the biblical prophet whose ascent to heaven in a chariot of fire, while still alive, was witnessed by his disciple Elisha. Elijah was transformed in the Jewish mystical tradition into an almost mythic figure who brings inner knowledge and illumination.²⁵⁷ Thus an illumination that came about through a revelation by Elijah gave the stamp of traditional authority to

teachings that may have been entirely new, without precedent in the accepted texts. It made even the most radical teaching stand clear of the slightest accusation of foreign influence or heresy.

Other mystics of the period, like Jacob of Marvège (often associated with the Ashkenazic Hasidim), also attributed their inner visions and prophetic experiences to the appearance of the holy spirit (*ruah ha-kodesh*) of the prophet Elijah. This is not to imply that these mystics simply used the notion of *giluy Eliyahu* to guarantee that their teachings would be accepted. On the contrary, it is well attested that these kabbalists and hasidim did have true mystic illumination that inspired them to innovate techniques of mystical prayer and thus gain a deeper understanding of the celestial mysteries. Joseph Dan remarks, “It is clear that Rabad was a leader of a group of esotericists, and that he was not the first to lead such a group in Provençe. The kabbalists describe a chain of tradition in the rabbinic academies of Provençe, expressed sometimes as a series of revelations from the prophet Elijah, of which Rabad and his son are later links.”²⁵⁸

For he [Elijah] revealed himself to Rabbi David, head of the rabbinical court and taught him the mysteries of the Kabbalah. He transmitted it, for his part, to his son, the Rabad [Rabbi Abraham ben David], and he [Elijah] also revealed himself to him, and he transmitted it to his son, Isaac the Blind, blind from birth, and to him, too, he revealed himself. The latter, in turn, transmitted these teachings to two disciples of his, Rabbi Ezra, author of a commentary to the Song of Songs, and Rabbi Azriel, after which it was transmitted to the Ramban [Nahmanides of Gerona].²⁵⁹

Rabad attributed all his wisdom – both his understanding of Talmud and mystical knowledge – to the prophet Elijah’s

revelation. He wrote: “The holy spirit has already appeared in our school,” and “it was revealed to me from the mysteries of God, which he [Elijah] communicates to those who fear Him.”²⁶⁰ Among the talmudists, these were accepted talmudic expressions for direct inspiration from the divine. Rabad also wrote that “whatever there is here of the good and the true comes from the mystery.”²⁶¹

Some of the mystics would cryptically refer to the source of their inner illumination as a revelation from the “celestial academy,” a metaphorical term for their concept of heaven, where the rabbis assemble to discuss the Bible and Talmud as they do on earth. A few, like Abraham Abulafia, the important Castilian kabbalist of the late thirteenth century, mention a sudden flash of spiritual illumination. Others, like Joseph Karo of Safed in the sixteenth century, mention a *maggid* (a heavenly messenger, an angel) who uses the mystic as a channel to communicate with men. There was an ambivalent attitude about accepting this type of revelation, however.

While it was acknowledged that the kabbalists received spiritual illumination from the heavenly realms, there was also an emphasis on personal communication from living masters to their disciples of the secrets of meditation and the divine realms. Nahmanides, the leading Talmud scholar of Gerona, is quoted as having said:

These things and the like of them cannot be grasped by one’s own knowledge, but through the Kabbalah [received tradition] . . . and this is the chain of tradition that stretches back, receiver by receiver, up to Moses [who has received it] from the mouth of the Almighty.²⁶²

The transmission through such a chain of tradition, from master to disciple, was to be trusted much more than other

subjective methods of transmission. The contemporary Israeli scholar Moshe Hallamish, in his book *An Introduction to the Kabbalah*, quotes Shem Tov ibn Gaon, a Spanish kabbalist of the fourteenth century who settled in Safed:

And the sage cannot know them through his own wisdom, and he who understands cannot understand them with his understanding, and he who inquires cannot do so by his inquiry, except for the *mekubal*, the receiver, as he received them by an oral tradition that goes back to the chain of the greatest of all generations, who, in turn, received from their masters and their ancestors up to Moses.²⁶³

Despite the emphasis on received tradition, whether from heaven above, from Elijah, or from master to disciple, the kabbalists also emphasized that they had an obligation to elaborate on the teachings, to innovate, and apply their intellect creatively to the symbolism. It was seen as a way of keeping the teachings alive and imbued with the fervor of the participants. They said they were simply uncovering hidden truths that were already embedded in the Torah or Kabbalah. Hallamish quotes Rabbi Jacob ben Sheshet, who was a member of the Gerona circle:

Know that the pronouncements of our rabbis, may their memories be blessed, are words of the living God and one should never contradict them. But it is also the religious duty to each wise man to *make innovations* in the Torah according to his own ability.²⁶⁴

TRANSMISSION: FROM SECRECY TO OPENNESS

Most of the early kabbalists were religious scholars and teachers by profession; the Torah and Talmud remained the primary focus of their teaching. Therefore, it is not surprising that the first

generation of kabbalists in Provence did not write about their esoteric teachings directly; and they held this legacy too lofty, intimate, and important to squander with an unknown public. It had to be imparted from master to disciple. There are, however, a few hints of their mystical activities and teachings buried within the context of their *halakhic* (religious-legal) writings, commentaries on scripture, and correspondence. Abraham ben Isaac, for example, wrote legal texts with obscure mystical references that are quite opaque, revealing less than they conceal.

Shem Tov ibn Gaon, a century later, saw Abraham's notes (which have since been lost), and wrote that the "president of the rabbinic court committed to writing only key words, *rashei perakim*. . . . They make known a series of excellent words, in order to stimulate every kabbalist so that his attention will be aroused in every passage in the Bible or in the Talmud where he finds such a word."²⁶⁵ In other words, for those familiar with the teaching, the key words would trigger an understanding of the esoteric meaning of many biblical or talmudic passages.

Abraham's grandson, Isaac the Blind, the most important kabbalist of his age, wrote that his ancestors were well versed in the esoteric knowledge, which they guarded with great secrecy. Scholem quotes a letter by Isaac, declaring that "no word on this subject ever escaped their lips and that they conducted themselves with them [those not initiated into the secret doctrine] as with men who were not versed in the [mystical] science, and I saw [this conduct] of theirs, and I learned a lesson from it."²⁶⁶

Jacob of Lunel's esoteric teachings were disguised in ambiguous terminology, in which his discussion of the meaning of a prayer, for example, could be understood at two levels, the deeper level understood by the initiates and a more superficial meaning accessible to outsiders. Because the mystical references are so cryptic, Scholem writes, "only the traditions preserved among the

earliest Spanish kabbalists can reveal to us the esoteric, truly kabbalistic statements made by the ... Provençal teachers.”²⁶⁷

Isaac the Blind published treatises devoted to explanations of his esoteric knowledge, and in that respect he was more explicit than his spiritual ancestors. However, he maintained the code of secrecy by writing in a very obscure manner, and he did not disseminate his teachings publicly, beyond his circle of disciples. In fact, he became very disturbed when Ezra and Azriel, his disciples from Gerona in northern Spain, returned home from Provence and began publicizing secrets that Isaac believed were meant only for initiates into the mystic path. According to Isaac, the esoteric tradition should and could only be passed in person from master to disciple.

We are fortunate to have authentic letters written by Rabbis Azriel and Ezra about their intentions to publicize the teachings, transforming the Kabbalah into a more widely accessible reservoir of esoteric knowledge. Ezra had predicted that the “end” or messianic time of redemption would come in the year 1240, and all Jewry had to be ready for it. The secrets of Kabbalah would help prepare the community for this apocalyptic time. In the year 1230, Azriel sent a mystical treatise to the community of Burgos in northern Spain. He wrote: “Kabbalah should be made available to those outside our circle. I myself have corresponded with the kabbalists of Burgos. In addition, I have written a small work which clearly explains the principles of Kabbalah to the wider public.”²⁶⁸

Isaac wrote a strong letter to Nahmanides,* complaining about the problematic behavior of Ezra and Azriel.

I saw wise men, men of understanding and piety engaging in long discourse, who have written great and terrible

* Nahmanides was the leader of the Jewish community in Gerona, and unlike Ezra and Azriel, he was a kabbalist who masked his esoteric teachings in exoteric documents.

things in their books and epistles. And once something is written it cannot be concealed any more, for often it will get lost or the author will die and the letters will pass into the hands of scoffers and idiots, and the name of God is profaned. . . . I have heard from the lands surrounding you, and from the people of Burgos, that they speak publicly in the marketplaces and in the streets in a confused and hasty manner, and from their words it is clear that their hearts have been turned from the All Highest.²⁶⁹

So why did the Gerona kabbalists decide to make this secret teaching available to the public? Harvey Hames of Ben Gurion University in Israel, in his penetrating study “Exotericism and Esotericism in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah,” offers an interesting perspective. He proposes that the externalization of Kabbalah served a particular purpose for the kabbalists, who saw themselves as reformers of Jewish life and guardians of a bond between God and Israel. They felt a dual mission in life, and believed it was time to move from the private to the public sphere, because conditions demanded it. It was time for the esoteric mystical teachings to be translated into a foundation and guidance for everyday life. However, Hames emphasizes that although they revealed their esoteric theosophy – the symbolism of the Ayn-Sof and sefirot, the inner workings of the Godhead and the creation – they never revealed their esoteric techniques of meditation through which they had the mystical experience on which their writings were based. Those secrets had to be obtained from a living teacher simply because it was not possible to transmit them otherwise. They had to be passed from master to disciple individually or in small groups. He says:

However, the importance of the [published] texts is also in what they do not reveal: the esoteric techniques and

path to mystical experience which could only be attained if one was a disciple of a recognized teacher. Thus the texts perform two main functions: on the one hand, to inform and enrich the Jewish way of life; and on the other, to emphasize the barrier between the general audience and the initiate.²⁷⁰

Hames goes on to demonstrate that Nahmanides believed there were certain kabbalistic teachings that could be used for the benefit of the entire community, and other practices that were suited only for initiates, who would have the level of understanding to appreciate them. Nahmanides intended to keep certain teachings for his intimate disciples, and he succeeded. Little about his techniques or his inner experiences is known today. His successors went even further and published commentaries that were intentionally misleading or revealed only some of his secrets in veiled language.

The issue of whether the secrets could be revealed in writing continued to be discussed among the later kabbalists. In the sixteenth century Rabbi Moses Cordovero summarized the need for secrecy:

No one who studies the books of the wisdom of the Kabbalah should think that it is possible for a kabbalist sage to write down in a book whatever is known to him, for an inevitable reduction occurs on the way from thought to speech and from speech to writing. Therefore, no one who possesses any knowledge of the Kabbalah should imagine that he [has] delved down into the depth of three books of this wisdom" (*Shiur Komah*, par. 11)... It is improper to reveal it even orally [lit., from mouth to mouth]. If he merits it, he will explore the divine secret by himself. And whoever is privileged to do so should not verbalize it.²⁷¹

Cordovero wrote several important books systematically discussing the kabbalistic symbolism. So when he says that the divine secret cannot be expressed in writing or speech, he must be referring to knowledge even more esoteric, which cannot be apprehended through the intellect – perhaps the method through which one can have an *experience* of the divine secret – true spiritual knowledge.

In a later chapter we will explore the writings of Isaac Luria, Cordovero's contemporary, who said he couldn't express to another person what was overflowing from within him, much less impart his teachings in a book. To Luria, the master-disciple relationship was key to spiritual growth, and even that had its limitations.

Symbolism of the early Kabbalah

The kabbalists wanted to explain how the transcendent Lord could manifest himself in the creation; how the abstract formless One could reach down and become involved in the lives of men and respond to their prayers. They were faced with the intellectual challenge that if God were infinite and limitless, self-contained, then it was inconceivable that he would have any connection with humanity. The creation could not have come from him as there would have been nothing outside of him. Something could not have come from nothing.

There had been attempts to explain this earlier in Jewish mystical history: Saadia Gaon had proposed that the glory of God, the *logos*, was a kind of ethereal intermediary, a "finer air," which carried the divine spirit into the creation. Similarly, the Hasidei Ashkenaz taught that the glory was an extension of God into the creation; they envisioned an inner and an outer glory. Solomon ibn Gebirol in the eleventh century wrote about the creation taking place through a series of emanations from the primal divine Light, though he didn't use the term *sefirot* for these emanations.

Many Jewish philosophers and mystics of the period had read the writings of Muslim Neoplatonists who discussed the emanation of the many from the One and the return to the One.

The hallmark of the early kabbalists was that they developed a new, unique, all-encompassing symbolism based on the *continuous* dynamic emanation of the *sefirot*. Despite the fact that the term *sefirot* had occurred in the *Sefer yetsirah* in the first century, in that work it designated ciphers or numbers, symbolizing powers that were static. In the *Bahir*, the powers became dynamic, always flowing outward and downward from the Godhead and returning to the Godhead, moving in a natural pattern from one to the next; they were conceived as influencing one another, and affecting the balance between them and the Godhead from which they had emanated.

In many early texts the *sefirot* were referred to as the *midot*, divine qualities or attributes through which God brought about the creation: wisdom, understanding, reason, strength, rebuke, might, righteousness, judgment, lovingkindness and compassion. These qualities were understood as God's instruments or utterances. These were the same ten utterances (Hebrew: *ma'amarot*, Greek: *logoi*) that the Bible refers to when it says that God "spoke" and the universe came into being. In Genesis, God speaks ten times as he creates the various aspects and levels of the creation, starting with "And God said, Let there be light." According to a mystical rabbinic interpretation of Genesis, this signifies that He brought about the creation through ten utterances or sounds.

The kabbalists gradually adopted the term *sefirot* for these utterances and conceived of them as a series of graded emanations through which the divine creative power flowed into the creation in an orderly way. They believed the primal divine will, energy, or light, in its purity and unity, needed to be "stepped down" and channeled in order for the process of creation to

take place. Thus the sefirot were also envisioned as gradations of spiritual light as well as sounds or utterances.

Isaac the Blind took these dynamic symbols as introduced in the *Bahir* and crystallized them into a system to explain the process of creation, upon which one could direct one's attention during contemplation and prayer. Isaac gave the sefirot names and explained their relationship to each other, although his writings are not always very clear. He conceived of the concealed Godhead as existing beyond the level of emanation of the sefirot, even beyond the primal will or "thought" to create. He called it the Ayn-Sof, the Limitless, the Infinite. There was a certain amount of confusion in his writings about the precise relationship between the Ayn-Sof and the sefirot, and some of his disciples differed from him. Each generation of kabbalists thereafter continued to embellish and refine the system of the Ayn-Sof and sefirot to correspond more precisely with their own vision and experience of the divine realms.

The names Isaac gave to the sefirot are: *keter* (crown), *hokhmah* (wisdom), *binah* (understanding), *hesed* or *gedulah* (love, mercy/greatness), *din* or *gevurah* (judgment/might), *tiferet* (beauty), *netsah* (endurance), *hod* (splendor), *yesod* (foundation), and *malkut* (kingship). The sefirot are generally arranged in a pattern that shows how the creative power flows from one to the next. A diagram is included as Appendix #2.

Isaac wrote commentaries on the *Sefer yetsirah* and the first chapter of the book of Genesis, explaining his theories. He taught that the creation of the physical world as described in the Bible must have taken place at a later stage in the process. The first stage happened on a spiritual level, within the eternal and concealed Godhead, beyond time, as the first will or thought to create. From that divine will were emanated, still on a spiritual level, the ten sefirot or *ma'amarot* from whose activity, ultimately, the physical world was created.

Scholem explains Isaac's teachings: The Ayn-Sof and the first sefirah of *keter* (crown) were beyond the utterance, above the expression of the divine will. *Hokhmah* (wisdom), as the second sefirah, "is in any case the 'beginning of being' as it is also the 'beginning of the *dibur* [utterance]'. From *hokhmah*, the rest of the sefirot proceed in a clear chain of emanations"²⁷² leading to all existence below. Isaac taught that "all things are linked to one another and intertwined like a chain: 'one from another, the inward from the still more inward.'²⁷³

In the Bible, there is a passage saying that there is a stream that goes forth from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10). This was understood by Isaac and his disciples as a symbol of the emanation of the sefirot; when the river leaves the garden and flows into the creation at the level of *malkut* (the lowest sefirah), the sefirot become separated from their source, as they flow into the "world of separation," the realm of duality. The idea of the never-ending flow through the chain of the sefirot presumes one underlying divine principle, which unites everything in itself. Isaac says: "He is united in everything and everything is united in Him." This preserves the idea of there being one God, who is immanent. According to Isaac, through *hitbonenut* (contemplation) one can find the divine throughout the world of separation, and ascend in the chain from the material to the spiritual, to the formless and the inward, ultimately to the state of the divine thought or will (*hokhmah*, *mahshavah*), and the infinite cause.²⁷⁴

One of Isaac's disciples wrote symbolically about the emanation of the second sefirah of *hokhmah*, which is where the divine will manifests, followed by the emanation of the lower sefirot, resulting eventually in the physical creation. He says that all existed in a potential state in *hokhmah*. When the divine essence of *hokhmah* poured into the third sefirah of *binah* (understanding), the material creation came into existence.

Before God created His world He was alone with His name, and His name is equivalent to His wisdom. And in His wisdom all things were mixed together and all the essences were hidden, for He had not yet brought them forth from potentiality to reality, like a tree in whose potency the fruit is already present, but which it has not yet brought forth. When he contemplated the wisdom, he transformed that which was in the root into mountains, and he cleft rivers (Job 28:9–10), that is: He drew forth all the essences that were hidden in the wisdom and brought them to light by means of His *binah*.²⁷⁵

The symbolism of the sefirot was extended by later kabbalists to the patriarchs and prophets of the Torah, and the narratives of the Torah were viewed as a metaphor for the process of emanation. The parts of the human body were also viewed as corresponding to the sefirot, and thus every action done by an individual on the material plane was understood as having a connection to the activity of the sefirot in the divine realms, a related concept introduced by Isaac the Blind.

According to Isaac, the divine realms are a series of inner worlds in which the activity of the sefirot takes place. Each such world is a projection from the one above. The highest of these worlds is called *atsilut* (emanation), the spiritual realm in which the potential for the primal emanation of divine qualities exists but does not actually express itself. Below *atsilut* is *briah* (creation), the causal (archetypal) realm where the divine will becomes active in creating the prototypes of the creation below. This is followed by *yetsirah* (formation) – the astral level. The lowest world is the physical realm of *assiyah* (actualization, making).

Isaac also taught that there were several levels to the human soul, which has a divine nature. He divided the soul into the

level of *nefesh* (the passions or sense perception) which was the lowest, and the progressively more spiritual levels of *ruah* (spirit, breath) and *neshamah* (soul). Isaac taught that the emanation of the sefirot takes place at the level of *neshamah*, the highest or most inward level, but he doesn't explain his teaching clearly. These divisions would be echoed in the works of later kabbalists who added two more levels.

Kavanah and devekut

The subject of contemplative prayer, or, as it became known, mystical prayer, was a preoccupation of the kabbalists from the very beginning, as it had been for the Hasidei Ashkenaz. *Kavanah* was the means developed by the kabbalists to bridge the chasm between external repetitive prayer and the yearning for a more immediate personal communion with the divine. The term was used in the context of the theurgical prayers of the Hasidei Ashkenaz who insisted upon precise recitation of outward prayers and recitation of numerical and alphabetical formulae in order to affect the divine realms, and in the prayers of early Provençal kabbalists like Jacob of Lunel and Isaac the Blind, who attempted to inwardly direct their prayers towards particular sefirot.

Kavanah means the focused or concentrated mind in prayer or meditation and is an aspect of the process of *devekut*, a "pious, inward communion ... with the divine," as Scholem explains:

The kavanah of meditation is the tension with which the consciousness (of a person performing a prayer or another ritual act) is directed to the world or object before him. Nothing is pronounced but the words of the statutory prayers, as they had been fixed of old, but the mystical meditation mentally accompanies the current of words and links them to the inner intention of the person who is

praying. . . . Among the kabbalists of Provence these initial stages led to a comprehensive discipline of contemplation concerned with man's communication with God.²⁷⁶

The Rabad, Isaac's father, distinguished between the Creator God (*yotser bereshit*), who is "the Cause of Causes," and the concealed transcendent Godhead. As in the *Bahir*, the Creator was understood as the source or womb (*pleroma*) of all the divine qualities or powers, the *sefirot*. Rabad taught that one could not direct one's prayers to the hidden Godhead, as it is hidden and transcendent. The devotee has to direct his prayer to the Creator, from whom the *midot* (qualities) emanate. Not all the kabbalists of this period agreed with him, and the doctrine was kept secret because it aroused such hostility among those who thought it meant that there were two gods in heaven, one of whom had a body and received the prayers of the faithful. By the time of Isaac the Blind, this doctrine had disappeared.

Jacob of Lunel and his circle taught a different type of mystical prayer, in which the mystic would mentally direct certain words or phrases of the prayers towards particular *midot*. Scholem remarks that while the *Bahir* provided the symbolism and principle of the *sefirot* and their dynamic emanation of the creative power, mystical prayer to particular *sefirot* was a logical and practical application of this principle. It was this model that became common among the kabbalists, although it also aroused a great deal of suspicion among nonkabbalists who saw it as worship of numerous gods.

Isaac's concept of the chain of the *sefirot* acting as a vehicle for the downward flow of the divine will or thought was mirrored by the corresponding image of an upward flow of divine energy, from the material plane to its source in God. "All things [or utterances] return to the root of their true being"²⁷⁷ was his statement of this principle. Because man has the divine element

or soul within him, so he will naturally return to his root in God, through a sort of magnetic attraction. His journey home is accomplished through the path of contemplative mysticism, using kavanah and devekut.

The object of one's prayer and meditation was to unite with the *midot* themselves. Through the contemplation of the lower *midot*, one reaches the higher ones. Each is a reflection of the one above, and they serve as intermediaries in the flow of the divine substance. Thus human thought can rise to the level of the pure divine thought, which then rises to the Ayn-Sof itself. Isaac wrote:

For every *midah* [singular of *midot*] is filled with that which is above it, and they are given to Israel . . . in order to meditate from the *midah* that is visible in the heart, to meditate up to the Infinite. For there is no other path to the [true] prayer than this one: by means of the limited words, man is made to enter [into their interior] and rises in thought to the Infinite.²⁷⁸

There was an esoteric tradition of how one was to apply one's kavanah to particular words of the prayers, which corresponded to (and were linked with) the various *midot*. Scholem poetically explains that through meditation on the spoken word, one can ascend to the primordial word – the divine quality itself, the higher *midah* that the spoken word corresponds to – and from there to the divine thought (the source of all the *midot*), through which he can reach the Ayn-Sof:

In his concentrated reflection on the word he finds the “primordial word” and through it the contact with the infinite movement of the divine *mahshavah* [thought] itself, in which he raises himself to Ayn-Sof. Therefore, in the word,

the mystical kavanah reveals a spiritual inner space where the word soars up to the divine.²⁷⁹

Isaac gives instructions for a kavanah (concentration exercise) in which the mystic “traverses the world of the sefirot from below upward during the declaration of the divine unity, the Shema Yisrael,²⁸⁰ and then, in his meditation on the word *ehad*, ‘one!’ completes and closes the circle of his kavanah, from above downward.”²⁸¹

A unique aspect of Isaac’s teachings is the graphic image he uses to describe the experience of the divine thought – that of sucking (*yenikah*) the divine essence, which he compares to the sap of a tree. This graphic term was Isaac’s evocative way of describing the transfer of spiritual knowledge, the experience of the outpouring of the divine will, at a level far above intellectual comprehension. Scholem presents the passage in which Isaac discusses the term “marvelous paths of *hokhmah* (wisdom),” which appears in the *Sefer yetsirah*:

The “marvelous paths of *hokhmah*” are, according to him, “inward and subtle essences” that exist in the *hokhmah* as the root in the tree, and that proceed from it like sap passing through the trunk. The secret arteries, by way of which the sap circulates throughout the tree, are themselves these paths. “No creature can know them by meditating, apart from he who sucks from it [from *hokhmah* itself], on the path of meditation through his sucking and not through knowledge.” These enigmatic words seem to suggest that Isaac knew of a way to connect with these hidden essences, obtained not through knowledge but by means of another process, a contemplation without language, which he names “sucking,” *yenikah*.²⁸²

Isaac taught that the mystic, through his *kavanah*, by controlling and directing his own thought, can experience communion with God. This is the meaning of *devekut*, which comes from the biblical verb *dabhak* (adhere, cleave to) “to express the contact of the soul with God or the divine light.”²⁸³ Isaac and his disciples likened the state of *devekut* achieved through contemplative prayer or meditation with the prophetic state experienced by the biblical prophets. In fact, Isaac’s own disciples Ezra and Azriel linked this state with the ecstasy of Moses. Ezra commented that through *devekut*, two become one.

Isaac urged the performance of the commandments (the 613 positive and negative commandments included in the Bible), as another aspect of *kavanah*. It is an external expression of the concept of divine service. He equated the inner *kavanah* with internal service of God.

The Gerona circle

This small community of Jews in northern Spain had sent their bright young men to Provence to study Talmud at the academies there. They became imbued with the mystical teachings, which they took home to Gerona. Most of them were disciples of Isaac the Blind. In their writings, they involved themselves deeply in discussing the *sefirot*. Anonymous tracts started appearing in which the symbolism of each *sefirah* was discussed systematically. Naturally, there was a lot of variation in their understanding of the symbolism as each kabbalist contributed his own interpretations.

The most important kabbalists of this group were Nahmanides, Ezra ben Solomon, and Azriel. Azriel’s writings were very systematic. He was able to elegantly develop the ideas of Isaac the Blind and give them clearer formulation and direction. As an example, here is what Azriel wrote about the *Ayn-Sof*:

Anything visible, and anything that can be grasped by thought, is bounded. Anything bounded is finite. Anything finite is not undifferentiated. Conversely, the boundless is called Ayn-Sof, Infinite. It is absolute undifferentiation in perfect, changeless oneness. Since it is boundless, there is nothing outside of it. Since it transcends and conceals itself, it is the essence of everything hidden and revealed. Since it is concealed, it is the root of faith and the root of rebellion. As it is written, "One who is righteous lives by his faith." The philosophers acknowledge that we comprehend it only by way of no.

Emanating from Ayn-Sof are the ten sefirot. They constitute the process by which all things come into being and pass away. They energize every existent thing that can be quantified. Since all things come into being by means of the sefirot, they differ from one another, yet they all derive from one root. Everything is from Ayn-Sof; there is nothing outside of it.

One should avoid fashioning metaphors regarding Ayn-Sof, but in order to help you understand, you can compare Ayn-Sof to a candle from which hundreds of millions of other candles are kindled. Though some shine brighter than others, compared to the first light they are all the same, all deriving from that one source. The first light and all the others are, in effect, incomparable. Nor can their priority compare with its, for it surpasses them; their energy emanates from it. No change takes place in it – the energy of emanation simply manifests through differentiation.

Ayn-Sof cannot be conceived, certainly not expressed, though it is intimated in everything, for there is nothing outside of it. No letter, no name, no writing, no thing can confine it. The witness testifying in writing that there is nothing outside of it is: "I am that I am." Ayn-Sof has no

will, no intention, no desire, no thought, no speech, no action – yet there is nothing outside of it.²⁸⁴

Azriel was strongly influenced by Neoplatonism and believed that everything comes from the One and will naturally return to the One, but the process is accelerated by man's participation through kavanah. Scholem summarizes Azriel's teachings on this:

All things egress from the One and return to the One, according to the formula borrowed from the Neoplatonists; but this movement has its goal and turning point in man when, turning inward, he begins to recognize his own being and, from the multiplicity of his nature, strives to return to the unity of his origin. No matter how the coming forth of the creature from God is conceived, there is no doubt here concerning the manner of its return. It is accomplished in the elevation of the kavanah, in the introversion of the will that, instead of spending itself in multiplicity, "collects" and concentrates itself and, purifying itself of all selfishness, attaches itself to the will of God, that is, joins the "lower will" to the "higher will." The commandments and their fulfillment are the vehicles of this movement of return to God. Inherent in them is a spiritual element of which man can and must take hold and through which he is joined to the sphere of the divine. For the commandments, in their spiritual element, are themselves part of the divine *kavod*.²⁸⁵

"THE GATE OF INTENTION OF THE EARLY KABBALISTS"

Mystical prayer was also practiced by the Gerona kabbalists, as they used the techniques and theory of kavanah to direct their prayers toward the Godhead, the Ayn-Sof, not to particular sefirot. There is a remarkable anonymous text, called by its translators "The Gate of Intention of the Early Kabbalists," which is presumed

to be a secret work by Azriel. It combines the theory of kavanah with the symbolism of light, and a meditation practice on different degrees of light. What was so revolutionary about the text, and probably why it was kept secret, is that it talked about the objective of total mystic union in the divine being. Whoever the mystic was who wrote it, he was cautious enough to frame it in the tradition of the early hasidim of the third and second centuries BCE, who used to meditate silently for one hour before engaging in their liturgical prayers. Joseph Dan summarizes the work:

The writer interpreted this [meditation] period as one in which the worshipper-mystic has to transform himself, to shed his material body and become purely spiritual, immersed in divine light surrounding him and becoming himself light rather than matter. When in this state, the mystic envisions the components of the spiritual world as pillars of light, of different colors, surrounding him. The mystical goal of this prayer is a very ambitious one – it is to reach the realm of the infinite, unbound Godhead beyond the limited manifestations of the divine realm, and be united with it – “so that the higher will is clothed in his will.”²⁸⁶

To unite with the Godhead as the goal of meditation is not very common in kabbalistic literature, perhaps due to the suspicion it would have aroused from the traditional rabbinic belief that no one could “see” the face of God and live (i.e., be equal to, or unite with him). Yet it does appear from time to time as a valid form of mystic expression, especially in texts unmediated by later editors who might have deleted such references. Here are a few lines from the original text, in translation:

He who resolves upon something in his mind with a perfect firmness, for him it becomes the essential thing. Therefore

if you pray and pronounce the benedictions or otherwise truly wish to direct the kavanah to something, imagine that you are light and that everything around you is light, light from every direction and every side; and in the light a throne of light, and on it, a “brilliant light,” and opposite it a throne and, on it, a “good light.” ... [More aspects of light are described; the distinctions among them have been lost.] And between them and above them the light of the *kavod*, and around it the light of life. And above it the crown of light that crowns the desires of the thoughts, ... And this illumination is unfathomable and infinite, and from its perfect glory proceed grace and benediction, peace and life for those who observe the path of its unification. ...

For according to the intensity of the kavanah, with which it draws strength to itself through its will, and will through its knowledge, and representation through its thought, and power through its reaching [to the primordial source of the will], and firmness through its contemplation, if no other reflection or desire is mixed in it, and if it grows in intensity through the power that guides it, in order to draw to itself the current that proceeds from Ayn-Sof, ... everything and every act is accomplished according to its spirit and its will. ... Then, it must elevate itself above them through the power of its kavanah and go into the depths ... to pave a new way according to his own will: through the power of his kavanah, which stems from the perfect glory of the withdrawing light, which has neither figure nor image, ... and which is in no respect finite. ...

And he who elevates himself in such a manner, from word to word, through the power of his intention, until he arrives at Ayn-Sof, must direct his kavanah in a manner corresponding to his perfection, so that the higher will is clothed in his will, and not only so that his will is clothed

in the higher will. For the effluence . . . is like the inexhaustible source that is never interrupted. . . .

In this manner the ancients used to spend some time in meditation, before prayer, and to divert all other thoughts and to determine the paths of their kavanah [during the subsequent prayer] and the power that was to be applied to its direction. . . . And this is the path among the paths of prophecy, upon which he who makes himself familiar with it will be capable of rising to the rank of prophecy.²⁸⁷

When he speaks of arriving at a state when “the higher will is clothed in his will,” one has achieved the state of mystic union. Described otherwise, who is the Beloved and who is the lover cannot be known; the two have become indistinguishable; they have merged into one identity. He says that in that state, “the effluence is like the inexhaustible source that is never interrupted.”

Scholem remarks that the text shows that the true state of prophecy is achieved through kavanah, and this defines the perfect mystic:

The true kavanah described in this text is therefore identical with the path of prophecy, which passes through the realization of the perfect *devekut* with God, that is, the cleaving of human thought and will to the thought and will of God. . . . The illumination, which is to be obtained through *devekut*, can therefore be distinguished from prophecy only by its degree and not by its nature. The prophet is here, as so often in medieval thought, none other than the perfect mystic.²⁸⁸

And how was this form of mystical prayer different from the magical prayers of the Hasidei Ashkenaz? The simplest

distinction is that when the Hasidei Ashkenaz created magic formulae out of holy words and names, they pronounced them aloud as part of the text of the prayer. But among the earliest kabbalists, the kavanah or intention takes place in the mind, while the mouth might be engaged in the external recitation of set prayers.

The difference between the mystical and the magical was not only in the manner of praying – in the mind or aloud. There was also a difference in intention, in purpose, though in practice the line would often be blurred. In pure mystical prayer, according to Scholem, the practitioner rises spiritually from level to level to become absorbed in the divine source or the highest *midot* (the sefirot); in theurgic or magical prayer the mystics would try to “draw down” to himself powers from the divine realm. Initially, among the earliest kabbalists of Provence, prayer was not used for magical or theurgic aims. However, by the next generation the Spanish kabbalists, among them the disciples of Isaac the Blind, definitely inclined towards theurgic prayer.

In some instances, the mystical prayer would be tied to a specific day, like Yom Kippur (the holy Day of Atonement), or to a higher power like the Prince of the Torah (an angelic being who, it was believed, could help a person learn the secrets of the Torah quickly). It might also consist of requests to the holy spirit or to Elijah to grant forgiveness.

Thus the kabbalists of Gerona, building on the teachings of Isaac the Blind, created a fully developed mythology and symbolism upon which they built forms of worship and meditation that took them far from the rabbinic forms of Judaism practiced only a century earlier.

The Iyun circle

The Iyun circle was another significant group of mystic practitioners active either in Provence or in Castile, Spain, during the

early- to mid-thirteenth century, parallel with the other early kabbalists. There seem to have been some cross-influences with the Gerona school, with whom they shared certain common terminology and doctrines, and scholars are not really sure who influenced whom.

The term *iyun* comes from the word *'ayin* (eye) and means concentrated visual contemplation; it seems to suggest a technique of meditation. This name was given to the circle by Gershom Scholem, who was the first to study their most significant writings, including the *Book of Contemplation* (*Sefer ha-iyun*), which exists in numerous versions. The theme of the *Book of Contemplation* is the nature of the Godhead – it explores the concept that there are spiritual realms within the Godhead and other realms that emanate from it. Their other important books are *Ma'ayan ha-hokhmah* (Fountain of Wisdom),* which relates how the cosmos was brought into being. A third text, which exists only as a fragment, is called the *Book of Unity*, and it focuses on the triad of powers or lights within the Godhead. There are numerous other short treatises and fragments. In the words of Mark Verman, a modern scholar who has studied the texts of the Iyun circle intensively, “together they offered a potent combination of radical theology and speculative science, which profoundly influenced those mystics active in Spain in the latter half of the thirteenth century.”²⁸⁹

The literary influences we find in their writings include the *Sefer yetsirah* and its numerous commentaries, the merkavah and heikhalot texts, and the teachings of the Hasidei Ashkenaz. But, according to such scholars as Joseph Dan, it was the impetus of first-hand mystical experience that propelled these mystics to write about their inner visions. The fact that the code of secrecy

*There is a play on words here, as the words *ma'ayan* (fountain) and *'iyun* are derived from the word *'ayin* (eye or source).

concerning esoteric knowledge had started to break down among the Jewish mystics also contributed to the writing of such documents. This trend would continue throughout the kabbalist period, but it should be remembered that these esoteric works were never studied in isolation, from books alone – there were always circles of masters and disciples encouraging each other in mystic practice.

To give a sense of the beauty and sublimity of their writings, a quotation from the *Book of Contemplation* is given below, which describes the hidden state of the Godhead prior to the creation (the state of balanced unity) and the emanation of the primal light, glory, faith, creative power, and wisdom.

This is the Book of Contemplation that Rabbi Hammai, the principal spokesman, composed on the topic of the Innermost [most hidden]. In it he revealed the essence of the entire existence of the Glory, which is hidden from sight. No creature can truly comprehend the essence of His existence and His nature, since He is in the state of balanced unity; for in His completeness the higher and lower beings are united. He is the foundation of everything that is hidden and revealed. From Him issues forth all that is emanated from the wondrousness of the Unity and all the powers that are revealed from the Supreme Hiddenness, which is called *aman* [artisan].* The explanation is that from Him the sustaining power emanated, which is called Father of Faith, since faith was emanated from its power.

He is the primal emanator, for He preceded all the

* There is a play on words here, as the word *aman* can mean either artisan, creator, or nurturer. It is also related to the word for faith, *emunah*. Thus, “Father of Faith” in the next sentence could also mean “Father of Creativity” (the Creator), and the sentence could read: “The explanation is that from Him the sustaining power emanated, which is called Father of Creativity, since creativity was emanated from its power.”

primordial elements that were emanated from the wondrousness of His Unity. Furthermore, all of them are revealed by the process of emanation, like a scent from a scent or a candle-flame from a candle-flame; since this emanates from that and that from something else, and the power of the emanator is within that which was emanated. The emanator, however, does not lack anything. Thus, the Holy One, blessed be He, generated all of His powers – these from those, by the process of emanation. Moreover, He is united with them like the flame of fire, which is united with its colors, and he ascends above in His Unity and is exalted, such that there is no end to His exaltedness.

When it arose in His mind to create all His actions and display His power and produce all of His creations, He created one power. This power is called Primordial Wisdom, which is called mystery. Before He created this power, His power was not discernible, until His radiance was seen, and His glory was revealed in this wisdom. . . . The quality of His truth, may He be blessed, that we are able to perceive, entails the pure light of life. It is pure gold, written and sealed in the radiance of His beautiful canopy. It consists of a brightly shining radiance, like the image of the form of the soul that is entirely imperceptible – an entirely imperceptible brightness.

He is united with the Primordial Wisdom. From this Wisdom that is called mystery, the Holy One, blessed be He, generated all the spiritual powers simultaneously. All of them vibrated and whirred in their brightness and were exalted above, until the Holy One, blessed be He, bound all of them together.²⁹⁰

The basic theme is the origin of the cosmos through the emanation of the divine powers (*kohot*) from the source, the

Holy One, the Primordial Wisdom. The ten powers emanate one from the other in an organic chain, one linked or “bound” to the other, “united in the exalted realm,” each deriving individually from the preceding power.

The first power that was emanated from the Primordial Wisdom the author calls Marvelous Light. From the Marvelous Light, the Primordial Wisdom created *hashmal*, electrum.* Among subsequent emanations are the throne of light, the wheel of greatness, and the cherub, which is described as being like “a curtain (veil) revolving in the revolution of its brilliance.” The work ends with the appearance of Metatron the angel, who in the heikhalot literature is often depicted as seated on the divine throne.

The esoteric meaning of much of this symbolism is elusive, yet the document conveys the ecstasy of their inner visual experiences of the divine light and radiance. The vibration and whirring of the powers refers to an experience of spiritual soundless “sound.” The texts reveal a unique and highly experiential mysticism.

Significant for our study is the fact that, as Dan remarks, “The series of powers are usually described in rhythmic prose, reflecting enthusiastic, experiential expression. It seems that unlike most kabbalistic texts, the works of the Iyun circle did not undergo a stage of theologization and systemization, so that the enthusiastic elements connected with first-hand mystical experience are not completely erased.”²⁹¹

Because their work comes to us unmediated by editors trying to make them conform to accepted theologies, we can still find evidence of their personal mystical experiences. This is important because it implies that the works of other mystics,

* *Electrum*: an unidentified term for light or radiance which occurs in Jewish esoteric literature.

which did get published, may only give us a partial glimpse of the mystical, experiential aspects of their teachings.

The *Fountain of Wisdom* has two distinct sections: the first part is concerned with a meditation practice based on deriving divine names from the internal patterns of the Hebrew language; in the second, the author describes the creation as a process of emanation of supernal lights. Concerning the quote below, Verman points out that the term *tikun* is used here to mean meditation, not the restoration or perfection of divine aspects of the Godhead and supernal realms, as used in the Lurianic teachings of the sixteenth century.

This is the *tikun*, by directing your heart upon these four letters which constitute the Ineffable Name. In them is hidden a flowing stream and an overflowing fountain. They divide into several parts and run like lightning. Their light continues to increase and grow stronger.

The root-principle of all of them is YHWH. It has the numerical value twenty-six, corresponding to the twenty-six movements that emerged from the Primal Ether which divided into two parts – each part separate unto itself. Each part has the numerical value thirteen, corresponding to the thirteen sources that separated from the letter “A” [Aleph].²⁹²

One of the doctrines of the Iyun circle was the emanation of thirteen powers or lights from the primal One, here called the Aleph, which is the first letter of the alphabet. He continues:

This matter will be elucidated and clarified by means of its *tikun*. The *tikun* about which we have spoken is the start of everything. It is the direction of the heart, intention of the thought, calculation of the viscera, purification of the heart,

until the mind is settled and logic and language are formed. From language [stems] clarification, and from clarification the word is formed. From the word is the utterance and from the utterance is the deed. This is its beginning.²⁹³

Verman, in trying to understand what this obscure passage means, assumes that it is something “more basic and yet more transcendent than mundane letter permutations.” Obviously, the attempts to record in writing the profound teachings that these mystics shared among themselves cannot do justice to them. Possibly this is because these teachings – about meditation, primal sound and language, divine powers, and so forth – cannot be conveyed at the level of the intellect through any human language. The author does, however, seem to be reaching to the spiritual nonphysical origins of language.

The document also includes the interesting statement on the Godhead – that He caused himself to come into being:

Know that the Holy one, blessed be He, was the first existent being. Only that which generates itself is called an existent being. Since He generated himself, we can comprehend and conduct an investigation into His existence.²⁹⁴

The identity of the Iyun mystics has remained obscure, as they wrote under fictional names of legendary mystics of past ages. *Contemplation*, for example, is attributed to a Rabbi Hammai, who never existed. *Hammai* means visionary in Aramaic. *Fountain of Wisdom* is attributed to an angel named Pe’eli. Verman, through his linguistic and historical studies, has attributed some of the circle’s works to Rabbi Isaac ha-Cohen, a kabbalist of Castile, but this has not been proven. Scholem and Dan date them earlier and Scholem locates them in Provence. Verman postulates that the reason the mystics who authored these works

hid under cloak of anonymity was because of opposition from the conservative rabbinic community which regarded some aspects of the teachings as heretical. At the time, controversy raged about the works of Maimonides, which were accused of being too philosophical and scientific; similar pressures were felt among kabbalists.²⁹⁵ And despite their importance for understanding the origins of the Kabbalah, these works still exist mostly in manuscript form in libraries around the world.²⁹⁶

A mystical rationale for the commandments

Provençe was an intellectual crossroads, lying between the Muslim-dominated Arabic-speaking world of Spain and the Christian-dominated Latin- and French-speaking world. It became a window through which the Arabic writings of Jewish philosophers like Saadia Gaon and Maimonides were transmitted to northern Europe in Hebrew translation. Maimonides' rationalist reinterpretation of Judaism in Aristotelian terms and his fearless intellectual innovation created a reaction of great hostility in European Jewish communities, as his ideas were seen to weaken the authority of the scriptures as the basis for the performance of ritual. Some of Maimonides' writings were banned by the religious authorities. It was natural that a teaching as radical as Kabbalah might also create waves of anxiety or fear in the minds of the religious authorities. But for the most part, this was not the case.

Ta'amei ha-mitsvot, meaning the reasons or justifications for the religious commandments, was a popular preoccupation with the kabbalists of the thirteenth century and they wrote many tracts on this subject. But these were not rational reasons that they proposed – they were mystical and symbolic. The kabbalists presumed that when people performed the rituals and ceremonies commanded in the Torah, this had a theurgical effect on the realm of the divine – it augmented the divine power, which gave

protection to the Jews. For example, the kabbalists believed that the *mitsvah* (biblical commandment) of the *tefillin* (phylacteries), and use of the *lulav* (palm branch) on the holiday of *sukkot*, had special meanings and impact on the supernal powers. If these commandments were not performed, the divine being would withdraw into itself and the flow (*shefa*) of its nurturing power, its grace, the holy spirit, would be diminished. The commandments had the power to join man to God, raising him to the divine level. In a play on words, the kabbalists taught that the mystical reason (*ta'am*) for performing a *mitsvah* is its taste (*ta'am*), knowledge of which could be gained by reading the biblical text carefully. By performing the *mitsvah*, the devotee could gain a taste of the divine sweetness and essence inherent in it.

The kabbalists believed that no action simply takes place in the physical world. Every action has its corresponding impact in the higher planes. Thus the kabbalistic world view provided a rationale for performance of the commandments and living an upright and moral life. Joseph Dan elaborates:

The commandments reflect essences and processes within the divine world, and by their observance the mystic is able to take part in these processes. That some *mitsvot* did not have logical explanations did not in any way diminish their attraction as symbols – on the contrary, the symbol became more powerful because of its mysterious nature on the literal level... In this way the Kabbalah completely transformed the everyday lives of its believers on the spiritual level, without changing anything on the practical level...

It is clear that a rationalistic explanation of the reasons of the *mitsvot* might make the commandments subject to change as circumstances change; whereas a mystical interpretation on the symbolic level – claiming that the real reasons are completely hidden and beyond human

comprehension and that the symbol dimly denotes something concerning an esoteric meaning – cannot be used to bring negation or change.²⁹⁷

Thus, a type of mystical practice and a belief system that might have seemed quite radical and destabilizing to a mainstream religion actually became a conservative force in maintaining the authority of religious law and tradition. At the same time, however, there were objections. The symbolism of the sefirot always bordered on polytheism to some minds, because it was perceived as the worship of many gods, not the one true Lord.



CHAPTER 11

The Kabbalah Matures: Moses de León and Abraham Abulafia

Moses de León

NOW THAT WE HAVE LOOKED AT the beginnings of Kabbalah and its vocabulary of mystic symbolism, we move into the period where Kabbalah in Spain matures. Fellowships of like-minded mystics gathered together to spur each other onwards in their meditation practices, to discuss the revelations they experienced, to explain and expand on the myths and symbolism they were creating. Often they would defer to one among them as the first among equals, their master on the spiritual path. An important example is Moses de León and his fellowship in thirteenth-century Spain who are presumed to be the authors of the *Zohar*, which became the central text of the Kabbalah.

By the middle of the sixteenth century the *Zohar* had become as sacred as the Torah and the Talmud. *Zohar* means splendor, radiance, brilliant light. It is written in the form of a classic mystical

commentary on the Torah, and incorporates fanciful tales about Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, a renowned second-century sage and legendary mystic, and a group of rabbis who were his disciples. The interactions among these rabbis and their discussions about the deeper meanings embedded in the Torah serve as the narrative voice of the teachings presented in the Zohar. What is most important about Rabbi Simeon as portrayed in the Zohar is his great knowledge of the secrets of the Torah and, indeed, all mystical secrets, combined with his permission by God to reveal them.

Moses ben Shem Tov de León, known to history as Moses de León, was born in Arevalo, Spain, in the year 1250. Until 1290 he lived in Guadalajara, a center of adherents of the Kabbalah. He then traveled a great deal and finally settled in Ávila, where he died in 1305. De León, during his lifetime, maintained that he was only a scribe copying from an ancient book of wisdom that he had found. He said that the author of the book was none other than the renowned sage Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai himself.

It was commonly accepted during the lifetime of de León and for centuries afterwards that the book was written by Rabbi Simeon. Nonetheless there were always those who doubted the authenticity of his authorship. In 1305, Isaac, son of Samuel of Akko, a kabbalist of great depth, reached Spain after wandering throughout the Mediterranean Jewish world from the time of the fall of Akko in 1291. He had heard of the Zohar and had come to Valladolid in quest of the truth about its origin. Isaac's diary was known to the historian Abraham Zacuto, who cites it in his book *Sefer ha-yuhasin* (Book of Genealogy). Apparently, Isaac managed to meet de León, who agreed to show him the original manuscript if Isaac would meet him in Ávila. The two parted company and agreed upon a date to meet at de León's home in Ávila.

Unfortunately, by the time Isaac reached Avila, Moses had died. Isaac questioned another scholar about the manuscript, who

recounted a conversation with Moses' widow. She said that there never was an old manuscript he had copied from, but that he had written it himself just to make money. Isaac records her words:

Thus and more may God do to me if my husband ever possessed such a book! He wrote it entirely from his own head. When I saw him writing with nothing in front of him, I said to him, "Why do you say that you are copying from a book when there is no book? You are writing from your head. Wouldn't it be better to say so? You would have more honor!" He answered me, "If I told them my secret, that I am writing from my own mind, they would pay no attention to my words, and they would pay nothing for them. They would say: 'He is inventing them out of his imagination.' But now that they hear that I am copying from the book of the Zohar composed by Rabbi Simeon son of Yohai through the Holy Spirit, they buy these words at a high price, as you see with your very eyes."²⁹⁸

Isaac mentions that Moses was known as one who had contact with the holy divine name, and that although he might not have had an old manuscript, it was commonly thought that he wrote at the inspiration and power of the holy name, perhaps channeling the book in a trance state. The close kabbalist friends of de León would have seen nothing wrong in what he was doing in order to heighten the teachings in which they also believed. And indeed, pseudepigrapha (where religious texts are attributed to ancient respected personalities) was a common way of presenting innovative and possibly heretical teachings, giving them the authority and anonymity of tradition. So, in spite of the testimony of de León's widow and some skepticism about Simeon's authorship, through the centuries the Zohar became even more venerated as the sacred text of Rabbi Simeon. It was

not until 1920, when Gershom Scholem did the most intensive research and linguistic and stylistic analysis, comparing the Zohar to other documents written by de León, that the academic world became convinced that Moses de León was the author of the book. Very recent research and analysis confirms Scholem's conclusions but proposes that Moses de León was not the sole author of the Zohar; it demonstrates that his fellow kabbalists wrote sections of the book with Moses de León at the center of what might have been a kind of mystical brotherhood, engaged over a period of thirty to forty years in putting into writing their perception of the spiritual reality.²⁹⁹

It is not known if Moses de León had disciples or whether this was a fellowship of equals, but the relationship and the mode of disseminating mystical concepts from master to disciples is beautifully depicted in the Zohar. The atmosphere, oral exchanges, the poetic verse, and the love between master and disciple is faithful to the time and place. The majority of mystical concepts of the Zohar were not new, but were never made quite so clear and intense, nor so inspiring. Admirers and many commentators of the Zohar through the centuries stress how the deeper layer of wisdom contained in the words of the book vibrate with a magnetic strength that pulls the earnest student into a world beyond concepts.

De León was a mystic whose persistent study and love of Torah brought him into the realm of active mystic union and caused a profound revolution in Judaism reverberating through the centuries into our present day. For de León, the Zohar is a means to an end (mystic union with God) and inspires one to *live* the Torah and rise above the level of intellectual knowledge. In another of his books, *Or zaru'a* (Sown Light), de León writes:

I have seen some people called "wise." But they have not awoken from their slumber; they just remain where they

are. . . . Indeed, they are far from searching for His glorious Reality. They have exchanged His Glory for the image of a bull eating grass (cf. Psalms 106:20). . . .

The ancient wise ones have said that there was once a man engaged in Mishnah and Talmud all his day according to his animal knowledge. When the time came for him to depart from the world, he was very old, and people said that he was a great wise man. But one person came along and said to him, "Do you know your self? All the limbs in your body, what are they for?" He said, "I do not know." "Your little finger, what is it for?" He said, "I do not know." "Do you know anything outside of you, why it is, how it is?" He began shouting at everyone, "I do not know my self! How can I know anything outside my self?" He went on, "All my days I have toiled in Torah until I was eighty years old. But in the final year I attained no more wisdom or essence than I attained in those first years when I began studying." The people asked, "Then what did you toil over all these years?" He said, "What I learned in the beginning." They said, "This wise man is nothing but an animal without any knowledge. He did not know the purpose of all his work; just like an animal carrying straw on its back, not knowing whether it is sifted grain or straw!" . . . See how my eyes shine, for I have tasted a bit of this honey! O House of Jacob! Come, let us walk in the light of YHWH!³⁰⁰

"This wise man is nothing but an animal without knowledge." Moses de León is referring to the rabbis and scholars who can quote from memory any verse from the Torah just as the priests and sages of all religions do from their scriptures – those for whom God is a book to be studied and worshiped. For de León and other kabbalists, the Torah was the breath of God. The Zohar was de León's attempt to bring to life "eyes that shine

because they have tasted the honey of Torah.” There were “generations of devotees who sought to make its poetry transparent, to see beyond the imagery into the ‘true’ religious meaning of the text, . . . to find in each word or phrase previously unseen layers of sacred meaning.”³⁰¹

A prominent theme of the Zohar is that the Torah as a book points to the Torah as a divine living presence: “Torah in the Zohar is not conceived as a text, as an object, or as material, but as a living divine presence, engaged in a mutual relationship with the person who studies her.”³⁰²

In a narration on the meaning of Torah in the Zohar, Rabbi Simeon says the following:

Alas for the man who regards the Torah as a book of mere tales and everyday matters! If that were so, we, even we could compose a torah dealing with everyday affairs, and of even greater excellence. Nay, even the princes of the world possess books of greater worth which we could use as a model for composing some such torah. The Torah, however, contains in all its words supernal truths and sublime mysteries. Observe the perfect balancing of the upper and the lower worlds. Israel here below is balanced by the angels on high, of whom it says: “who makest thy angels into winds” (Psalms 104:4). For the angels in descending on earth put on themselves earthly garments, as otherwise they could not stay in this world, nor could the world endure them. Now, if thus it is with the angels, how much more so must it be with the Torah – the Torah that created them, that created all the worlds and is the means by which these are sustained.

Thus had the Torah not clothed herself in garments of this world, the world could not endure it. The stories of the Torah are thus only her outer garments, and whoever looks upon that garment as being the Torah itself, woe to that

man – such a one will have no portion in the next world. David thus said: “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” (Psalms 119:18), to wit, the things that are beneath the garment.

Observe this. The garments worn by a man are the most visible part of him, and senseless people looking at the man do not seem to see more in him than the garments. But in truth the pride of the garments is the body of the man, and the pride of the body is the soul. Similarly the Torah has a body made up of the precepts of the Torah, called *gufei torah* [bodies of the Torah, i.e., main principles of the Torah], and that body is enveloped in garments made up of worldly narrations. The senseless people only see the garment, the mere narrations; those who are somewhat wiser penetrate as far as the body.³⁰³

The creation came about through the words of the Torah, Rabbi Simeon declares:

See now, it was by means of the Torah that the Holy One created the world. That has already been derived from the verse, “Then I was near him as an artisan, and I was daily all his delight” (Proverbs 8:30). He looked at the Torah once, twice, thrice, and a fourth time. He uttered the words composing her and then operated through her. . . .

Hence the account of the creation commences with the four words *Bereshit bara Elohim et* [“In-the-beginning created God the”], before mentioning “the heavens,” thus signifying the four times which the Holy One, blessed be He, looked into the Torah before He performed His work.³⁰⁴

In another place, Rabbi Simeon summarizes the power of the Torah as the ultimate guide for life:

Observe how powerful is the might of the Torah, and how it surpasses any other force. For whoso occupies himself in the study of the Torah has no fear of the powers above or below, nor of any evil happenings of the world. For such a man cleaves to the tree of life, and derives knowledge from it day by day, since it is the Torah that teaches man to walk in the true path.³⁰⁵

For de León and his fellowship, the Torah text as narrated and interpreted in the Zohar is a dynamic creative force, the holy name or utterance. And the more than three hundred stories and reflections in approximately twenty volumes of the Zohar are a means to help the student who is moving toward contact with the “living and divine” Torah. The study of Torah for these mystics was not just a duty; it was their supreme pleasure. And their mystical and symbolic interpretations provided a supernatural rationale for observance of the commandments.

In the Zohar, Rabbi Eleazar is quoted as having said: “Therefore to study the Torah is like studying the holy name, as we have said, that the Torah is all one holy supernal name.”³⁰⁶

Through the numerous stories of a group of disciples gathered around their master in a garden, in a grove of trees or around a fire at midnight, at an inn, or conversing as they leisurely walk from one village to another, the Zohar takes the laws and narratives of the Torah and interprets them on both conceptual and symbolic levels, reading mystical truths and principles into them, investing them with an exponential power. It sees the Torah as the power of God projected in the creation, and explores the microcosmic elements making up that power and how they break into various spheres (the ten sefirot – the unfolding of creation). Rabbi Simeon and his disciples spend many hours delving into the deeper meanings of passages in the Torah, how Torah sustains the world, the

various levels of the soul, the symbolic structure of the human body, and many more subjects.

The master and disciple sitting or walking together through this mundane world, and discussing the divine realms and matters of the spirit, was the common mode of teaching and transmission.³⁰⁷ Arthur Green in *A Guide to the Zohar* writes:

These tales of Rabbi Simeon and his disciples wandering about Galilee a thousand years before the Zohar was written are clearly works of fiction. But to say so is by no means to deny the possibility that a very real mystical brotherhood underlies the Zohar and shapes its spiritual character. Anyone who reads the Zohar over an extended period will come to see that the interface among companions and the close relationship between the tales of their wanderings and the homilies those wanderings occasion are not the result of fictional imagination alone. Whoever wrote the work knew very well how fellow students respond to companionship and support and are inspired by one another's glowing renditions of a text. He (or they) has felt the warm glow of a master's praise and the shame of being shown up by a stranger in the face of one's peers.

Leaving aside for now the question of who actually penned the words, we can say that the Zohar *reflects the experience* of a kabbalistic circle. It is one of a series of such circles of Jewish mystics, stretching back in time to Qumran, Jerusalem, Provence, and Gerona, and forward in history to Safed, Padua, Miedzybozh, Bratslav, and again to Jerusalem. A small circle of initiates gathered about a master is the way Kabbalah has always happened, and the Zohar is no exception. In fact, the collective experience of this group around Rabbi Simeon as "recorded"

in the Zohar forms the paradigm for all later Jewish mystical circles.³⁰⁸

But as much as the Zohar teaches about the Torah on a symbolic level, through the narratives of its cast of characters, its essence is the story of the master and the disciples gathered around him. The story of Rabbi Simeon and his circle is a thin veil over the story of Moses de León and his kabbalist circle. And the wanderings of the holy men studying the profound meaning of the Torah is in itself a metaphor for the divine spirit, the Shekhinah, wandering in exile in the world and choosing to be revealed through the saints who seek to do the divine will in every aspect of their lives.

With that in mind, we will set aside the richness of the mystic teachings and interpretations of the creation process contained within the Zohar, and look more closely at what it reveals about the spiritual master and his profound relationship with his disciples.

The great reverence with which Simeon bar Yohai is treated by his disciples is worthy of note. They elevate him to the highest level, sometimes even equating him with God. He evokes great gratitude for the grace and light he bestows upon them. "Happy is the generation in which Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai lives!"³⁰⁹

The figure of Simeon bar Yohai "became a paradigm for medieval kabbalists. Not only did he know where to go in the ascent to heaven, he also possessed the great redemptive capacity to atone for the sins of others."³¹⁰ It is no wonder that many of the later kabbalists claimed to be his reincarnation.

Here are a few comments of his disciples about him. In this first account, Rabbi Simeon is referred to as "the sacred lamp." He is also compared to Moses, revered as the greatest of the prophets, and it is assumed he is Moses' reincarnation. The Zohar says that in this generation, Rabbi Simeon's holiness brings the miracles of the holy spirit into the world.

Rabbi Jose said: Let us take these things [the mysteries of the scriptures] up to the sacred lamp, for he prepares sweet dishes [reveals spiritual mysteries], like those of the holy Ancient One [Atika Kadisha], the mystery of all mysteries; he prepares dishes that do not need salt from another. Furthermore, we can eat and drink our fill from all the delights of the world, and still have some to spare. He fulfills the verse “So he set it before them, and they ate, and had some to spare, according to the word of the Lord” (2 Kings 4:44)....

Rabbi Isaac said: What you say is true, for one day I was walking along with him, and he opened his mouth to speak Torah, and I saw a pillar of cloud stretching down from heaven to earth, and a light shone in the middle of the pillar. I was greatly afraid and I said: Happy is the man for whom such things can happen in this world. What is written concerning Moses? “And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud stand at the door of the tent, all the people arose and worshiped, every man at his tent door” (Exodus 33:10). This was most fitting for Moses, the faithful prophet, supreme over all the world’s prophets, and for that generation, who received the Torah at Mount Sinai and witnessed so many miracles and examples of power in Egypt and at the Red Sea. But now, in this generation, it is because of the supreme merit of Rabbi Simeon that wonders are revealed at his hands.³¹¹

A shared spiritual experience of Rabbi Simeon and his son, Rabbi Eleazar, is described:

Rabbi Simeon came and kissed him on the head. He said to him: Stand where you are, my son, for your moment has now come.

Rabbi Simeon sat down, and Rabbi Eleazar, his son, stood

and expounded wisdom's mysteries, and his face shone like the sun, and his words spread abroad and moved in the firmament.

They sat for two days, and did not eat or drink, not knowing whether it was day or night. When they left they realized that they had not eaten anything for two days.³¹²

Rabbi Simeon then exclaims to his son that if we have had such an experience after such a short time, imagine what Moses, who spent forty days with the Lord on Mount Sinai, would have experienced!

After hearing about this event, Rabbi Gamaliel, the head of the academy, says that Rabbi Simeon is so great that even God obeys him. He doesn't have to fast or perform other austerities to influence God. It is a common theme in praising the saints in all mystic traditions to say that they are greater than God:

Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai is a lion, and Rabbi Eleazar, his son, is a lion. But Rabbi Simeon is not like other lions. Of him it is written, "The lion has roared; who will not fear?" (Amos 3:8). And since the worlds above trembled before him, how much more should we? He is a man who has never had to ordain a fast for something that he really desired. But he makes a decision, and the Holy One, blessed be He, supports it. The Holy One, blessed be He, makes a decision, and he annuls it. . . . The Holy One, blessed be He, is the ruler over man, but who rules over the Holy One, blessed be He? The righteous, for He makes a decision, and the righteous annuls it.³¹³

In another account, Rabbi Hiya, a member of Rabbi Simeon's fellowship, says:

This is Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, who shatters all things. Who can stand before him? This is Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, whose voice, when he opens his mouth and begins to study Torah, is heeded by all the thrones, all the firmaments, and all the chariots, and all of these, who praise their master, neither open nor close [their mouths] – all of them are silent, until in all the firmaments, above and below, no sound is heard. When Rabbi Simeon completes his study of the Torah, who has seen the songs, who has seen the joy of those who praise their master? Who has seen the voices that travel through all the firmaments? They all come on account of Rabbi Simeon, and they bow and prostrate themselves before their master, exuding the odors of the spices of Eden as far as the Ancient of Days [Atika Kadisha] and all this on account of Rabbi Simeon.³¹⁴

Before his death, Rabbi Simeon reveals more mysteries to his disciples and tells them who will teach them when he is gone.

Now is a propitious hour, and I am seeking to enter the world-to-come without shame. There are sacred matters that have not been revealed up till now and that I wish to reveal in the presence of the Shekhinah, so that it should not be said that I departed from the world with my work incomplete. Until now they have been concealed in my heart, so that I might enter the world-to-come with them. And so I give you your duties: Rabbi Abba will write them down, Rabbi Eleazar, my son, will explain them, and the other companions will meditate silently upon them.³¹⁵

Rabbi Abba had described the relationship of Rabbi Simeon to his disciples prior to his death:

It is taught that from that day forward the companions did not leave Rabbi Simeon's house, and that when Rabbi Simeon was revealing secrets, only they were present with him. And Rabbi Simeon used to say of them: We seven are the eyes of the Lord, as it is written, "these seven, the eyes of the Lord" (Zechariah 4:10). Of us is this said.

Rabbi Abba said: We are six lamps that derive their light from the seventh [like the menorah lampstand, whose six lamps are lit by the "chief" candle]. You are the seventh over all, for the six cannot survive without the seventh. Everything depends on the seventh.

Rabbi Judah called him "Sabbath," because the [other] six [days] receive blessing from it, for it is written "Sabbath to the Lord" and it is also written "Holy to the Lord." Just as the Sabbath is holy to the Lord, so Rabbi Simeon, the Sabbath, is holy to the Lord.³¹⁶

Subsequently Rabbi Hiya was called "the light of the lamp of the Torah," meaning the light that was lit by his master. And later the Zohar recounts the death of Rabbi Simeon in terms of the appearance of light and fire, similar to the way the Torah describes the divine revelation Moses experienced in the burning bush:

Rabbi Abba said: The holy light [Rabbi Simeon] had not finished saying "life," when his words were hushed. I was writing as if there were more to write, but I heard nothing. And I did not raise my head, for the light was strong, and I could not look at it. Then I became afraid... All that day the fire did not leave the house, and no one could get near it. They were unable, because the light and the fire surrounded it the whole day. I threw myself upon the ground and groaned. When the fire had gone I saw

that the holy light, the holy of holies, had departed from the world. He was lying on his right side, wrapped in his cloak, and his face was laughing. Rabbi Eleazar, his son, rose, took his hands and kissed them, and I licked the dust beneath his feet. The companions wanted to mourn but they could not speak. The companions began to weep, and Rabbi Eleazar, his son, fell three times, and he could not open his mouth....

Rabbi Hiya got to his feet, and said: Up till now the holy light has taken care of us. Now we can do nothing but attend to his honor.

Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Abba rose, and put him in a litter. Who has ever seen disarray like that of the companions? The whole house exuded perfume.³¹⁷

The Zohar poetically recounts the disciples' distress at the loss of their master. He was the source of their knowledge of the celestial mysteries, their deep mystic experience.

It is taught that Rabbi Jose said: From the day that Rabbi Simeon left the cave, matters were not hidden from the companions, and the celestial mysteries were radiated and revealed among them as if they had been promulgated at that very moment on Mount Sinai. When he died it was as is written "the fountains of the deep and the windows of heaven were stopped" (Genesis 8:2), and the companions experienced things that they did not understand.³¹⁸

Rabbi Judah's reverence and love for Rabbi Simeon is expressed beautifully in a symbolic cry of longing:

When he awoke [from his dream], he said: Truly, since Rabbi Simeon died, wisdom has departed from the world.

Alas for the generation that has lost the precious stone, from which the upper and the lower regions looked down, and from which they gained their support!³¹⁹

Another interesting element in the Zohar's concept of the spiritual master, which is almost a subtext running throughout, is that the true holy man hides himself from view and is often unknown to those around him. Arthur Green writes:

A significant part of the Zohar text is devoted to tales of their [the companions'] wanderings and adventures, proclamations of their great love for one another, accounts of their devotion to their Master, and echoes of the great pleasure he takes in hearing their teachings. In these tales, while on the road, wandering from place to place in the Holy Land, they encounter various other teachers, in the form of mysterious elders, wondrous children, merchants, and donkey [or mule] drivers, all of whom possess secrets that they share with this band of loving and faithful companions. Usually these mysterious teachers know more than the wanderers expect, and Rabbi Simeon's disciples are often outshone in wisdom by these most unlikely figures. That too is part of the Zohar's story.³²⁰

The mule-driver appears in the Zohar as a metaphor for the spiritual master, even for the messiah. The biblical prediction of the coming of the messiah envisions him as riding on a mule – the one “who will come lowly and riding on an ass” (Zechariah 9:9). The Zohar's use of this metaphor points to the humility of the spiritual master, as also to the mule-like nature of the disciple whom he has to guide, who is governed by his stubborn mind.

This parable begins when Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Abba take a long journey together. Along the way, they enter into a discussion

concerning some fine points of the scriptures. The mule-driver, who was leading the mules behind them, joins the discussion and slowly they become impressed that “he has some wisdom we do not know.” In the course of the tale, the rabbis tell him:

You have not told us your name nor the place where you live.

He replied: The place where I live is fine and exalted for me. It is a tower, flying in the air, great and beautiful. And these are they who dwell in the tower: the Holy One, blessed be He, and a poor man. This is where I live. But I am exiled from there, and I am a mule-driver. [I am exiled from the higher spiritual regions and must live in this world, this earth plane, as a mule-driver.]

Rabbi Abba and Rabbi Eleazar looked at him, and his words pleased them. They were as sweet as manna and honey.

They said: If you tell us the name of your father, we shall kiss the dust of your feet.

Why? he asked. It is not my wont to use the Torah in order to exalt myself. But my father used to live in the great sea, and he was a fish [*nuna*]* that used to circumnavigate the great sea from end to end. [He crossed the ocean of phenomena.] He was so great, ancient, and honorable that he used to swallow all the other fish in the sea, and spew them out again, live and healthy, and full of all the goodness in the world. He was so strong that he could cross the sea in a single second, and he produced me like an arrow from a mighty warrior’s hand. He hid me in the place that I described to you, and then he returned to his place and concealed himself in the sea.

* *Nuna* means fish. Through a play on words, he is saying that his father is Rabbi Hamnuna Sava, the successor to Rabbi Simeon.

Rabbi Eleazar considered his words, and said: You are really the son of the sacred lamp, you are really the son of Rav Hamnuna Sava, you are really the son of the light of the Torah, and yet you drive mules behind us?

They both wept together, and kissed him, and continued their journey.³²¹

The Zohar tells another story, perhaps a retelling of an old folk tale, of a man who is weeping because he gave his daughter in marriage to a man who knows nothing of Torah; he doesn't even know the blessing after meals. At first the father thought the bridegroom was an ardent student of Torah because he leaped into the synagogue from a nearby roof to hear the prayers. But then later (after the marriage) the father realizes the boy knows absolutely nothing. All of this is revealed by the father to two disciples of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai. And while this discussion goes on, once again – as in the beginning of the story – the young bridegroom leaps into the group and explains why he had concealed his true identity from them all, and that in fact he is a great Torah scholar and lover of God. And there is great rejoicing in the household!

This story reverberates with themes inculcated in Jewish mysticism, principally that of the need to conceal what is great. It shows the unique manner in which kabbalists play with their disciples and readers by presenting something that at first appears as one thing and, when looked at again, is understood to be something very different – the hidden and the disclosed and their interdependence. This is related to a deeply held spiritual belief in Judaism that the divine power of God teaches through all things and people, and one therefore should never ignore what might seem insignificant or of no spiritual importance owing to its “garments” or appearance.

Kabbalistic teachings and the Zohar in particular are constantly presenting persons claiming to know nothing but then

their true spiritual greatness is revealed. In kabbalistic thinking it is believed that esoteric teachings are concealed everywhere and can come from anyone. The hidden secrets of life, the layers of illusion that surround a man's already limited perception, are highlighted in similar tales in the Zohar. As the true meaning of the Torah is hidden, revealed through the Zohar, so the truth of the master is hidden and revealed in the narratives of the Zohar. Additionally, a recurrent theme in the Zohar is that a man of spiritual greatness should conceal himself in obscurity, which is possibly what Moses de León himself was doing.

Abraham Abulafia

Abraham Abulafia was a thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist who is significant because his detailed method for practicing Kabbalah offered the hope of an ecstatic experience of union with the divine, in which “the boundaries separating the self and God are overcome.”³²² Abulafia's system emerged as an alternative to the theosophical, intellectual approach of the majority of kabbalists of his time, who were preoccupied with meditating on the symbolism of the sefirot that make up the divine realms and not on a practical path of *devekut*, an intimate joining with God through inner ascent. Abulafia called his teaching “prophetic Kabbalah” (*kabbalah nevu'it*), as it was designed to induce a state of inner illumination. Modern scholars have called it “ecstatic Kabbalah.”

Abulafia was born in 1240 in Saragossa, Aragon, which at the time of his birth was under Muslim rule. He died sometime around 1291. Very early in life he was taken by his parents to Tudela, Navarre, which was home to many Jewish scholars and mystics. There Abraham's father instructed him in the Bible and Talmud. When he was eighteen years old his aging father died, and two years later Abraham began a lifetime of extensive travel. First he went to Palestine in order to find the Ten Lost Tribes

which, according to legend, were to be found at the mythological river Sambatyon, referred to in many ancient Jewish texts.* But his trip was interrupted due to fighting and chaos in the Holy Land following the last Crusades.

Abulafia returned to Europe where he married, and lived in Italy. In Capua, he studied Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* with Rabbi Hillel of Verona.† Despite his intense commitment to the path of mystical experience, Abulafia was deeply influenced by Maimonides and the philosophical approach current at that time. He adopted Maimonides' concept of the Active Intellect which emanates from God and directs the physical creation. He associated it with the projection of the divine power, which is present in everything. The Active Intellect can touch the human intellect (the human spiritual potential) that has been actualized through meditation. The human being thus can receive the divine influx, the overflowing divine spiritual consciousness that radiates from God. Abulafia sometimes calls the Active Intellect the *dibur kadmon*, the primordial speech or word. The Bible calls the human intellect or consciousness "the image of God," in which man was created.‡

* The conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE by the Assyrians resulted in the scattering to unknown lands of the ten Israelite tribes who lived there. The belief in the messiah in the Middle Ages was tied up with the return of the Ten Lost Tribes.

† Maimonides' *Guide* was an attempt to harmonize Judaism and philosophy for the intellectual elite of the time and is therefore written so that its deepest meanings and implications will not be grasped by the average reader. Often, ideas are expressed intermittently and briefly so that the reader must connect elements of thoughts from a variety of portions of the text before truly understanding the idea that Maimonides is presenting.

‡ As discussed earlier in the section on Maimonides, the term Intellect does not refer to an intellectual or mental function as the term is used today. In medieval times, Jewish philosophers and mystics were greatly influenced by Muslim philosophers who in turn were influenced by Aristotle. For them the Intellect denotes a spiritual faculty emanating from the divine realm and inherent, in potential, in human beings.

Scholem remarks that for Abulafia, there is a “stream of cosmic life – personified for him in the *intellectus agens* (active intellect) of the philosophers, which runs through the whole of creation. There is a dam which keeps the soul confined within the natural and normal borders of human existence and protects it against the flood of the divine stream, which flows beneath it or all around it; the same dam, however, also prevents the soul from taking cognizance of the Divine.”³²³ Through the meditation practices he developed, Abulafia sought to open himself to receive this divine stream.

When Abulafia returned to Spain from Italy, he studied the Kabbalah, especially the early text of the *Sefer yetsirah* (Book of Formation) which presents the creation as having taken place through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the numbers, planets, and spatial dimensions. He immersed himself in the commentaries on the *Sefer yetsirah* by Eleazar of Worms, the renowned Ashkenazic hasid who taught various meditations on names of God. While the methods that Abulafia later developed were unique, he acknowledged adopting elements from Eleazar of Worms. In turn, Eleazar maintained that Abraham already knew the letter combination system and said they were secrets passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation, until they reached mystics in the medieval period.

It is claimed that in 1270 Abulafia had a revelation that affected the course of his life. Some scholars write that God appeared to Abulafia and commanded him to meet with the Pope; others say that an inner voice spoke to him. But whatever the case, based upon a revelation, he went to Rome in 1280 in order to convert Pope Nicholas III to Judaism. The Pope heard of this and issued orders to burn Abulafia at the stake as soon as he arrived. Outside the city of Rome a stake was erected. Fortunately for Abulafia, the night before he arrived the Pope had a stroke and died. However, Abulafia was captured and briefly thrown into prison.

He was next heard of in Sicily in the year 1281, where he claimed that he was the messiah. By now he had gathered a circle of followers in Sicily “who moved at his command.” His behavior was bizarre and his teachings strongly challenged some of the accepted beliefs in traditional Judaism, even among kabbalists. During his own time he was considered a maverick, perhaps a crazy and dangerous person, as he proclaimed himself a prophet and messiah. As a result he was severely attacked by the orthodox Jewish community and was forced into exile on the island of Comino near Sicily. Abulafia probably died around 1291, as there is no indication of any activities or writing by him after that date.

Abulafia began writing in 1271 and wrote about fifty texts. Although he was one of the most prolific writers of the medieval period on Kabbalah, yet it was only in the twentieth century that many of his manuscripts were found. These books included his interpretation of classic Jewish texts of antiquity and accounts of his spiritual experiences. And most important, a number of his books offered detailed descriptions of complex meditation practices based upon letter combination in conjunction with other exercises, which became the basis of ecstatic Kabbalah.

While there is very little written in English about Abulafia’s relationship to his followers, it appears they wanted more than an academic understanding of God. Abulafia offered a mystical path not taught by other kabbalists of the time to those who had the courage and capacity for understanding, memorizing, and putting his techniques into practice. What’s more, his message offered a challenging journey that, until Abulafia, had belonged only to those men written about in the Torah and Talmud of ages past. His path required dedication and discipline of the highest order. The following demonstrates the dedication required of his students:

One who enters the path of combination [of letters of the alphabet], which is the way that is close to knowledge of

God in truth, from all the ways he will at once test and purify his heart in the great fire, which is the fire of desire; and if he has strength to stand the way of ethics, close to desire; and his intellect is stronger than his imagination,* he rides upon it as one who rides upon his horse and guides it by hitting it with the boots to run at his will, and to restrain it with his hand, to make it stand in the place where the intellect will wish, and his imagination is to be a recipient that he accept his opinion. . . . The man who possesses this great power, he is a man in truth.³²⁴

Although Abulafia has been portrayed as an ascetic by some scholars, Moshe Idel, the most renowned contemporary expert on Abulafia, points out that he was not as extreme as some of his disciples were, nor as the later generations of kabbalists who combined Abulafia's techniques with Sufi-influenced austerities. Rather, Abulafia believed that by strengthening one's spiritual aspect (intellect) rather than by suppressing body, senses, or mind (imagination), it would be possible to achieve the state of prophecy or even mystic union. Idel writes: "As Abulafia understood man's inner struggle as taking place between the intellect (spirit) and the imagination (mind), one cannot find in his writings extreme ascetic instructions. . . . His approach is rather that, in order to attain 'prophecy,' one must act in the direction of strengthening the intellect rather than that of suppressing the body, the soul, or the imagination."³²⁵ This is very different from a path of extreme austerities.

* Like the word "intellect," in the writings of Abulafia the word "imagination" also has a variety of meanings depending upon the context. Here Abulafia is using the word "intellect" to denote willpower as an intellectual act of controlling the desires. "Imagination" here is being used to indicate the myriad desires of the mind.

Reaching towards the “abstract” and ineffable name of God, Abulafia focused his meditation practices on combinations and permutations of the written or spoken names of God, which he felt would bring him in touch with that imperceptible reality that is the true abstract name, thus drawing down the divine influx and actualizing his intellect. As Scholem explains, “Abulafia believes that whoever succeeds in making this great name of God, the least concrete and perceptible thing in the world, the object of his meditation, is on the way to true mystical ecstasy.”³²⁶

His technique of merging into the “nameless” or the “word” was through a complex process of combining letters, vowels, and words from the Hebrew alphabet on the written level, then on the verbal level (by singing the letters), and ultimately on the mental level through concentration. Some of the techniques were shared with earlier kabbalists and the Hasidei Ashkenaz, but one which Abulafia seemed to have developed himself was *tseruf*, the practice of letter combination. Literally, *tseruf* means smelting or merging, as well as separating the true from the false, the real from the unreal.

In addition, he prescribed a fixed method of breathing and movements of the head and hands in accordance with the letters being vocalized. It is probable that Abulafia incorporated elements of the yogic systems of *pranayam* and *asanas* into his breathing techniques and body postures. Scholem comments that some passages of his book *Or ha-sekhel* (Light of the Mind) read like Judaized versions of a yoga manual. The fact that Abulafia traveled a great deal would have provided him the opportunity to encounter yogis and adepts of different spiritual paths.

Through his practices, he sought to free his soul from the “seals” and “knots” that bound it to the physical world and that kept it in a state of separation from God. These seals and knots were the way he described the obstacles, the lower, evil inclinations

that prevent the Active Intellect from flowing into a person's consciousness and actualizing his spiritual potential. Abulafia maintained that the letters and words themselves have no power on their own, but when absorbed with the breath and spiritual intellect of the individual they become dynamic forces with shapes of their own that transform them into powers, and the letters thereby transform the person meditating.

Abulafia and his disciples experienced both inner light and sound during their meditation. Here is an account by one of his disciples of the experience of inner light:

The third night, after midnight, I nodded off a little, quill in my hands and paper on my knees. Then I noticed that the candle was about to go out. I rose to put it right, as oftentimes happens to a person awake. Then I saw that the light continued. I was greatly astonished, as though, after close examination, I saw that it issued from myself. I said: "I do not believe it." I walked to and fro all through the house and, behold, the light is with me; I lay on a couch and covered myself up, and behold, the light is with me all the while. I said: "This is truly a great sign and a new phenomenon which I have perceived."³²⁷

Abulafia wrote about the devotees ascending from the outer human speech to inner speech and merging into the divine speech, the *dibur kadmon*:

And they ascend from light to light ... to the union, until their inner speech returns, cleaving to the primordial speech which is the source of all speech, and they further ascend from speech to speech until the inner human speech [is a] power in itself, and he prepares himself to receive the divine speech.³²⁸

Abulafia also wrote that the combination of letters and names creates a kind of internal music in the meditator. The melodies vibrate within and bring joy to the heart of the meditator.

I will now explain to you how the method of *tseruf* proceeds. You must realize that letter combination acts in a manner similar to listening with the ears. The ear hears sounds and the sounds merge, according to the form of the melody or the pronunciation. I will offer you an illustration. A violin and a harp join in playing and the ear hears, with sensations of love, variations in their harmonious playing. The strings touched with the right hand or the left hand vibrate, and the experience is sweet to the ears, and from the ears the sound travels to the heart and from the heart to the spleen [the seat of emotion]. The joy is renewed through the pleasure of the changing melodies, and it is impossible to renew it except through the process of combinations of sounds.

The combination of letters proceeds similarly. One touches the first string, that is, analogically, the first letter, and the right hand passes to the others, to second, third, fourth, or fifth strings, and from the fifth it proceeds to the others. In this process of permutations new melodies emerge and vibrate to the ears, and then touch the heart. This is how the technique of letter combination operates. . . . And the secrets which are disclosed in the vibrations rejoice the heart, for the heart then knows its God and experiences additional delight. This is alluded to in the verse (Psalms 19:8): "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul." When it is perfect, it restores the soul.³²⁹

Abulafia gives detailed instructions for his meditation techniques in his book *Hayei ha-olam ha-ba* (Life of the World-to-

Come). He includes hints on preparing oneself for a period of meditation, describes the technique, and guides his disciple on what to expect as he experiences the “intellectual influx.” It is interesting that rather than divesting himself of thought and rising above the thinking process, as taught in many other systems, he intensely increases the flow of thought in his mind, perhaps making his mind hyperactive and losing control, as a way of rising above it. We have included this selection in its entirety because it covers all aspects of the meditation practice he taught:

Make yourself ready to meet your God, O Israel. Get ready to turn your heart to God alone, cleanse your body, and choose a special place where none will hear you, and remain altogether by yourself in isolation. Sit in one place in a room or in the attic, but do not disclose your secret to anybody. If you can do this in the day time in your own home, do even if only a little. But it is best to do it at night. Be careful to withdraw your thoughts from all the vanities of the world when you are preparing yourself to speak to your Creator, and you want Him to reveal to you His mighty deeds.

Robe yourself in your *tallit* [prayer shawl] and put the *tefillin* [phylacteries] on your head and hand; so that you may feel awed before the Shekhinah [divine immanence] that is with you at that time, cleanse your garments. If you can, let your garments all be white, for this is a very great aid to experiencing the fear and love for God. If you are doing this at night, kindle many lights so that your eyes will see brightly.

Then take in hand pen and ink and a writing board, and this will be your witness that you have come to serve your God in joy and with gladness of heart. Begin to combine letters, a few or many, reverse them and roll them around

rapidly until your heart feels warm. Take note of the permutations, and of what emerges in the process. When your heart feels very warm at this process of combinations and you have understood many new subjects that you had not known through tradition or through your own reason, when you are receptive to the divine influence, and the divine influence has touched you and stirred you to perceptions one after another, get your purified thoughts ready to envision God, praised be He, and His supreme angels. Envision them in your heart as though they were people standing or sitting about you, and you are among them like a messenger whom the king and his ministers wish to send on a mission and he is ready to hear about his mission from the king or his ministers.

After envisioning all this, prepare your mind and heart to understand mentally the many subjects that the letters conjured up in you, concentrate on all of them, in all their aspects, like a person who is told a parable or a riddle or a dream or as one who ponders a book of wisdom in a subject so profound as to elude his comprehension which will make you receptive to seek any plausible interpretation possible.

All this will happen to you after you will have dropped the writing tablet from your hand and the quill from your finger or they will have fallen away by themselves, because of the intensity of your thoughts. And be aware that the stronger the intellectual influx will become in you, your outer and inner organs will weaken and your whole body will be agitated with a mighty agitation to a point where you will think you are going to die at that time, for your soul will separate from your body out of great joy in having comprehended what you have comprehended. You will choose death over life, knowing that this death is for the body alone, and that as a result of it your soul will enjoy eternal life.

Then you will know that you have attained the distinction of being a recipient of the divine influx, and if you will then wish to honor the glorious Name, to serve Him with the life of body and soul, cover your face and be afraid to look at God, as Moses was told at the burning bush (Exodus 3:5): “Do not draw near, remove the shoes from your feet, for the ground on which you stand is holy.”

Then return to your bodily needs, leave that place, eat and drink a little, breathe in fragrant odors, and restore your spirit until another time and be happy with your lot. And know that your God who imparts knowledge to man has bestowed His love on you. When you will become adept in choosing this kind of life, and you will repeat it several times until you will be successful in it, strengthen yourself, and you will choose another path even higher than this.³³⁰

While a variety of practices exist that incorporate movement with repetition of phrases or words, none occupy the intellectual faculties of the mind with so many activities on changing objects, combined with vocal and body involvement. What is also unique about Abulafia’s letter combination system is that the combination of so many objects (letters, vowels, words, physical movements, and breaths) requires an extraordinary memory. Idel points out that this system does not allow for prolonged periods of contemplation, but rather “short bursts into eternal life, followed by a rapid return to the life of this world.”³³¹ He comments about some unusual aspects of Abulafia’s system:

Abulafia’s method is based upon the contemplation of a constantly changing object: one must combine the letters and their vowel signs, “sing” and move the head in accordance with the vocalization, and even lift one’s hands in the gesture of Priestly Blessing. This combination of constantly

changing components is entirely different from what we know of these other techniques. Abulafia is not interested in relaxing the consciousness by means of concentration on a “point,” but in purifying it by the necessity to concentrate intensely on such a large number of activities that it is almost impossible at that moment to think about any other subject. By this means, the consciousness is purified of every subject apart from the names being uttered.³³²

The complexity of this system can be illustrated by examining the process of letter combination. When working with a Hebrew letter it must be combined with the letters of the explicit name of God (YHWH). Each letter is combined with the explicit name using each of the five vowels of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, in using the first letter *aleph*, it is joined with each letter of YHWH, so that there would be four combinations, AY, AH, AW, AH. Each of these is then vocalized by every possible permutation of the five vowels, *holam*, *kamats*, *hirik*, *tserei*, *kubuts*.

There were specific instructions on how many breaths to take between each letter combination, specific directions on how long the breaths should be on the exhalation while reciting a particular letter/vowel combination, and how the head and hand movements should be coordinated with the above. Furthermore, Abulafia instructed his followers to see the letters as a visionary experience, either as the names of God themselves or in the shape of a man, symbolizing the divine being.

In theory, as one author writes, one meditation session could take more than a day if anyone could do it, and if you made a mistake on breath, hand, or sound you had to start over again. It would be very dangerous not to start from the beginning, according to Abulafia.

As complex and difficult as this system may appear to be, Abulafia had several disciples who attested to its effectiveness.

For example, in the anonymous work written in 1295 called *Sha'arei tsedek* (Gates of Virtue), one of Abulafia's disciples discusses the basic ideas of prophetic Kabbalah, and describes the two other methods by which he tried to attain "spiritual expansion": the method of "effacement" as practiced by Muslim mystics and the method of rationalistic philosophy, until he finally arrived at Kabbalah and the path of the names, through which he attained the spiritual level he desired. A short selection describing his experience of inner light was cited a few pages back. The complete selection, included as Appendix #4, gives a revealing account of his relationship with his master as well as his progress in taking his soul beyond the physical realm and filling it with the divine influx.

Abulafia's techniques were also adopted and incorporated into later practices of Jewish mysticism. The Sufi Jewish mystics who had originated in Egypt continued to live in the Holy Land during Abulafia's time; it is thought that they incorporated elements of his teachings, and produced a kind of hybrid Sufi Kabbalah. Abulafia's influence was also felt among kabbalists like Isaac of Akko and Shem Tov ibn Gaon in the fourteenth century, and even in the teachings of the Safed mystics of the sixteenth century like Moses Cordovero and Hayim Vital.



CHAPTER 12

The Mystic Fellowship of Safed: Moses Cordovero and Isaac Luria

KABBALAH CONTINUED TO DEVELOP and grow despite, or perhaps because of, the adversities experienced by the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean in the late fifteenth century. The expulsion of the Jews from Spain and the Inquisition forced Jews to convert to Christianity or flee into exile. Many went to Greece, Turkey, even to Mexico. Others went to the Holy Land, then under Muslim domination. In Safed, a small city in northern Israel, the Kabbalah flourished, as numerous fellowships of mystics gathered together to nurture and support one another in the mystic quest. The renewal of Kabbalah came through a community of mystic brothers who shared in a union based on love of God, the Shekhinah, and one another.

Moses Cordovero

The sixteenth-century rabbi Moses ben Jacob Cordovero was one of the most important scholars and kabbalists of Safed.

Cordovero was born around 1522 and died in 1570. While his birthplace is unknown, the name Cordovero strongly indicates that his family came from Cordoba, Spain, and most likely fled from there during the Inquisition due to the expulsion of Jews beginning in 1492.

Little is known of Cordovero's origin and early life. It is possible that he was born in Safed; it is certain that he spent most of his life there. Cordovero was a major influence in the transformation of Safed into one of the most important centers of kabbalistic teachings in the sixteenth century. Moses Cordovero, Isaac Luria, and Joseph Karo are among three of the most renowned figures in the history of Kabbalah and they all lived in Safed at the same time. All of them had distinctive talents and special views on aspects of kabbalistic theology. And while there are differences between Luria and Cordovero on specific aspects of the sefirot, these are minor compared to their common spiritual and messianic view that their mission was to restore the well-being of the divine realm of God through collective action. All three were practicing mystics who shared a revolutionary outlook that man's individual and collective actions could reestablish order in the cosmos. They were leaders of a mystical fellowship that, as one renowned Safed kabbalist, Hayim Vital, described it, were like brothers, each of whom bound himself "to the others as if he were one limb within the body of the fellowship. . . . And should there be one among them in distress, all must take it upon themselves to share his troubles, whether it has to do with some illness or with his children, God forbid."³³³

Cordovero was the first and foremost leader of that fellowship and, while known for his prolific writing (approximately thirty books and manuscripts), he is most important historically for his ability to demonstrate the underlying unity of the kabbalistic tradition by organizing the various, often seemingly contradictory, viewpoints and writings, especially the Zohar,

into a methodical system. However, our focus is more specifically on Cordovero as the practicing mystic and teacher, which unfortunately, is not well documented. His interest in the writings of Abraham Abulafia reveals that he was not only preoccupied by an academic interest in the symbolism of the sefirot, he was actively involved in exploring techniques of mystic practice.³³⁴ While Cordovero began his study of rabbinic law with the eminent scholar and mystic Rabbi Joseph Karo,³³⁵ he then went on to become a disciple of Solomon Alkabetz,* his brother-in-law and founder of the circle of kabbalists at Safed.

Alkabetz and Joseph Karo were acquaintances, and Alkabetz not only had a significant influence on Cordovero in his mystical pursuits but also on Karo. Karo and Alkabetz created the ritual of *tikun leil shavuot*, the tradition of staying up all night on the evening of the holiday of Shavuot. It was during one of these all-night rituals that Karo was visited for the first time by his *maggid*, whom he describes as an “angel who perched on his shoulder and kissed Jewish law into his mouth.”³³⁶ Cordovero was in search of a deeper understanding of Kabbalah, and Alkabetz, a charismatic person who inspired his audiences with his knowledge of Kabbalah, was an obvious resource.

The two of them, along with other Safed mystics, took the kabbalistic mystic concepts and practices of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and pushed them to a level unimagined – or at least undocumented by – the earlier mystics. A central theme of these teachings is the cosmic repercussion of Adam’s sin.

* Alkabetz is also credited with initiating the ritual of going into the fields just prior to sundown on Friday to physically welcome the special “additional” soul all Jews receive on the Sabbath, identified with the Shekhinah, which is symbolically personified as the Sabbath bride. Despite his prolific writings on both the Bible and Kabbalah, Alkabetz is best known for his “Lekha Dodi” (Welcome, O Beloved Bride), a hymn which welcomes the Sabbath bride, sung throughout the world on the eve of the Sabbath.

Early kabbalists taught that prior to his sin there was no material world. All human souls were part of the original soul of Adam; they were now the fallen sparks of the soul of Adam which not only partook of the sin, but then, because of the sin, were forced into exile from the spiritual realms to the physical world. Up to this point there is no major difference between earlier kabbalist teachings and interpretations of the Torah or Zohar.

The divergence from early Kabbalah begins with Cordovero, who soon became Alkabets's master and a guide to other prominent kabbalists of Safed. The Safed mystics believed that it was their duty to help redeem the Jewish people and restore the original divine cosmic order through prayer, meditation, and other spiritual practices. The concept of individual responsibility for restoring the universe reverses the traditional notion of God's autonomy and control so central to Jewish teachings. It is a revolutionary concept, for it implies that God looks to the individual human being to perform an act of his own will to bring himself and the world out of exile. Human beings take control of God's well-being with their every act of religious observance – every good deed or sin has its effect on the divine. As Lawrence Fine, an important scholar of sixteenth-century Kabbalah, writes:

God is no longer conceived to be in control of all history in the conventional theological sense. Rather God's own well-being is determined by what human beings do or fail to do. The mystic's religious observance takes on an altogether new meaning by investing his every deed with enormous significance.³³⁷

But not only was Adam's sin the cause of man's exile, it also caused the exile of the Shekhinah. From this perspective, the Shekhinah is in exile wandering alone on the earth, parted from her other half (God) due to Adam's sin (the sin of all souls in this

world). Many scholars such as Gershom Scholem and George Robinson have written that this revolutionary concept appeared in Jewish life following the historical crisis of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Cordovero, Alkabets, and most of their students, who were primarily from the Iberian Peninsula, were attracted to the idea that only a collective action had the power to achieve that which had never been achieved, restoring the cosmic order to what it was before Adam's sin and bringing the Shekhinah out of her long exile. (Jews have been persecuted and expelled many times throughout history but no group prior to the Safed mystics had the audacity to take on a responsibility of this magnitude!)

To what extent the expulsion from Iberia consciously or unconsciously influenced Cordovero or any other of the Safed mystics or their students, is impossible to determine. But it is possible that the expulsion, for the wider Jewish community of Safed, was a major contributor to their increased interest in the Zohar and a mystic perspective on life, in which this physical world becomes unreal and the inner life becomes real. Life in this world is seen from a spiritual, eternal perspective rather than the (painful) here and now. The teachings of the mystics of Safed fit the Jewish community's conceptual mindset of that time, which created a receptive environment for accepting radical changes in Jewish thought.

For whatever reason or reasons, Cordovero and his master, Alkabets, did have an emotional intensity, a sense of guilt and shame, which motivated them to engage in unique spiritual practices they believed would restore cosmic order. Together they performed *gerushin* (banishments), a practice of wandering into the countryside to imitate the exiled Shekhinah and thus transform themselves into a receptive vessel for her. In *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, Cordovero describes the experience:

One should wander, as if exiled, from place to place, purely for the sake of Heaven, and thereby make oneself a vessel for the Shekhinah in exile.³³⁸

During these *gerushin*, Cordovero experienced interpretations of biblical texts that would pour from his mouth. Cordovero said, “New ideas would come to us in a manner that cannot be believed unless one has seen or experienced it many times.”³³⁹ *Gerushin* was only one of the many means at hand that would allow for communion with the Shekhinah. Alkabets also taught Cordovero how to meditate on the graves of great spiritual leaders of former times in the area of Safed.

Cordovero and his brotherhood were men of ascetic pioussness. One had to be pure in thought and action in order to make one’s heart the abode of the Shekhinah and to engage in mystic practice. This theme was developed into a system of *hanhagot* (rules of mystical piety), which became a genre of literature produced by many of the Safed mystics as a daily guide for their brotherhood. They were an intricate part of the teachings of the sages of Safed and laid the foundation for their mystic teachings. They can also be seen as representing a counterpart to mysticism, a theme inherent to so much of Jewish thinking, of Talmud and the Zohar, of law and love.

Cordovero included forty-one rules in his *hanhagot*. The following is a selection:

A person should never lie and ought to keep away from lies; he must not utter a false word in any manner whatsoever.

Let a person commune with one of the associates [companions] every day for the purpose of conversing about devotional concerns.

A person should not turn his heart away from meditating

upon words of Torah and holiness, so that his heart will not be empty and void of reflection upon the commandments, and in order that his heart may become a dwelling place for the Shekhinah.³⁴⁰

In *The Palm Tree of Deborah* Cordovero had already put forward the concept that every action and thought of man affected the upper worlds, the divine realm. The individual therefore must imitate God in each aspect of mundane life. Cordovero explains how to do so. By the time Luria arrived in Safed, the groundwork had been prepared. After a very close relationship between Cordovero and Luria lasting six months, Cordovero died at age forty-eight. Luria became the leader of the fellowship. By all historical accounts, Cordovero, while a dynamic thinker, did not have the influence or charisma of Luria, who went far deeper, affecting the course of Jewish mysticism and religious practice even to this day.

Isaac Luria

Isaac ben Solomon Luria, generally known by an acronym of his name, *ha-Ari* (the divine Rabbi Isaac),* lived from 1534 to 1572. He was born in Jerusalem, but when his father died his mother moved to Egypt, where he was brought up by a wealthy uncle. Luria studied under one of the most renowned rabbinic scholars in Egypt, who was also a kabbalist. Luria may have been initiated into the life of a mystic through his influence. At the age of fifteen Luria married his cousin and was able to continue his studies as he was well provided for. At about the age of twenty-two, he became absorbed in the study of the Zohar, which had recently been printed for the first time.

* Literally, the word *Ari* means Lion and is a play on words based on the initials of Luria's name.

The Zohar had a profound effect on Luria and most likely inspired him to adopt the life of a recluse. He withdrew to an island off the banks of the Nile, and for seven years secluded himself in an isolated cottage, where he spent his time reading and meditating. While on the Nile he visited his family only on the Sabbath, speaking very seldom, and always in Hebrew. At this stage of his life Luria was having frequent internal visions and interviews with the prophet Elijah,* by whom he was initiated into the divine path. He also recounted that while he was asleep his soul ascended to heaven and conversed with many great teachers of the past. It was during these seven years of seclusion that Luria began developing his kabbalist system.

In 1570 Luria settled in Safed. Safed welcomed him as it was a cultural haven of scholars, poets, and writers, and there were many kabbalists open to new ideas. They were sincere seekers intent on creating the right conditions for the messiah to appear. When Luria arrived, Moses Cordovero had been the central figure in the kabbalist community for some time. There is some evidence that Luria regarded Cordovero as his spiritual master. The temperament and values of the community and Luria meshed. Cordovero died on June 17, 1570, the same year that Luria had arrived. Luria filled the vacuum of leadership created by Cordovero's death.³⁴¹

Luria lived in Safed for only about two years, and during this time he dominated the kabbalistic community. However, it should be stressed that by the time of Luria's arrival, the community included other illustrious kabbalists in addition to Moses Cordovero, Joseph Karo, and Solomon Alkabetz:

Jacob Berab, who had set out to reinitiate rabbinic ordination by reestablishing an unbroken line back to Moses;

* As we saw earlier, *giluy Eliyahu* (revelation by the prophet Elijah) was common among Jewish mystics.

Elijah de Vidas, the author of *Reshit hokhmah* (The Beginning of Wisdom), one of the most influential ethical works in Judaism;

Eleazar Azikri, author of *Sefer haredim* (The Book of the Pious); and

Hayim Vital, author of the *Ets hayim* (The Tree of Life).

Luria the charismatic mystic was not only in harmony with the mystical atmosphere and culture of Safed, but before his arrival the town had already become one of the major centers in the world influencing Jewish religious thought. Kabbalistic thinking was becoming part of the mainstream, and was being spread to other parts of the world by followers of Cordovero and other teachers living in Safed.

Luria had four groups of disciples, as well as some disciples who were outside the structure of a group. The first two groups became the vessels for his secret teachings and rituals and his formulae of invocation. To his first and most notable group belonged Hayim Vital, Jonathan Sagis, Joseph Arzin, Isaac Kohen, Gedaliah ha-Levi, Samuel Uceda, Judah Mishan, Abraham Gavriel, Shabatai Menashe, Joseph ibn Tabul, and Elijah Falko. The third and fourth groups consisted of novices, to whom he taught elementary Kabbalah.

Since Luria wrote very little, we are completely dependent on Hayim Vital (1543–1620), Joseph ibn Tabul, and a few other disciples to tell us what he was like as a man and what he taught. But everything they wrote was subject to their interpretation, and none of them were able to convey Luria's unique combination of personal charisma and spiritual insight. Since the writings of these disciples, especially of Vital, are all that remain of him, they have become synonymous with the teachings of Luria.

The irony is that according to Vital, Luria did not want his

teachings to be known beyond the circle of his students (possibly only to Vital himself) nor did he desire to speak in public. However, his disciples continued to gather around him, and Vital tried to convince Luria to continue as their teacher. Luria also refused to commit anything of his mystical thinking to writing aside from a short commentary on a section of the Zohar and some religious poetry. He explained why:

It is impossible, because all things are connected with one another. I can hardly open up my mouth to speak without feeling as though the sea burst its dams and overflowed. How then shall I express what my soul has received, and how can I put it down in a book?³⁴²

If he could hardly express his wonderment at his experience of the divine unity, how could he write it or tell it? Yet he did divulge something, as the story of his death reveals. Luria died at the age of thirty-eight from the plague. He predicted his early death and attributed it to the fact that he had divulged too much of his mystical knowledge to his disciples. What he divulged isn't really known, but from reading between the lines of Vital's writings, it seems that Vital pressed him to give the esoteric meaning of a passage in the Zohar. Luria said he didn't have permission from "on high" to do so, that it was a great mystery. But finally Vital wore him down and he revealed it; the esoteric secret had to do with the level of Luria's own soul and his spiritual attainments. He also told Vital that as a result he would have to die within the year.

Luria's sin was in teaching the mystery to people who were not deserving. There are many hints in Luria's writings that he felt his disciples didn't love one another enough, and this is what made them undeserving. That is why he didn't have divine permission to teach them the inner secrets. Yet he revealed too

much and, like Moses the prophet of the Bible who couldn't enter the promised land with his people, Luria ultimately felt he had failed in his mission.

LURIA'S COSMOLOGY

Based on the teachings of the Zohar and early Kabbalah, Luria developed his own symbolic explanation concerning the process of creation, which resonated with the Jewish psyche of his time, both on a national and a psychological level. At the heart of Luria's teachings are the concepts of *tsimtsum* (contraction) and *shevirat ha-kelim* (shattering of the vessels). Luria believed that at the time of the initial creation, God contracted or withdrew into Himself, thus creating a vacuum or empty space (*tehiru*) in which the creation could take place. According to Luria, prior to *tsimtsum*, the spiritual aspects or qualities of God – which the kabbalists called the *sefirot* – existed undifferentiated, beyond duality, within the *Ayn-Sof* (the infinite primal light).

Know that before the emanations were emanated and the creatures created, the simple supernal light filled all there was and there was no empty area whatever, that is, an empty atmosphere and a vacuum. All was filled with that simple infinite light. It had no beginning and no end. All was simple light in total sameness. This is called the endless light.

When in His simple will it was resolved to create worlds and emanate the emanations, to bring to objective existence the perfection of His deeds, and His names and His appellations, which was the reason for the creation of the worlds, then He contracted Himself within the middle point in Himself, in the very center. And He contracted that light, and it was withdrawn to the sides around the middle point. Then there was left an empty space, an atmosphere, and a vacuum extending from the precise point of the center.³⁴³

Luria makes it clear that this is all metaphorical and not meant physically: “Know that for the sake of comprehension we have been permitted to draw on analogies from the physical organisms, . . . but you, enlightened one, cleanse your thinking to realize that in the supernal realm there is nothing physical.”³⁴⁴

With *tsimtsum*, God expelled from himself even the potential for negativity, thus creating the “seed” or potential for the duality of positive and negative, good and evil. At the highest level, all is oneness. Only when the creation process begins does the undifferentiated primal light divide into the duality of positive-negative, masculine-feminine forces.

The concept of *shevirat ha-kelim* explains the next step in the creation process in a manner similar to the Big Bang theory: At the moment of creation, the primary emanation of light from the Ayn-Sof was too intense to flow into the creation in an orderly way, so it shattered the vessels (of light) that were meant to contain and channel it.* From this cataclysm, sparks of the divine light flew off helter-skelter in a chaotic profusion. Some of the sparks returned to their source, while others fell into the material planes and were imprisoned in the *kelipot*, shells or shards of coarse matter. Thus there are sparks of the divine imprisoned everywhere in the creation.

On a narrative level, Adam’s sin of disobedience to God, for which he and Eve were thrown out of the Garden of Eden, is a metaphor for the shattering of the vessels and the scattering of the light. Adam’s sin resulted in disharmony in the divine realms, according to Luria, as the divine light, the primal energy, no

* Luria uses these metaphors to explain something beyond description in human language. How there could be preexisting “vessels” of light to channel the primal light is beyond intellectual comprehension. Another metaphor he used was that the primal light flowed into the creation through the body of the primal Adam (Adam Kadmon).

longer flowed through the sefirot into the created world in an orderly way.

The concept of the sefirot is the imposition of order on the flow of light into the creation in successive stages, according to Luria. He used the metaphor of *partsufim* (faces, configurations, arrangements) to explain it further. The *partsufim* are groupings of the ten sefirot into five configurations or pairs. When the *partsufim* are in balance, they interrelate and energize each other so that the divine force flows between them harmoniously. At the time the primal light became dispersed into the creation, the harmonious flow of energy among the *partsufim* was interrupted, and thus the divine realms went into a state of imbalance. The flow of the creative energy that had formerly circulated between them continuously had stopped. The restoration of their harmonious energy flow is the goal of *tikun olam*, “repair of the cosmos,” which was Luria’s concept of creating harmony in the spiritual realm.

The Lurianic notion of *tikun olam* is also based on the principle that all things and actions in the world, no matter how seemingly trivial, are saturated with holy sparks, which are yearning to return to the state of unity from which they fell at the time of creation. Thus it is obligatory for the pious to recite specific prayers and perform rituals and meditation exercises that would not only absolve them of their own sins, but which would free the sparks from the *kelipot*, the shells or layers of materiality, and help them return to their source in the divine.

Luria’s concept of *tikun* was a very powerful notion that caught hold of the imagination of the Jews of his time. Luria and his followers had developed an ideology that was a direct response to the afflictions of the Jewish people. The exile of the Jews from Spain in the fifteenth century was no less a tragedy than the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. The contemporary historian of religion George Robinson elaborates on this theme. He says that particularly at that time in history, an answer was

needed to the question of the existence of evil in the world – “the sort of evil that had forced thousands of Jews to convert to Christianity at sword point, killed countless thousands of other Jews, and finally driven the Iberian Jews into exile.”³⁴⁵ Lurianic Kabbalah gave Jews of this period the responsibility to respond positively to the evil. Rather than lose themselves in bitterness and rage, they were to “repair the cosmos” by engaging themselves in *tikun olam*.

On another level, the efforts to repair or mend the disharmony and polarization in the upper realms can be understood as an externalization of the need for the individual soul to rise above the state of spiritual disharmony and alienation in which human beings all live, to union with the divine being, which is above duality and exists in pure self-contained oneness. This is exemplified in the myth of Adam and Eve, who were commanded not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (which represents duality) and taste only of the tree of life (divine unity). However, they succumbed to the temptation of ego and became trapped in the realm of duality – of suffering and contentment, pain and pleasure, good and evil.

Luria’s teachings embodied the basic vision, corroborated by contemporary science, that “the cosmos consists of a great chain of being, in which one can discern the whole structure of reality in any particular part of it.”³⁴⁶ The universal mystic principle is that the part contains the whole. Like other kabbalists, Luria also divided the creation into four realms of decreasing degrees of spiritual purity: *atsilut* (emanation), *briah* (creation), *yetsirah* (formation), and *assiyah* (making or actualization), in which every lower level mirrors the one above. It is easy to see, therefore, why Luria envisioned that each of the five *partzufim* contained all ten sefirot, that each of the four realms of creation contained an entire set of *partzufim*, that each of the ten sefirot contained elements of all ten sefirot, and so forth.

Luria's teachings spread quickly and influenced many European Jewish scholars and mystics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His concepts of *tikun olam* and liberation of the sparks from gross matter penetrated deeply into the thinking of kabbalists and messianic figures, including Shabatai Tsevi of the seventeenth century. Such concepts as *tsimtsum* (contraction), *shevirah* (shattering), and *tikun* (mending), which underlie the teachings of modern Hasidism, while originating in the Zohar, were greatly illuminated by Luria. From the time of the canonization of the Hebrew Bible in the fifth or fourth century BCE until Luria, there had not been a charismatic mystical authority to equal him in spiritual impact. The thinking of twentieth-century psychologists and writers like Carl Jung and James Joyce was also dramatically influenced by Luria. The synagogue liturgy and many present-day Jewish customs are based upon Lurianic devotional practices.

LURIA'S INFLUENCE AND CHARISMA

Luria's charisma was embodied in his spiritual and psychic sensitivity. His divinatory experiences – ability to read minds, see past lives of disciples, and the like – elevated his authority in the minds of his disciples. His access to the divine realms, where he conversed with Elijah and brought his disciples into contact with him and other great souls, also enhanced Luria's disciples' concept of him as someone of spiritual mastery, who could change their lives and heal them so that they could in turn heal others in their mission to mend the cosmos. In that sense they believed he was their redeemer. Hayim Vital imparts in *Sha'ar ha-hakdamot* (Gate of the Introductions) a first-hand description of his master that represents the experience of all of Luria's disciples:

The Ari [Luria] overflowed with Torah. He was thoroughly expert in Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, Pilpul, Midrash,

Aggadah, Ma'aseh Bereshit, and Ma'aseh Merkavah [various texts, methods of interpretation, and mystical teachings]. He was expert in the language of trees, the language of birds, and the speech of angels. He could read faces in the manner outlined in the Zohar. . . . He could discern all that any individual had done, and could see what they would do in the future. He could read people's thoughts, often before the thought even entered their mind. He knew future events, was aware of everything happening here on earth, and what was decreed in heaven.

He knew the mysteries of *gilgul* [reincarnation], who had been born previously, and who was here for the first time. He could look at a person and tell him how he was connected to higher spiritual levels, and his original root in Adam. He could read wondrous things [about people] in the light of a candle or in the flame of a fire. With his eyes he gazed and was able to see the souls of the righteous, both those who had died recently and those who had lived in ancient times. Together with these departed souls, he studied the true mysteries.

From a person's scent, he was able to know all that he had done. . . . It was as if the answers to all these mysteries were lying dormant within him, waiting to be activated whenever he desired. He did not have to seclude himself to seek them out.

All this we saw with our own eyes. These are not things that we heard from others. They were wondrous things that had not been seen on earth since the time of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai. None of this was attained through magic, heaven forbid. There is a strong prohibition against these arts. Instead, it came automatically, as a result of his saintliness and asceticism, after many years of study in both the ancient and the newer kabbalistic texts. He then increased his piety, asceticism, purity, and holiness until he reached

a level where Elijah would constantly reveal himself to him, speaking to him “mouth to mouth,” teaching him these mysteries and secrets.³⁴⁷

VALUES

Luria’s sensitivity extended to the moral and ethical aspects of people’s lives. He expected his disciples to live according to his high standard. Vital summarizes his teachings:

The most important of all worthy traits consists in an individual’s behaving with humility, modesty, and with the fear of sin to the greatest possible degree. He should also, to the utmost degree, keep his distance from pride, anger, fussiness, foolishness, and evil gossip; and even should he have a significant reason for behaving harshly, he ought to refrain from acting in this way. . . . He should also abstain from idle conversation . . . and not to lose his temper, even with the members of his own household.³⁴⁸

Luria’s sensitivity included even the humblest of animals, as Vital writes:

My master, of blessed memory, used to be careful never to destroy any insect, even the smallest and least significant among them, such as fleas and gnats, bees and the like, even if they were annoying him.³⁴⁹

Luria was especially concerned about displays of anger among his disciples. He believed that it was “an obstacle to mystical inspiration altogether” as it injures a person to the depth of his soul.

In devotion, Luria emphasized the importance of a happy disposition. Sadness runs counter to the attainment of mystical inspiration.

Melancholia is, by itself, an exceedingly unpleasant quality of personality, particularly in the case of an individual whose intention is to acquire esoteric knowledge and experience the Holy Spirit. There is nothing which impedes mystical inspiration – even for someone who is otherwise worthy of it – as much as the quality of sadness.³⁵⁰

Luria also maintained that performance of the commandments (the *mitsvot*) must be done with joyfulness. The amount of “supernal light (*aur elyon*) and the inspiration of the holy spirit (*ruah ha-kodesh*)” that the performance of the *mitsvot* evoked were “in direct proportion to one’s degree of joyfulness.”³⁵¹

Luria was also passionate about the importance of his disciples loving one another:

And especially when it comes to the love for one’s associates who study Torah with one another, each and every person must bind himself to the others as if he were one limb within the body of this fellowship. This is particularly important when an individual possesses the knowledge and the mystical insight with which to understand and apprehend his friend’s soul. And should there be one among them in distress, all must take it upon themselves to share his trouble, whether it has to do with some illness, or with his children, God forbid. And they must all pray on his behalf. Likewise, in all one’s prayers and petitions one should be mindful of his fellows. My teacher, of blessed memory, took great care to caution me about the love which we ought to bear toward our associates, the members of our brotherhood.³⁵²

The Safed kabbalists who preceded Luria, while at the center of kabbalistic thought, were also known for being consumed by melancholy, guilt, and vanity. Luria, like many other masters

throughout history, emphasized in his daily interactions with his students the importance of controlling emotional states that impeded spiritual development, and he was an example in his behavior in that he did not demonstrate those negative states.

In spiritual practice, discipline and passion are required. One cannot help but admire the sincerity and intense dedication to the spiritual life that Luria and his disciples embodied.

In addition, Rabbi Abraham ha-Levi, may God protect and preserve him, related to me that my master, of blessed memory, gave him the following advice concerning the attainment of mystical inspiration: a person must not indulge in idle conversation; he must rise in the middle of the night and weep on account of our poverty of knowledge. He ought to study forty or fifty pages of Zohar each day with the exclusive goal of textual familiarity, without engaging in intensive investigation. He should read the Zohar frequently.

When I asked my teacher how he had merited all the esoteric wisdom in his possession, however, he told me that he had invested a great amount of effort studying. But I responded that Rabbi Moses of Cordovero, of blessed memory, had also done the same. Even I, Hayim, devoted a tremendous amount of effort in acquiring this wisdom. He then told me that while it is true that we applied ourselves extremely diligently, to an extent greater than any of our contemporaries, we did not do as he had done. For how many nights had he remained awake, poring over a single passage of the Zohar? Sometimes he would seclude himself, sit and study only a single passage during the course of six weekday nights. And usually, he would avoid sleeping altogether during these nights.³⁵³

HIS TEACHINGS

As reflected in the stories of his personal life, Luria believed that spiritual truths could not be conveyed through books, although he greatly valued the *Sefer yetsirah*, *Sefer ha-bahir*, and the Zohar, and he used their symbolism as the vocabulary for his own teachings. To Luria the sublime secrets of the divine could only be imparted from master to disciple. In fact, Luria defined Kabbalah as the transmission of knowledge from one person to another.³⁵⁴ That is most likely why he did not write, and he requested that his teachings not be spread. He also believed in the power of divine inspiration and internal contact with the prophets of old and with those in spiritual realms beyond the earth. Luria himself was unable to transmit his deepest understanding to others, as it was too sublime to be communicated in earthly language, and his disciples weren't ready to receive it. Yet the personal contact between master and disciple was the core of the relationships among the Safed kabbalists.

This is very different, for example, from Abulafia, who wrote extensively and gave out instructions for mystic union in his books. Abulafia did not deny the importance of a teacher but did not emphasize it either. He had many disciples, but that did not mean one could not learn his methods from books. For Abulafia the important thing was that the exact meditation practice he had prescribed be followed.

One did not become a disciple of Luria's without a diagnosis by Luria. He could see into the heart, mind, and soul of an individual to determine if they were fit to be purified before entering upon discipleship. To diagnose individuals he used a method which allowed him to see with his inner eye several Hebrew letters visible upon an individual's forehead to determine the state of his soul, mind, and body in the most-minute detail.

Luria could also tell much about a person's emotional state by pulse reading, and if required, he "called forth the *nefesh, ruah*, or

neshamah (three levels of the soul) of an individual to speak with it.” It was said that he could know everything about a person, from what they would do in the future to what they would say next, to what past lives they had gone through. However, he utilized these powers in a very affectionate manner. Lawrence Fine, in his ground-breaking work *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos*, gives us one excellent example from Vital of Luria’s skills, how he used them, and a feeling of the warmth that came from him:

Vital wrote that every single evening his master would gaze upon the faces of his disciples. He would then see a scriptural verse shining upon the forehead. The visualized verse was one that pertained to that particular student’s soul, in accordance with the Lurianic notion that every soul possesses interpretations of Scripture that are unique to it. Luria would then partially explain the esoteric meaning of the verse in terms of the significance that it held for that individual’s spiritual condition. The disciple was then instructed to concentrate upon the explanation he had been given and to recite the verse before going to sleep. He did this so that when his soul ascended to the upper realm during sleep, he might gain full knowledge of the verse’s meaning. In this way, the individual’s soul would increase in purity and ascend to still higher levels in the divine realm, where it would enjoy the revelation of additional mysteries of the Torah.³⁵⁵

Before becoming full-fledged members of the fellowship, where much spiritual knowledge was to be obtained, the potential disciples had to go through intensive purification practices due to sins committed in their present life. For each sin committed by a student prior to acceptance or while a practicing disciple, there were specific prescribed acts of purification that had to be endured. These acts of purification are well documented by his

disciples. For lesser sins the act of purification was difficult but tolerable and would require fasting for 87 days, but other acts of purification were even more dreadful. For example, according to Vital, Luria instructed three of his followers to undergo “specific spiritual correction” for having sinned by engaging in immoral behavior. This remedy required 233 days of fasting, 161 of which were accompanied by immersing oneself naked in the snow and rolling frontwards and backwards nine times.

Luria had no hesitation about demonstrating these practices of purification. One act of purification which he appeared to favor required being tied in a cloth sack and having his disciples throw one-pound stones at him. Then he would jump out of the sack into a bed covered with burning nettles and roll around until he was covered with blisters.

However gruesome these activities may appear to us, they need to be perceived through the lens of the sixteenth century, not the twenty-first century, with a special focus on the history of Judeo-Christian attitudes toward sin and Luria’s concept of *shevirat-ha-kelim*, breaking of the vessels.³⁵⁶ It is probable that Luria and the Safed mystics were inspired by the penances of the Hasidei Asheknaz, with which they were familiar through many texts that had been preserved. Also, some members of the fellowship had originally lived in Morocco and other areas of North Africa, where these types of ascetic practices were commonly practiced by the Muslim Sufis.

There appears to be no indication that any of the disciples who wrote about these acts of purification saw them as unusual or harsh. In their writings they emphasized the importance of the number of days a person was to fast or the number of times to be immersed in water. To calculate the number of days for a fast or number of immersions for the particular sin they had committed, they used the intricate kabbalistic application of letter and number combinations.

As mentioned earlier, Luria had four groups of disciples. But his first group mattered the most to him. It was his elite community, which would help with the mending of the cosmos. This is not to say that the other groups were not important or that Jews who were not initiated did not matter. It is just that he believed that only a small, dedicated, and evolved group was necessary to facilitate the mending of the cosmos.

It is important to understand that each figure of the above-mentioned group knew his soul ancestry through Luria or by his own divination. Luria believed himself to be the reincarnation of the biblical Moses, as well as of Simeon bar Yohai, legendary mystic of the Zohar.³⁵⁷ His followers believed they were incarnations of eminent righteous souls as well. Luria maintained that their actions, no matter how small, had a correspondence with, and influence on, the workings of the macrocosm. Their goal clearly stated was that through their actions and daily contemplative ritualistic devotion they would mend the cosmos.

YIHUDIM

One of Luria's contemplative ritualistic acts of devotion intended to mend the cosmos was *yihudim* (unifications). The common understanding of the *yihudim* taught by Luria is that they were silent meditative exercises based on repetition and contemplation of combinations of sacred words or names. They involved "unifying the name of God" and "binding" the individual soul to the upper spheres. The practices were meant to restore the divine harmony in the upper spheres by reconnecting the aspects of God that had become estranged, allowing the sparks to return to the primal light. Thus the purpose of *yihudim* was to bring about the *tikun olam*.

Lawrence Fine comments on the type of meditation on the names that Luria and his disciples practiced. It should be emphasized that the performance of these *yihudim* could take even

more than twenty-four hours. Needless to say, the practitioner had to bring total concentration (*kavanah*) to his practice.

Many of the names used in the performance of the *yihudim* correspond to the *partsufim* and their multiple sub-configurations, the unification of which is effected through formalized and sustained contemplation. . . . Some of these names constitute different spellings of the Tetragrammaton [the 4-letter name of God YHWH] and are known by their *gematria* [numerical values]. Thus, they are called by the names 72, 63, 45, and 52, and correspond to the *partsufim*. . . . As with the *partsufim*, the names of God to which they correspond constitute a vast and complex map of the divine structure. That is, the names are linguistic symbols, denoting various discrete concentrations of divine power. As such, they are not really names in the conventional sense. In a way highly reminiscent of the seemingly arbitrary deconstruction and reconstruction of Hebrew words so strikingly characteristic of Abulafian mysticism, Luria's use of divine names is, to a significant extent, beyond rational understanding altogether. . . . Many of the *yihudim* consist of long sequences of names in deconstructed and reconstructed forms that do not bear any clear meaning. These are typically vocalized in ways that only add to the difficulty of making sense of them.³⁵⁸

We only have one document written by Luria himself, in which he gives instructions on performing a *yihud* to unify the sefirot of *hokhmah* (wisdom) and *binah* (understanding) as well as *tiferet* (beauty) and *malkut* (*kingship*). The result of the *yihud* would be the unification of the name of God YHWH, which would now become whole and perfect, with the qualities of those sefirot unified within it.³⁵⁹

But there was another very important aspect to Luria's *yihudim*, which Lawrence Fine explores – and that was communicating with the souls of deceased saints, what is sometimes called “communicating with the very special dead.”³⁶⁰ This was a distinctive practice that was outside the daily communal prayers and individual meditations that disciples of the fellowship performed. It involved lying down on the graves of deceased saints and holy men and trying to unite with their souls in order to communicate with them and raise one's own spiritual level (and theirs). Apparently, a very similar form of *yihudim* was being practiced by Muslim Sufis in Safed before Luria arrived.³⁶¹

What Luria was teaching went against the Torah and all talmudic injunctions. There appears to be no evidence that *yihudim* as practiced by Luria has any connection to accepted Jewish rites. Although visits to gravesites of saints had become part of Jewish custom since the thirteenth century, under the influence of Sufi practice, stretching out on graves and trying to unite with the souls of the dead was a new Jewish ritual taught by Luria. This gives us insight into Luria's creative ability as well as the power of what he created, as it carried on for centuries into the future.

The underlying basis for these *yihudim* was that Luria and his fellowship believed, as did most kabbalists, in the transmigration of the soul. Descriptions of reincarnation in Kabbalah are fairly complicated, and there is no definitive or comprehensive understanding of what was taught. However, what we know about transmigration as taught by Luria (through the writings of Vital and others) is quite unique and is based on a concept of “soul groups.” Luria taught that all souls belong to a particular soul group and that these groups reach back to the beginning of humanity. All souls were at one time part of Adam – the primal Adam of myth – Adam Kadmon. According to Luria, Adam's sin and banishment from Eden symbolizes the scattering of the primal light into the creation. Thus the souls that were originally

part of Adam scattered in many different directions. Those who came to the earth belonged to various classifications of soul groups. The members of these groups share a deeper relatedness than a blood-family ancestry, due to the fact that they share a long-term metaphysical ancestry going back to the beginning of humanity. Owing to this ancestry and depending upon their group's classification, some members of certain groups would be qualified to help other members in the great task of uplifting souls from the material world. Fine informs us:

The knowledge of one's soul-ancestry – knowledge that Isaac Luria was able to give to his disciples – was thus of absolutely crucial importance to them. It is precisely this affinity of souls that constitutes the basis for the communion of souls at the grave. Because of their natural kinship, through intense concentration, the soul of the adept can arouse the corresponding aspect of soul of the *tsadik* [the master].³⁶²

It cannot be overemphasized that the Luria fellowship was very special to the disciples because of their perceived kinship to their dead metaphysical ancestors and to each other. They took seriously and literally the Zohar's statement that the righteous never depart from this world because they continue to live in all the worlds at the same time, even to a greater extent than during their lifetime.³⁶³ Luria was their earthly guide in terms of teaching the *yihudim* and instructing them on their mistakes. It was very important to him that they succeeded, not only for their sake but for the health of the cosmos.

Yihudim do not necessarily have to be practiced at the grave but could be practiced at home. Better results were thought to occur at the grave, Vital says, and sometimes the whole group of disciples would perform rites at the grave together.

Be aware that in the case of all possible *yihudim*, if you perform the *yihud* by stretching yourself out on the tsadik's actual grave, you should contemplatively intend that by virtue of your stretching out on top of him, you also cause the tsadik to stretch out his lower soul [*nefesh*], which will then spread out in his bones that are in the grave: whereupon he comes alive and his bones become like a body to the soul that is stretched and spread out within them.³⁶⁴

Vital goes on to explain that when the disciple lies on the tsadik's grave, the two souls can concentrate on their "common root" (their deep connection to their soul group which is often called the "soul root") and then they "cleave to one another." They can talk to each other; the tsadik becomes an actor in this world, an advisor and counselor to the disciple. Also, by joining with each other, the mystic and the tsadik can travel together to celestial realms.

By stretching out on the graves of the dead, one symbolically enters the realm of the dead, by implication the divine realms. One enters the death state while still alive, crossing the line between living and dead. In an act that evokes magic and shamanism, one gains strength from the souls of the dead and overcomes the taboos of impurity of contact with the dead. It is thought that these practices may have originated with the Sufi practices of contemplation on the form of a living master, which thereafter had become transformed into contemplation and union with the forms of dead saints.

It is interesting that Vital at one point actually stopped practicing this ritual out of frustration because "those souls did not come to me as openly as they should have done." Not enough concentration and love, Luria said to him! Luria stressed love and intense concentration in all prayer and ritual, especially in *yihudim*. Mystical transformation required that the ritual be accompanied by intense love and concentration if it was to work.

Fine's explanation of *yihudim* allows us to understand Luria a bit more deeply as it represents his earnest attempt to help redeem the cosmos through interaction between this world (souls longing to return and reconnect) and the worlds above. According to Vital, the practice of *yihudim* held greater merit than Torah to Luria.³⁶⁵ It was a living practice; it was the connection between this troubled earth and the more ethereal realms of the vessels above. It was more than words; from the perspective of Luria and his followers, it was the joyful experience of their souls in the act of redemption.

LURIA AS REDEEMER AND MESSIAH

Luria was understood to be the incarnation of not only Moses and Rabbi Simeon, but also Adam and Abel of the early stories of Genesis. Moses and Simeon were viewed as the incarnations of the messiah son of Joseph (precursor to the true and final messiah, from the lineage of David). Vital and the other disciples felt that Luria was the first and only authentic teacher of Kabbalah since the Kabbalah had first appeared and was of the same stature as Simeon bar Yohai. Vital wrote that in every generation God sends to Israel "extraordinary individuals (*yehidei segulah*) 'upon whom the Holy Spirit rested, and to whom Elijah ... revealed himself, instructing them in the secrets of Kabbalah.'"³⁶⁶

When Luria sat with his disciples, he envisioned himself and his disciples as incarnations of Simeon with his disciples in the *idra rabba* (the Great Assembly), discussing matters of spirituality and spurring each other onwards in their spiritual quest. Simeon was also called the *tsadik*, pillar of the world, meaning that he sustained the world. He was the channel through which the divine blessing enters the world. Thus Luria was regarded by his disciples as the messiah, a redeemer and *tsadik* who would bring about the messianic age. Luria's teaching of *tikun olam* has messianic implications, as its goal is to bring about perfection and

salvation to the world. Once the divine realms are brought into a harmonious balance and the divine energy flows from one sefirah to the other in an orderly way, the messianic age would begin on all levels – spiritual and material, cosmic and individual.

Luria's circle of disciples believed that God, in his compassion, sends a redeemer to every generation. In their generation, too, God had not withheld a redeemer but had sent "the great rabbi, our saintly teacher, our rabbi and master, Isaac Luria . . . filled like a pomegranate with [knowledge]." Moreover, the penitential remedies that Luria provided for his disciples to mend their souls had an unmistakable messianic motive: "He gave him [each of his disciples] the *tikun* he required for the corresponding transgression, in order to cleanse his soul, so that he could receive the divine light."³⁶⁷

Yet as we saw earlier, Luria felt he had failed in his mission as he had revealed too much to those who were not ready for the spiritual illumination. The failure and death of the messiah figure is also built into the concept of the messiah who continues to incarnate in every generation. He must fail so that the creation will continue and he can be reborn in a new form. As Gershom Scholem remarks, the disciples of Isaac Luria discovered hints in the Zohar to the effect that "the messiah of the House of Joseph is reborn in every generation. If there is a sufficient number of righteous men in his generation to save him from death [by their merits, then all is well], but if there is no one to save him, then he must die. However, by the repeated deaths he suffers in every generation, he atones for himself so that he need not die at the hands of the wicked Armilus,* but may die every time by a divine kiss."³⁶⁸

* Armilus is the name given to the embodiment of evil, a king who tries to slay the messiah, who is the embodiment of good. He is comparable to the Christian concept of the anti-Christ.



CHAPTER 13

Messiahs of the Post-Inquisition Age

THE BRUTALITY OF THE SPANISH INQUISITION, begun in 1492 and spanning more than three centuries, was itself a horrifying climax to a century of massacres, torture, forced conversions, and exile. The Inquisition especially persecuted the Jewish *conversos* (referred to by the Spanish as *marranos*, meaning “pigs”) – those Jews who had converted to Catholicism to avoid persecution but who were always suspected of “relapsing” into Jewish practices or secretly being Jews. Between 1480 and 1808, about 350,000 Spanish *conversos* fell victim to the Inquisition; many were burned at the stake. Some escaped to Salonika (Thessaloniki), Venice, Amsterdam, London, and the New World, especially Mexico.

Jewish hearts around the Mediterranean were galvanized with the hope that the messiah would appear at any moment and the universe would be healed and perfected. The sufferings of that period were often interpreted by kabbalists and other Jewish religious leaders as the “birth pangs” of the messiah, orchestrated by God to precipitate the messianic age.

Several messiah figures and “prophets” did indeed appear, appealing to both conversos and openly practicing Jews. They offered hope for a political resolution to the suffering of the Jews, as well as spiritual strength to undergo it. Some were bent on leading armies of true believers to defeat the “powers of evil” and restore the Jews to the Holy Land; some sought to influence destiny through prayer, miracles, and magic (sometimes called practical Kabbalah); others (mainly conversos) found meaning in the renewal of their commitment to traditional Jewish religious rites and customs. And still others focused on developing an inner spiritual awareness – the direct experience of God through what has been called ecstatic Kabbalah, a path which provided an alternative reality to the tragic circumstances they found themselves in. Most of the messiahs and spiritual leaders who appeared combined elements of all these approaches. The belief that God had taken direct interest in their welfare by sending them a messiah brought solace.

Moshe Idel, in his insightful work *Messianic Mystics*, proposes that it was divine revelation, or a mystic experience of some sort, that propelled each of the messianic figures. For some it was a one-time, life-changing revelation experienced through the grace of God, while others had sustained inner communion through their dedicated, concentrated efforts in meditation, generally using the Abulafian model of name practices. Idel terms this the “ecstatic model, in which the major messianic activity occurred on the intellectual level, and in personal ecstasy as a prophetic experience.”³⁶⁹ These messiahs translated their inner experiences into the basis for their external mission, but few taught their meditation practices openly to large groups of disciples.

Some messiahs tried to influence the divine power by using the kabbalistic *kavanot* and Lurianic *yihudim*, repeating and manipulating holy names and prayers in order to bring about the *tikun olam*. They tried to precipitate redemption by creating

cosmic harmony and “repairing” the universe, along the lines of Luria’s *tikunim*.

Some of the messiahs who appeared, like Rabbi Joseph della Reina in the late fifteenth century, went even further. They believed that they could force the messiah to appear by engaging in magical acts which would actually alter history. There was a series of books, purporting to be written by God himself (but which were really written by anonymous kabbalists) giving magical incantations which could destroy the demonic realm. The practitioners’ mystic experiences were “viewed as a means of attaining and eventually transmitting magical information. Heavenly revelation is now the channel for the descent of supernal magic, the main tool for the annihilation of the powers of evil as well as bringing of the redemption.”³⁷⁰

Among the messiahs who appeared during this time was a converso cobbler named Ludovico Diaz, from Setubal, Portugal; his disciples included the converso physician to the bishop of Portugal, who returned to Judaism. Eventually, he and his followers were condemned by the Inquisition and burned to death. Ines de Herrera was a female prophet from a converso family who received visitations of her mother’s spirit after her death, advising her to engage in acts of charity. Then she was given an inner experience of light, which brought her messages from the supernal realms about the coming of Elijah the prophet, who would announce the messiah. She predicted that certain signs would appear from heaven to herald his coming. In a vision, she saw the souls of those who had been tortured and burned by the Inquisition. She fasted frequently, as per Jewish law, and kept the Sabbath, urging her followers to do likewise. At this time, throughout Catholic Europe, ordinary Jewish religious practices like fasting, charity, observing the Sabbath, and Jewish dietary laws became extreme statements of faith in Judaism and the messiah.

Another prophet appeared in the same period near Venice among the Ashkenazic Jews.* Asher Leimlin of Germany was active in north Italy for just a few years of the sixteenth century although his reputation was later spread throughout Europe by his followers. A student of Abulafia's name mysticism and the vocabulary of the inner ascent in the chariot, the merkavah, he documents his use of letter and name combinations to travel to heavenly realms and receive divine revelations, some from a feminine entity named Tefillah (prayer), who insists on the importance of the correct recitation of the prayers. Leimlin predicted the imminent coming of the messiah and called for acts of repentance, charity, and fasting. When he died and the messiah still hadn't appeared, many of his disciples lost faith in Judaism and converted to Christianity.

Another messianic figure after the expulsion was Rabbi Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi, who developed a series of vigils called *mishmarot* (lengthy sessions of extra prayers) that he taught would help ease the sufferings of the people in the period preceding the messiah's coming. Other traditional religious expressions were redirected towards messianic ends. These were dangerous activities in those days, due to the threat from the Inquisition. Yet Rabbi Abraham courageously disseminated his writings concerning "the secret of the redemption" to an eager audience throughout most of Europe.

In the early seventeenth century, an interesting phenomenon occurred in Mexico, when several women messiahs appeared among the conversos. Prominent among them were Dona Juana Enriquez and Ines Pereira, who were actually revered as potential mothers of the messiah, as it was impossible to conceive of the

*Jews who were descended from the Spanish community were referred to as Sephardic, even if they eventually lived in countries like Poland. Jews who originated in the rest of Europe were referred to as Ashkenazic, even if they did not come from Germany itself.

messiah as being anything but male! The arm of the Inquisition reached far, however; they were accused of “Judaizing” and condemned to death. Dona Juana Enriquez inspired so much faith in her followers that the Inquisition reported:

Among the Judaizers of this kingdom, she came to be acclaimed as the perfect and saintly Jewess because they saw her [as] a great faster and reciter of prayers. . . . [She was also venerated] because of the many charities she dispensed to those who observed her lapsed law or because of their good deeds. . . . Maybe, because of her false zeal, many died as Jews. She made them give heed to the law of Moses with their last breaths, telling them that it was necessary for their salvation. A woman could not be more daring.³⁷¹

Ines Pereira’s followers believed in her messianic role intensely. It is hard not to think of parallels with the worship of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism.

It appears that as soon as she was old enough to use her reason, she began to Judaize because by the time she was seven years of age she was observing the law of Moses. The reason for this was that all her relatives . . . were falsely persuaded that this young Jewess would give birth to the messiah. [One relative] convinced his sons and daughters of this and thus compelled them to keep the law of Moses. This is also why, in her young years, they dressed her with a tunic of voile. They would place her in the middle of the drawing room and surround her with burning candles. They worshiped her and adored her as a person from whom would be born their redeemer and chief. Without a doubt, they awaited this during her first pregnancy, and when the baby was born all of her relatives fasted [as an expression of thanks to the Lord].³⁷²

David Reubeni and Shlomo Molkho

David Reubeni and Shlomo Molkho were two important messianic figures in the first half of the sixteenth century who combined their outward political vision of liberation with the mystical and magical. The attraction of both these figures was based on the myth of the Ten Lost Tribes who would gather and march to Jerusalem under the messiah's leadership.

Reubeni assumed his name as a symbol of the lost tribe of Reuben. He was probably of Arabian Jewish descent, though his precise place of origin has never been established. He traveled to Italy and other areas of Europe, where he claimed to be a brother of a Jewish king in a distant land and leader of his military force, whose mission it was to retake the Holy Land from the Turks with the help of Christian and Jewish troops gathered from all over Europe. He was accepted by the Pope and other Christian rulers who initially offered him protection, as long as he did not Judaize their conversos.

A young Portuguese man named Diogo Pires, of a converso family, met Reubeni in the court of John II of Portugal in 1525. Pires saw Reubeni as the commander of the forces of the messiah and re-Judaized himself, "swept up, like other conversos, in apocalyptic passion."³⁷³ He changed his name to Shlomo Molkho (meaning "Solomon his king") and circumcised himself. Molkho wrote about his internal mystical experience at the time of his circumcision:

And after I was sealed with the signet of my Creator, awful [awesome] things appeared to me, great and mighty, and great secrets, and they made known to me the hidden things of the wisdom of the holy Kabbalah and great combinations among the sefirot and showed me the treasures of wisdom and illuminated my heart with our God's teaching. And then they ordered me to go to the kingdom

of Turkey... But now I will tell the truth before him who made the sky and the earth, that I neither circumcised myself nor traveled, at the direction of flesh and blood but according to the will of the Lord our God.³⁷⁴

Overnight, seemingly miraculously, Molkho became proficient in Kabbalah, which was attested to by all the authorities of his time who were awed by his genius and the scope of his knowledge. He apparently experienced many divine revelations, which started even before his circumcision and continued throughout his life. The revelations centered around secrets of the redemption and the hidden sense of biblical texts, and were translated into a clear messianic vision. Claiming to be the messiah, he, along with Reubeni, who had become his prophet, embarked on a program of preaching to conversos throughout Europe; they also visited various European rulers to gain their support for their military campaign to liberate the Holy Land.

Molkho taught that the messiah exists at all times, in every generation, as the positive force that diffuses the negative, impure energies that are active in the creation. Idel comments that “the messiah is conceived of as the antidote to the impure influx descending from above. In fact, he must return in every generation in order to ensure the preservation of the world, to maintain the cosmos against the centrifugal force of chaos. Therefore, the redemptive role of the messiah is not only a matter of a certain final act or series of acts performed during the *eschaton* (the final days), but is an ongoing activity performed throughout common history.”³⁷⁵ The role of the messiah here is reminiscent of the legend of the *tsadik* (the righteous or virtuous one) who sustains the world. He is sometimes manifest and sometimes hidden, but his presence in the world is essential for its continuation. In the passage below, Molkho defines his idea in terms of the incarnation of the messiah from the time of Abel, the son of the first

man, Adam, through Moses, to every messiah who incarnates to overcome the power of evil, symbolized as the serpent from the Garden of Eden.

Abel is Moses, who is Abel, because all the deliverances are done by him, because his soul will transmigrate into the messiah, and this is why he [Moses] has been buried abroad. "What is the gain of man from all his labor that he labors under the sun," if the redemption does not come? And he [Solomon] answered: "One generation goeth, another generation cometh," namely it is a necessity that the messiah will come, because he is [equivalent to] the power of Satan [and] serpent, and he removed the impurity of the serpent from the world, and this is the reason that he goes, because in the very moment and time that Israel will repent, they will immediately be redeemed. . . . This is why in each and every generation there was a person [stemming] from [the children of] Israel, worthy and prepared to become the messiah, and fulfill what has been written . . . "because a generation goeth and another generation cometh, and the earth abideth forever." [This is] because it cannot subsist without the messiah, because of the impurity of the serpent . . . because the impurity of the serpent spills over all the spheres and comes from the power of the seventh, lower sphere, which is that of the moon.³⁷⁶

Reubeni and Molkho followed ascetic lifestyles which made them appear holy and distant from worldly concerns. They inspired repentance and acts of charity. Primarily known to later generations as magicians with secret knowledge and the ability to predict the future, they did try to use magical techniques, gained through revelations, to bring about the messianic age. They emblazoned the "holy divine names" on special flags, shields,

and swords.* Thus they had a strong appeal for Christians, Jews, conversos, and crypto-Jews (those Jews who practiced their religion in secret while pretending to be Christian). In their travels Molkho and Reubeni put themselves in harm's way, and were eventually executed under the Inquisition, probably on charges of having persuaded conversos to return to Judaism. Their execution inspired increased faith in their purity and martyrdom – “sanctification of the name of God.”

Molkho was a friend of Joseph Karo, the renowned Talmud scholar and legal codifier, and his death greatly distressed Karo. From that time onwards Karo experienced the voice of Moses, the Mishnah, and the Shekhinah speaking through him. He moved to Safed, where he became one of the leading Safed kabbalists, a companion of Cordovero and Luria.

Shabatai Tsevi

In 1648, the massacre of 100,000 to 200,000 Jews in the Ukraine (the Chmielnicki pogrom) reaffirmed the Jewish community's belief that the apocalyptic time had come. They were yearning for God to send them the messiah who would bring salvation and release from suffering. That the messiah could appear in their own time was a distinct possibility to Jews of that period, as it was in many other periods of history. The worse the worldly situation, the greater the impetus for the messiah to reveal himself. Such was their faith in divine love and protection! As mentioned earlier, there was a belief that in every generation there is one worthy person who can be the messiah for that time, provided the people are deserving.³⁷⁷

Nathan of Gaza, who lived in the Holy Land and was an ardent student of Luria's Kabbalah, declared himself the prophet of the coming messiah. Following his own internal spiritual

* Molkho's flag with divine names is on display in the Jewish museum of Prague.

experiences, he prophesied that the messiah's appearance was imminent. Meanwhile, in 1648, Shabatai Tsevi (1626–1676), a lonely Jewish student of law and mysticism in Izmir, Turkey, proficient in Lurianic and Abulafian mystical teachings, had an experience of inner illumination and revealed himself as the messiah. He publicly recited the forbidden “explicit” name of God and announced that the time of redemption had come. Unfortunately, however, his declaration was received coolly and he was excommunicated by the religious authorities. Banished from Izmir, Shabatai went to Salonika, where he persisted in his divine calling; then, during a trip to Israel, he met Nathan of Gaza, who confirmed that he was indeed the messiah.

For approximately the next fifteen years, Shabatai and Nathan brought news of Shabatai's messiahship to a slowly increasing number of devotees in Jewish communities around the Mediterranean basin, from Turkey to England, Egypt, and Palestine. While the rabbis in most countries rejected his claims at first, eventually almost all of them subscribed to his messiahship. There was great ecstasy and excitement among the Jews that finally the messiah had come, that God had not abandoned them to eternal suffering. They believed that they would be returned to the Holy Land in triumph.

The cornerstone of Shabatai's teaching was his experience of a personal revelation of God, which he called *sod ha-elohut*, the secret of divinity, whose true nature he revealed to only a few disciples whom he swore to secrecy. Even so, it is thought that to most of them he only revealed it partially, seeing that they were not of a sufficiently high spiritual level to comprehend it. He never wrote about his revelation or discussed it publicly and there are no first-hand descriptions of what he meant, though it seemed to be based on Shabatai's inner spiritual journey and his mystic experience of God within.³⁷⁸

Shabatai would often say that he had experience of “his own

God.”³⁷⁹ He would not use kabbalistic terminology or any human language to describe this experience of God. Yehuda Liebes, contemporary Israeli scholar of Jewish mysticism, comments: “The God known to Shabatai Tsevi was more easily found in his soul than in his mind.”³⁸⁰ In a letter to his brother, referring to his previous incarnations as well as his current life, he wrote that his God was “the true One that only I have known for generations and for whom I have so strenuously toiled.”³⁸¹

There are accounts in a document called the *Yemenite Apocalypse* of Shabatai experiencing a specific mystical event in 1650, when during his meditation he ascended through the seven inner levels of the sefirot, from *malkut* through *hesed*, until he finally reached the third sefirah of *binah* (understanding), which is considered the “mother” or source of all the sefirot below.³⁸² Scholem proposes that this is what Shabatai meant by the secret of divinity: that he merged into the level of *binah*, thus entering the divine realm and experiencing the deity. It is possible that this is the experience described by many Sufi and Indian mystics, of one’s true, higher self being identical to God – one realizes one’s true spiritual identity and that it is of the essence of God – a state that Indian mystics call “I Am That.”

The methods Nathan and Shabatai used to obtain the revelation of God probably involved some kabbalistic meditation techniques taught by Abulafia, Luria, and other Jewish mystics, and were a result of sustained, concentrated effort. Nathan “explicitly states that certain matters that came to him from ‘elevated and holy souls’ were ‘revealed . . . by way of the power of meditative concentration and formulae of unifications (*hitbodedut* and *yihudim*).”³⁸³ *Hitbodedut*, as we saw earlier in discussing the biblical and Sufi use of the term, involves self-isolation from external and internal distractions, and *yihudim* are mental concentration techniques combining divine names. Nathan also said he received revelations about the messiah from an angel.

Nathan taught that the messiah's stature does not depend on his being a miracle-worker, rather on his transformation into a divine being, "the chariot of the Light of Life," through a mystical process. This transformation "invests the messiah with a new type of existence, which allows him to be called divine."³⁸⁴ Nathan felt that Jesus' attainment was marred by his performance of miracles. Moshe Idel summarizes:

Having built up the possibility that a man may become a complete divine being, Nathan now turns to the personality of his messiah. He argues that unlike the mystical attainment of the messiah, which is defined in terms of becoming a merkavah, a chariot of the divinity, Jesus' claim to incarnation is built upon another argument, which turned out to be the reason for Jesus' failure and ultimately the reason for the deception of the Jewish people. He proved to be a false messiah because the standard for measurement of this claim was his ability to perform signs and wonders. Herein lies the fault, for the people believed primarily in this magical aspect of his messianism. . . .

Actually, Nathan of Gaza alters the popular Jewish attitude toward Jesus. According to the Shabatean prophet, the theological problem was not that Jesus was deified, as many Jewish thinkers would argue, for that is just the rank that the messiah should attain. The cardinal failure was in Jesus presenting himself as a wonder worker. It may then be inferred that the process of deification of the messiah will take place only after he has perfected the lower world. This transformation into the chariot of the Light of Life invests the messiah with a new type of existence, which allows him to be called divine. By being absorbed into the divine structure, apparently after following a certain mystical path, one is able to be deified and so become messiah.³⁸⁵

Whether or not Jesus' miracles as recounted in the Gospels actually took place on the physical level, or whether they were symbolic references to inner healing, nourishment, and reawakening from a state of spiritual death, is not our concern. However, it is noteworthy that Nathan used the stories of Jesus' miracles to illustrate an important truth – that the dependency on miracles cannot lead one very far spiritually. Spiritual redemption – the liberation of the spirit – cannot be brought about through an external agent. That would take away any part the individual has to play in the process. The individual must make effort and have a commitment to a spiritual life.

Yehuda Liebes, in his illuminating study of Shabatai's life and career, states that Shabatai was primarily interested in a spiritual redemption, rather than political. He was trying to redeem the religion itself – to renew it through teaching about the true experience of God. His redemption of religion meant freeing the individual soul from religion's strictures. The real exile, to Shabatai, "is the exile of religion, and its place of exile is the fossilized tradition, which has long since forgotten its roots and its aims."³⁸⁶ He wrote to his brother: "Because they do not have the true God, their Torah is not Torah."

A sense that the Torah had fossilized, coupled with a hope for reform and renewal, had once resulted in a dramatic and ritual breakthrough in *halakhic* [legal] prohibitions, mainly those under penalty of *karet* [transgressions punishable with death by Heaven], turning them into commandments. Shabateans had an ambivalent attitude to religion: On the one hand, they aspired to its renewal, reform, and redemption; and on the other, they wanted to destroy, punish, and relinquish religion. This was their attitude to other religions as well. Latent in this phenomenon is also the explanation of one of Shabateanism's greatest paradoxes – a

movement for the redemption of Judaism that at times leads to apostasy.³⁸⁷

Shabatai's claim to divinity, to having had the personal experience of God, was heretical to classical Jewish religion, as it meant that a human being could become God through mystic practice. Although Abulafia and his circle had written about *unio mystica* (mystic union), achieving that high spiritual level was generally considered impossible for mortals; it was only for supernatural beings. This shows that conventionally there was an assumption that human beings, while in the body, could not undergo a total spiritual transformation. It assumes that man cannot totally shed his physical nature. However, according to some scholars, the experiences and writings of numerous Jewish mystics belie that assumption and give evidence that various degrees of mystic union are possible. Ultimately, it was inconceivable for the mainstream Jewish establishment to imagine a messiah who began his life as an ordinary human being. It was easier to conceive of a supernatural being, born supernatural, who would bring redemption sometime in the hazy future.

Shabatai's claim to divinity also carried with it the underlying assumption that he and his experience were higher than the Torah and Talmud, the inherited legal framework for the religion. He was declaring his freedom to act independent of rabbinic law and conventional morality, in a bold declaration of a new age governed by a higher law – his own law gained through his perception of God. In many respects Shabatai was not concerned with the public's perceptions of him; he was totally immersed and governed by his own personal mystical experience. Even Nathan of Gaza failed to understand him and projected his own beliefs and kabbalistic interpretations of Shabatai's actions and pronouncements.³⁸⁸

In 1664, after his first two marriages were annulled because

they were not consummated, Shabatai married Sarah, a woman of questionable virtue. It has been conjectured that Shabatai saw himself as the prophet Hosea, commanded by God to marry a prostitute in order to demonstrate the faithlessness of the people of Israel to God, and God's eternal faithfulness to his covenant with them. Sarah was projected as the fallen-woman-become-virgin through her marriage to Shabatai, who redeemed her and made her virtuous.

Shabatai's disciples elevated him to the status of king and Sarah to queen. Redemption was based on their acceptance of Shabatai as messiah and their belief in his divinity. They would do whatever he told them to do, whether it made sense or not, whether it followed moral norms or not. He was above the law and could act as he wished. He even created a new prayer: "Blessed be thou, O God, who has permitted that which is forbidden." Some of his actions, such as his marriage to Sarah and his flaunting of religious prohibitions, were explained using the Lurianic concept of the *kelipot*, the shells of coarse matter that imprison the sparks of light released at the time of the creation. Nathan used the concept to explain why Shabatai needed to perform certain immoral actions – in order to liberate the sparks imprisoned by the *kelipot*. He had to descend to the realm of evil (the *kelipot*) in order to liberate the good (the sparks) that were imprisoned there. It was this metaphor that became the guiding principle of Shabatai and his followers.

In 1666, Shabatai publicly proclaimed himself the messiah and was denounced to the Sultan, who saw the potential for instability and disloyalty arising among the Jewish community. Shabatai was arrested and imprisoned for a short time. Later that year he was brought before the Sultan and was offered two options: death or conversion to Islam. He chose conversion. He was made Gatekeeper of the Sultan's palace at Edirne Sarayi, a position of honor. In Edirne, which is near the Greek and

Bulgarian borders in western Turkey, Shabatai was visited by some of his disciples, many of whom followed him into apostasy. During the years in Edirne, Shabatai experienced times of inner illumination, after which he would preach the importance of conversion to Islam. As we shall see later, it is possible that during this time he had contact with Muslim Sufi mystics, which would explain his receptivity to conversion. In 1668 he had the “great illumination,” and insisted that his followers convert, saying that unless they did so he would not be able to plead for them with God or lead them back to the Holy Land.³⁸⁹

Shabatai said that he had adopted Islam because God willed it. Initially he gave no other reason. Later, Shabatai and Nathan attributed his conversion to the need to gather the sparks of light that were scattered among the *kelipot*, the shards of gross matter. To do so, he had to descend into that realm of grossness himself.

Another reason for the conversion, as Nathan later proposed, was that Shabatai was descending into exile (in Islam) as atonement for the faithlessness of the people of Israel, just as the Shekhinah is in exile. By converting, he was becoming a sacrifice and a martyr. Nathan would quote the biblical passage, “Thou art wounded because of the guilt of the people” (cf. Isaiah 53:5). He wrote in a letter: “Know therefore . . . that [it is] he and no other, and besides him there is no savior of Israel. And although he has put the fair miter [the turban of Islam] on his head, his holiness is not profaned, for God has sworn with his right hand he will not deceive. This is one of God’s mysteries, and no one who has any knowledge of the mysteries of the Torah will consider it strange.”³⁹⁰

Nathan’s explanations were designed to make Shabatai’s conversion and enigmatic behavior acceptable to his followers. Whether Shabatai subscribed to these ideas is difficult to say, as he was not always consistent in his pronouncements. The key

point is that Shabatai was always true to his personal God, to the will of God as it came to him regardless of the traditions and taboos of religion. He wrote in a message to his followers, cited in John Freely's *The Lost Messiah*:

Know ye . . . that I recognized with great clarity that the true God . . . has willed that I should come with all my heart into the Islamic religion, the religion of Ishmael, to permit what it permits, and to forbid what it forbids, and to nullify the Torah of Moses until the time of the End.³⁹¹

Freely continues with the substance of Shabatai's message:

Shabatai goes on to say that it is important for the glory of God that he should bring into Islam all those to whom he would reveal the Mystery of His Godhead. He answers those who said that he had become a Muslim on the strength of a vision, and that when the illumination left him he would regret what he had done. "This is not so," he insists, "for I did this on my own, through the great power and strength of the Truth and Faith which no wind in the world and no sages and prophets can cause me to leave my place. . . . Thus speaks the master of Truth and Faith, the Turco [Turk] and Mesurman [Egyptian]."

During this time, recounts Israel Hazzan, one of Shabatai's devoted disciples who remained a Jew, Shabatai continued to sing both sacred songs and secular Spanish love songs, including his favorite, "Meliselda," which those who didn't understand its mystical significance thought to be a lewd love song. (How similar was the confusion of those who regarded the biblical Song of Songs as a worldly collection of love songs!)

MELISELDA

To the mountain I ascended,
 To the river I descended,
 Meliselda I met there,
 The king's daughter bright and fair.
 There I saw the shining lass
 As she came up from the bath.
 Her arched brow dark as the night,
 Her face a gleaming sword of light,
 Her lips like corals red and bright,
 Her flesh as milk, so fair and bright.³⁹²

Earlier, before his conversion, Shabatai had taught the mystic significance of this song. He saw himself, the messiah, as the bridegroom of the Torah, which was the embodiment of the Shekhinah, the "feminine" immanent presence of God in the creation. The Shekhinah, the Torah, was his bride. In the description of the beautiful Meliselda, Shabatai understood deep mystic symbolism. He would often sing this song to the Torah.

Hazzan described the spiritual heights that Shabatai attained in his meditation after his conversion: "When Amirah* practiced solitude with his holy soul, he would unite his soul [to the four supernatural worlds of the kabbalistic cosmos] and I beheld all this. Blessed be the Lord that I was vouchsafed to see his face when he practiced this solitude."³⁹³

Hazzan noted also that Shabatai and his disciples were frequently visited by Nathan, and together they made preparations for Shabatai's second coming or manifestation as the messiah, to take place seven years after his apostasy, in 1673–74, "by which time Shabatai would have finished 'collecting the seed that was

* Acronym of the designation used for Shabatai: "Our Lord and King, His Majesty be exalted!"

sown among the Gentiles.” At one point Shabatai revealed to the group that “God was like unto a glorious youth that resembled him [i.e., Shabatai himself].”³⁹⁴

It has also been recorded that during his exile Shabatai was good friends with a Turkish Sufi dervish, a renowned poet and mystic named Mahomet Niyazi (d. 1694, also called Niyazi Misri Dede). Niyazi was associated with the Bektashi order of dervishes; he came to Edirne around 1670, and that is when he apparently met Shabatai, if not earlier during previous visits to Constantinople. The Bektashis were noted for their unorthodox and even heretical beliefs and flaunting religious convention, including the incorporation of Christian and other non-Muslim mystical practices. Apparently, Shabatai stayed at Niyazi’s monastery (*tekke*) during his visits to Constantinople and was initiated into the Bektashi order there. This implies that he became Niyazi’s disciple and accepted Niyazi as his master.

It is probable that Niyazi and Shabatai found a great commonality in their equally heretical approaches. Freely writes: “Shabatai and Niyazi seemed to have a strong influence upon one another, which, given the extreme unorthodoxy of their views, could only take each of them even further from the accepted religious beliefs of Judaism and Islam.”³⁹⁵

In many ways Shabatai’s life and teachings are formed by a perspective drawn from Kabbalah; and Kabbalah, according to the contemporary scholar Paul Fenton, itself was influenced by Islamic mysticism during the early period of its development in Spain, the seat of Islam in Europe. It is in this context that Fenton examines the reciprocal influences of Sufi and Jewish mysticism on Niyazi and Shabatai. Fenton points out that few scholars have looked at the influence of Sufism on Shabatai’s teachings from the very beginning of his calling. He says that “the missing issue [in Scholem’s ‘masterful’ study of Shabatai] is the investigation

of the role played by Shabatai's Islamic background in forming his personality and doctrine."³⁹⁶

One of the areas of similarity Fenton looks at is the use of the numerical value of the Arabic letters in Niyazi's mystical writings, in a manner similar to the kabbalistic use of *gematria*. He also mentions the Bektashis' belief in "reincarnation and the divine manifestation in human form,"³⁹⁷ concepts which are parallel with Shabatai's belief in his messianic role. In both religions there was a prevailing atmosphere of messianic fervor. Niyazi was also thought to have been the fulfillment of messianic predictions.

Fenton traces Shabatai's history and probable contacts with Niyazi. He concludes that there is a good possibility that from 1666 until his banishment to Montenegro in 1672 or 1673, Shabatai may have been a regular visitor at Niyazi's tekke. "Were it true, this tradition would also indicate that from its very inception, the Shabatean movement had contacts with the Dervish and Bektashi milieu. This concurs with the unambiguous testimony of Israel Hazzan, who reports that while in Edirne, Shabatai was wont to participate in Dervish prayer circles which would consist in the innumerable repetitions of the name of God. Later, as it is known, the Shabateans adopted a certain number of Bektashi doctrines and rituals."³⁹⁸ It is quite possible that Shabatai and Niyazi shared a universalist approach to spirituality, based on their inner mystical experiences.

It appears that Shabatai initially had experienced a certain degree of spiritual attainment and attracted a large following, fueled by his own and Nathan's pronouncements of his messiahship. Despite the messianic fervor surrounding him and his own belief that he was the messiah, however, he felt that few of his disciples, if any, understood him. What he meant by "messiah" and "God" and what they understood and projected on him may have been very different things.

Shabatai's destiny took him to Islam and ultimately to initiation by a Sufi dervish into a mystic order, whose teachings were based on the transcendence of religious boundaries. What role his conversion had in this final transformation is not known. His mission of spiritual renewal took him to renew his own soul with a form of devotion and mystic practice that existed outside of orthodox religious practice and belief. His spiritual attainment carried with it the conviction that the restrictive boundaries of religion needed to be broken in order to experience God directly.

Shabatai was quite radical, and perhaps none of his followers understood what he was doing or saying. Even in his lifetime, not to speak of later generations, he was interpreted as an advocate of conversion and multireligious syncretism. But this could have been only a crumb of his spiritual realization. It is also difficult to authenticate or evaluate the accusations of immoral behavior, but it is possible that a certain mental and moral confusion resulted from the concept of the descent into the realm of evil to liberate the good.

Shabatai's conversion to Islam caused a great crisis and fragmentation in the Jewish community. He had galvanized Jews around the entire Mediterranean basin, and even northern Europe, by his claims of messiahship and promise of imminent redemption. Despite his conversion, many still clung to their faith in him. Among his followers were a large number of conversos or marranos, descendants of the Jews who had been forced to convert to Catholicism during the Inquisition, but had returned to Judaism in the century and a half that followed. They were not so attached to the strict observances of Judaism and were able to accept the concept of conversion. Many of them adopted Muslim ways on the surface, but continued with Jewish observances privately. A sect of these Shabatean followers, known as the Donmeh, survived as a separate Muslim community in Turkey into the twentieth century.

But for the majority of Jews who did not follow Shabatai into conversion or accommodate his syncretistic approach, Shabatai's conversion was a betrayal and they lost their faith in him as the messiah. Despite the fact that Shabatai had become the most influential messianic figure in Jewish religious history since Jesus – even more than Luria, as Shabatai became more popularly known – it quickly became taboo to speak of him in conventional religious circles, and he was disparaged by most writers of succeeding generations. Another impact of Shabatai's activities (and the activities of other "messiahs" who followed him) was that Kabbalah, which had enjoyed an almost universal acceptance in his time, became anathema, as it was associated with heresy and apostasy. Nevertheless, many of Shabatai's ideas, particularly the need to descend to the realm of evil in order to liberate the good, did influence kabbalistic teachings, and penetrated Hasidism as well, in a different form. Yet the practice of kabbalistic mysticism was driven underground in some places, until it resurfaced in the form of Hasidism a century later.

Following Shabatai's death in 1676, there was a proliferation of messianic movements in Poland and other areas of Europe. Many of the messianic figures were disciples of Shabatai or were inspired by his achievement and messianic role. Some were sincerely convinced of their messianic calling; they offered spiritual guidance to the Jewish community according to their perceptions of the divine will, taught kabbalistic "secrets," and urged repentance in order to prepare for the messianic time. Others seemed to have been advancing their own personal interests, riding the waves of excitement and hysteria, and receiving the unqualified reverence of the desperate and gullible Jewish community which was easily swayed by stories of miracles, complex mythologies, and predictions of messianic redemption.

The following will give an idea of the variety of messiahs who followed Shabatai. Most of these individuals traveled widely,

bringing their teachings – generally variations on Shabatai’s legacy – to disciples in Europe, North Africa, and the Holy Land. Even the presence of imperfect masters who betray their disciples may have a positive consequence in that it can create the longing for a true spiritual master or messiah to appear. The fact that some messiahs proved untrue did not deter the people from searching, although it did give rise to occasional excommunications and spiritual crises. Masters came in every size, shape, and form, as it were: scholars, the uneducated, Shabateans, ethicists; divine, mundane; miracle-workers, magicians; ascetics, sensualists; teachers of meditation; women who were to give birth to the messiah. It was as if a dam had broken on spiritual possibility, as masters of every sort rose to the surface to claim those souls marked for them and their teaching.

Abraham Miguel Cardozo (1626–1706) was a close disciple of Shabatai’s who did not convert to Islam, reserving this as a holy act appropriate for the messiah alone. He was expelled from both Tunis and Tripoli because of his heretical Shabatean teachings and, on his arrival in Izmir, announced that he was the messiah. A recent biography introduces Cardozo as a kabbalist who was much more than a simple follower of Shabatai. “He was one of the most vivid, complex, and original personalities to emerge within Judaism during the seventeenth century.... Cardozo lived not only in a different world from ours but in a different universe. His was not the universe of Newton and Descartes, but the magical universe of kabbalistic mysticism, which has mostly vanished today.”³⁹⁹

Yehoshua Heschel Tsoref (1633–c.1700) was another messiah of this period who was active in Lithuania and Poland. An uneducated jeweler, he lived an ascetic lifestyle and was devoted to Shabatai. When Shabatai converted, Tsoref became inspired and got involved with carrying Shabatai’s message to Poland. Many Polish Jews made pilgrimages to see him and hear his

stories and prophecies. It is probable that his book, *Sefer ha-tsoref*, was one of the esoteric texts that inspired the Ba'al Shem Tov, the first hasidic master, fifty years later.

Hayim ben Shlomo (c. 1655–c. 1716) was known as the Mal'akh (the angel). He proclaimed himself the messiah while awaiting Shabatai's second coming. The Mal'akh was active in Poland, Italy, Israel, and Turkey, and was quite controversial because of his teaching of radical Shabatean practices. After being expelled from Israel and Turkey, he returned to Poland to teach.

Yehuda Leib Prossnitz (1670–1730) was an uneducated peddler, an ascetic who gathered large groups of followers, including many children. His spiritual ministry began when he received visions and dreams of Luria and Shabatai. In 1724, after meeting some adherents of Shabatean messianism, he declared himself to be the messiah of the lineage of Joseph. Though excommunicated and banned from several Jewish communities, his teachings were passed down through a close disciple to Yonatan Eybeschuetz, who became a popular Shabatean teacher and folk magician.

Jacob Frank

It was in this period of spiritual ferment and messianic longing that Jacob Frank (1726–1791), one of the most influential messiahs of the eighteenth century, made his mark. A follower of Shabatai, Frank converted initially to Islam and then to Catholicism, taking his followers with him. He was “a fearless and physically powerful figure but uneducated and disdainful of religious traditions, above all the Jewish rabbinic elite. His messianic activities were at the local level, in Poland and Moravia for the most part, but were imbued, as had been those of Luria and Tsevi, with cosmic significance and the mystic vision.”⁴⁰⁰

Once he had converted to Catholicism, he denounced Judaism and engaged in numerous Church-sponsored public disputations

with rabbis concerning Jewish law, religious practices, and the Talmud. Naturally, his side always won, and numerous copies of the Talmud were burned. As the foundation for his teachings, he developed a complex mythology based on Shabateanism, Lurianic Kabbalah, the Zohar, and other rabbinic sources.

Frank's theology was based on a concept of "doubleness," or the duplication in this world of everything in the upper realms. He interpreted the concept in a literalistic manner. God became Big Brother, Frank's supernal double. He called his disciples brothers and sisters and envisioned them duplicated in the court of Big Brother. He taught that embodied forms of divine powers in higher realms were lower reflections of even-higher powers. God himself has a lower power to carry out his work in the material world. The positive and negative forces of the upper realms, which derived from the higher Unity, were embodied as beings who were good and evil. He taught that hints exist in this material world of the reality of the upper realms.

Frank developed a pattern to guide his followers' actions. Everything was to be contrary. All orthodox Jewish law and ritual was to be broken and violated.

Nothing is what it seems; that which is held to be holy is deadly, and the awe must be stripped from it in order to expose what is real. This achieves the repair of the holy.⁴⁰¹

Frank elevated himself to emperor-like status and projected his daughter, Ewa, whom he named "the matronita," into the figure of the Virgin Mary, attracting many followers to her shrine. Despite his seemingly bizarre theology, he had a wide appeal for the Jewish community of his time. Exhausted by persecutions from Christian authorities and the government, and suffering from the stringent religious requirements of eighteenth-century Eastern European Judaism, which was demanding both in practice

and intellectual effort, the Jewish community found in Frank's teachings a path of assimilation into non-Jewish society that allowed them to still maintain some sense of Jewish identity, even if Frank's stance was heretical. As history has unfolded, many Jewish and non-Jewish families in that part of Europe share Frankist origins.

Moshe Hayim Luzzatto

One of the most significant of the post-Shabatai messianic figures was Moshe Hayim Luzzatto (1707–1747), who was born in Padua, Italy, and died in Akko in the Holy Land. From a wealthy family, Luzzatto was well educated in the secular humanities and sciences, wrote drama and poetry, and spoke Italian and Latin. He was also a scholar of traditional rabbinic Jewish texts like the Talmud and a devoted kabbalist.

Luzzatto, also called the Ramhal (from the initials of his name) revealed his messianic calling to his circle of disciples, whom he called the Holy Society. From his youth, he claimed to be a channel for the revelations of a *maggid*, an angel who had spoken through him during his meditative states. He wrote an excellent survey of the Lurianic kabbalistic system, as well as a popular work on ethics, *Mesilat yesharim* (Path of the Upright), a manual to the path of holy living resulting in the attainment of the divine spirit. He consciously obscured and hid its underlying kabbalistic and mystical ideas, and thus it found acceptance in the wider Jewish community as a guide to an ethical way of life.

The first passage cited below is from a letter written by one of his disciples, Yekuthiel Gordon, to Rabbi Mordecai Yoffe, telling him about Luzzatto's spiritual gifts, specifically that a *maggid* has appeared to him instructing him to teach certain spiritual exercises to his disciples and giving him knowledge of their successive incarnations and many other divine secrets. The letter is illuminating because it reveals the close devotional relationship

Gordon had with his master, and the biblical and kabbalistic religious context in which Luzzatto received his revelation and framed his teachings. It also shows that he was regarded as the successor and transmitter of the spiritual wisdom received from masters of old, such as Rabbi Akiva of the rabbinic period, “members of the Heavenly Academy” (various historic and legendary religious figures), and the Ari (Rabbi Isaac Luria). The exercises he taught his disciples were *tikunim*, Lurianic meditative techniques (involving permutations of the divine names) and other special actions to be performed with complete dedication and *kavanah*, in order to repair or perfect the cosmic disharmony into which the world had presumably fallen. According to the kabbalistic conceptual framework, it was the messiah’s duty to teach these techniques in order to redeem the world and restore the primordial harmony within the Godhead.

I come regarding things of the Torah to inform my lord of the choice gift the Holy One, blessed be He, has granted to us from his treasure store. There is here a young man, tender in years, no older than the age of twenty-three. He is a holy man, my master and teacher, the holy lamp, the man of God, his honor Rabbi Moses Hayim Luzzatto. For these past two and a half years a *maggid* has been revealed to him, a holy and tremendous angel who reveals wondrous mysteries to him. Even before he reached the age of fourteen he knew all the writings of the Ari by heart. He is very modest, telling nothing of this even to his own father and obviously not to anyone else. It was by the counsel of the Lord that I discovered it by accident, here is not the place to describe how.

For the past month I have been ministering to him, drawing water from his well, happy the eye that has seen all this and happy the ear that has heard of it. He is a spark

of Akiva ben Joseph. Eight months have passed since the time that the holy and tremendous angel was first revealed to him. He delivered to him numerous mysteries and imparted the methods by means of which he could summon to him the members of the Heavenly Academy. With the approval of the Holy One, blessed be He, and his Shekhinah, he ordered him to compose a Book of the Zohar, called in Heaven, the Second Zohar, in order that a great *tikun* known to us should be carried out.

This is what happens. The angel speaks out of his mouth but we, his disciples, hear nothing. The angel begins to reveal to him great mysteries. Then my master orders Elijah to come to him and he comes to impart mysteries of his own. . . . He knows all men's previous incarnations and all the *tikunim* they have to carry out and he knows the science of reading the lines of the hand and face. To sum up, nothing is hidden from him. At first permission was only granted to reveal to him the mysteries of the Torah but now all things are revealed to him. But no one outside our circle knows of it. He told to me personally a great secret regarding why I have come here to study under him, for nothing occurs without reason. He told me about my soul and the *tikunim* I have to perform.⁴⁰²

Most of Luzzatto's writings have entered kabbalistic literature, but some are imbued with a type of devotion generally associated with Hasidism. For that reason he is considered an important transitional figure between classic Lurianic Kabbalah and Hasidism. In his book *Derekh ha-shem* (The Way of the Name), he discusses the importance of the spiritual master in channeling the divine will into the realm of man. He writes that the master acts as a lens that focuses the divine inner light and allows us to see God:

The prophetic experience must come about through intermediaries. A human being cannot directly attach himself to God's glory, perceiving it as one sees a man standing in front of him. The perception of God involved in true prophecy [spiritual experience] must therefore come about through God's servants, whose task it is to provide such a vision. These intermediaries then act as lenses through which the individual sees the Glory.⁴⁰³

He stresses the need for a spiritual master of the highest order:

It is therefore crucial for those who strive for true prophecy to do so under the guidance of a master prophet.⁴⁰⁴

He describes the qualifications of the master prophet:

He must have an adequate knowledge of the prophetic methods, and be able to teach his disciples what each one must do to attain the desired result, according to each one's particular level of readiness.

When the neophyte prophets begin to experience revelations, the master prophet continues to guide them. On the basis of what is revealed to them, he instructs them and informs them what is still lacking in their quest. Until they attain full prophecy, they will require a master for all of this. Even though some influence and revelation may have started to come to them, this in itself is not enough to immediately bring them to the ultimate goal. Before they can reach this, they need much guidance and training, each one according to his degree of readiness.⁴⁰⁵

Luzzatto took his mission very seriously and felt deeply responsible for the spiritual welfare of his disciples. The following

passage is from a letter Luzzatto wrote to Rabbi Benjamin ben Eliezer ha-Kohen Vitale, a famous kabbalist and the father-in-law of Luzzatto's teacher, Rabbi Isaiah Basson. He explains his refusal to flee Italy because of the responsibility he feels to guide his young disciples spiritually.

Praise to the God of Israel, many of the people now give up their sins to seek the Lord. All the God-fearing come daily to me to hear the new things the Lord tells me. The young men who had previously walked in the ways of youth's vanities, now, thank God, have turned from the evil way to return unto the Lord, each of them coming to me to receive *tikunim* for his past deeds. Only yesterday did they come; shall I, then, forsake them by going to another country? Such a thing cannot be right! I have the obligation to encourage them until their feet have become firmly planted, as I hope, in the way of the Lord. Furthermore, it is impossible to rely on a miracle by bringing my book with me because of the danger from the censor.* Nevertheless, I am obliged to reveal to your honor, whose soul is so dear to me, the mysteries of God to the extent I am permitted so to do and within the confines of this letter. With the eye of your great and pure intellect you will see how profound these matters are, for deep are the thoughts of the Lord.⁴⁰⁶

Because he claimed to be the messiah and talked about having a *maggid*, and because he predicted that some of his writings would replace the Bible during the time of the messiah, Luzzatto was suspected of being a Shabatean (which he wasn't) and engaging in heretical activities. He was excommunicated

* "Danger from the censor" means danger from the Christian authorities who might see the book as offensive to the Christian faith and confiscate it.

by the Jewish religious authorities and many of his works were banned. He ultimately fled from Italy to the Holy Land where, soon afterwards, he died of plague. It was only posthumously that he became respected as an influential kabbalist and teacher of *mussar*, the ethical life.

Yemenite messiahs

Yemen had been an important center of Jewish life since the tenth century, and several important messianic figures appeared there between the twelfth and late nineteenth centuries. Some were inspired by Shabatai and Lurianic Kabbalah, others drew on Muslim messianist traditions. Because they ministered to the isolated Jewish community of Yemen, they have not been studied frequently.

There was a certain mystique to the legends surrounding the origins of the Yemenite Jews, and many thought they represented the Ten Lost Tribes, a theme which was woven into the teachings of all the Yemenite messiahs. Asceticism and the need for communal repentance were two other important aspects of the Yemenite messianic movements. The subject is discussed in detail in Harris Lenowitz's comprehensive work, *The Jewish Messiahs*.⁴⁰⁷

A return to inwardness

In the mid-eighteenth century, the messianic impulse that had informed kabbalism for six centuries turned inward to focus on individual salvation. No longer was the leader only a political-mystical messiah, he became a savior to the masses, a teacher of the inner path; he offered the possibility of a spiritual way of life that anyone could follow through true devotion to a master and his teachings.

THE POWER OF LOVE

A mystic once said that true love occurs when we forget ourselves and merge into another, when two become one. Surely the love of the *hasidim* for the Ba'al Shem Tov was so intense that when they remembered him, they were literally in his presence. They forgot themselves and their ills and *became* him. Here is a story recounted by the philosopher Martin Buber in his *Tales of the Hasidim*:

*A rabbi whose grandfather had been a disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov was asked to tell a story. "A story," he said, "must be told in such a way that it constitutes help in itself." And he told: "My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher. And he related how the holy Ba'al Shem used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke, and he was so swept away by his story that he himself began to hop and dance to show how the master had done. From that hour on he was cured of his lameness. That's the way to tell a story!"*⁴⁰⁸





CHAPTER 14

Hasidism: A New Paradigm.

The tsadik as foundation of the world

AFTER THE GOLDEN AGE OF SAFED in the sixteenth century, Kabbalah spread even further into European Jewish society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, transformed through the teachings of Isaac Luria. Fellowships of kabbalists continued to meet in small groups just as they had in Luria's time; the symbolism and theosophy of Luria penetrated all Jewish life, even among nonkabbalists. The esoteric teachings were transmitted from master to disciple, one generation to the next. The kabbalists were an elite of the educated, concerned with the abstract symbolism of God and the divine realms; the purpose of their meditations was to affect the relationships of powers within the divine realm and stimulate the coming of the messiah. Although in the sixteenth century Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague (the Maharal) had paved the way to simplifying Kabbalah and making it relevant to the common man, the majority of kabbalists still adhered to the old model.

The way of life of the kabbalists was called *hasidut* (piety) and the members of kabbalistic fellowships were often called *hasidim*, the term used for mystics and devotees in many periods of history. “Their purpose was to hasten redemption of the Shekhinah by withdrawing themselves from this world – the world of evil and exile – and seek proximity to the higher realms, of good and redemption.”⁴⁰⁹ The kabbalist *hasidim* were marked by their elite status, ascetic lifestyle, and secretive complex practices. Because the hasidic movement that later developed in eighteenth-century Poland shared the same terminology for its adherents as the kabbalist *hasidim*, scholars have often call the kabbalist *hasidim* “old-style” *hasidim*.

In a sense, Hasidism was a continuation of Kabbalah, but it stripped away Kabbalah’s excessive symbolism, rigid asceticism, and complicated forms of worship and meditation. In place of the ascetic penances of Kabbalah, Hasidism stressed a worship based on joy. The way to reach God was transformed from a secret doctrine for the elite into a popular movement focused on the living masters, or *tsadikim*, who served as intermediaries for their disciples with the divine realms.

Hasidism, then, was (and continues to be) the most recent link in the chain of Jewish mysticism that extends from the ancient *heikhalot* and *merkavah* literature and practices, to the early and later Kabbalah, into the eighteenth century and the modern world. Yet it is also revolutionary in that it applies kabbalistic principles to the population at large, bringing the divine into every aspect of life so that all life is touched by the spiritual dimension, and every person has the potential to be redeemed.

Kabbalah had been discredited to a certain extent because of its association with Shabatai Tsevi. Nevertheless, many Jews were still deeply influenced by Shabatai’s claim to messiahship and his use of kabbalistic symbolism in explaining his mission to liberate the good and holy from the realm of evil. Often there

was confusion in the minds of the masses as to which aspects of Shabatai's teachings could be preserved and which should be rejected. The fear of being linked with Shabatai and his followers drove Kabbalah further underground, into the safety of small elite groups of kabbalists all of whom knew each other intimately.

And, as much as Shabatai was officially disparaged, and even saying his name became taboo, the concept of the master embodied in Shabatai – as a quasi-supernatural being who, through his spiritual influence, could save souls – anticipated the hasidic concept of the tsadik. In fact, it is probable that had Shabatai not existed, there would have been no precedent for acceptance of a human mediator with the divine to the degree in which it was adopted in Hasidism. It is as if, in a certain ironic twist of history, he himself was the model for the tsadik.

Social background

Jews had started migrating to Poland, Russia, and the Ukraine in the sixteenth century, as a haven from the oppression they were experiencing in southern Europe. They found an atmosphere of tolerance and prosperity in which Jewish life flourished, and Torah study reached great heights with illustrious teachers. By the mid-seventeenth century, however, conditions in Poland had started degenerating and by the eighteenth century life had become extremely harsh. In 1648 the Ukrainian Count Chmielnicki led armed bands of Cossacks in a series of pogroms against the Jews – between 100,000 and 500,000 were killed. (No one knows the exact number.) Invasions from Sweden and elsewhere followed, in which Jews were targeted. Many towns were completely destroyed. The Jewish community was greatly weakened and Jewish life went into decline. There was extensive oppression from the nobles and church officials, as the Jews virtually became slaves – vulnerable and unable to defend themselves. The appeal of messianic figures like Jacob Frank and

Moses Hayim Luzzatto was felt, but was limited to small groups of disciples or specific communities. The common man had nowhere to turn.

INTERNAL SPIRITUAL DECAY

The decline of Jewish life was also visible in an internal spiritual decay – in the corruption of religious leadership and the alienation of the ordinary people. The rabbis traditionally were supposed to provide guidance to the community in issues of daily life and the prescribed worship. However, over time, Torah study had degenerated into endless hairsplitting arguments over fine points of text and law, and the religious needs of the common people were neglected. The rabbis studied the religious texts to show off their knowledge and not to help the people. They served the needs of the wealthy and neglected the *am ha-arets* (the simple “man of the earth”). In some instances they had even purchased their positions from government officials. Prayers had lost their spark of spirituality. They were repeated in a perfunctory manner and inner devotion was lacking.

The scholar Samuel Dresner has done an intensive study of early Hasidism and the religious and social milieu of the time. Through his translations of the writings of Ya’akov Yosef of Polnoy (1710–1784), a close disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov (the first hasidic master), we can get a picture of the degeneration of Jewish life during this period. He recounts the following parable about the loss of spiritual inspiration:

An apprentice learned his trade from a blacksmith. After he had mastered it, he made a list, point after point, of how to go about his craft. But he neglected to note down that he should first ignite a spark for the fire, as this was obvious.

When he went to work at the king’s palace, he was unable to perform his duties as he had forgotten to light

the spark. Finally he returned to his master, who reminded him of the first principle, which he had forgotten.⁴¹⁰

The fire of devotion had been extinguished because of the lack of spiritual leadership. Ya'akov Yosef wrote eloquently of the terrible abyss, the gulf that divided the religious scholars from the people. He talked of the abuses of the rabbis and “the pride of the learned,” and he emphasized that there was an overwhelming need for a bond to heal this rift. He used the example of the Shekhinah, the holy spirit who is in exile from her beloved, to illustrate how deep and devastating the gulf was, and how it affected the divine as well. For if the people don't have proper spiritual leadership, there will be no one to bring them close to God. God yearns for the love of his people, so the corruption of the spiritual leadership means that God himself experiences the loss of their devotion, “for the Shekhinah is in exile, because we have no leader, no one to give us strength.”⁴¹¹

The Ba'al Shem Tov

It was into this atmosphere that a different type of spiritual master appeared among the Jews – the mystic who broke away from the complexity of Kabbalah and traditional religious study, who offered liberation to the soul of the common man, who reignited the fire of spirituality. This was Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Ba'al Shem Tov (master of the good name), who was often called simply the Besht, an acronym of his name.

The early life of the Ba'al Shem Tov is obscured by legend, not unlike the stories of the early lives of many saints and holy men in different cultures. The first recorded stories about him are preserved in a collection called *Shivhei ha-Besht* (translated into English as *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov*). Born in 1698 in Okup, a small village on the Russian-Polish border, Israel was orphaned at an early age. As a boy he appeared to be quite ordinary and

even unintelligent – and as he grew older he did not display the brilliance or understanding of religious texts that would be required of a pious man. Instead, he was content to wander in the forests enjoying his solitude and the company of animals. When he finished school, the young Israel was given a job as a helper in the local synagogue.

To most people he appeared as a simpleton. Even his future brother-in-law tried to discourage his sister from marrying him, despite a contract signed by their father, as he thought the young Israel was ignorant of Talmud and Jewish law. After his marriage, Israel spent a lengthy period as a recluse, which prepared him for his role as a spiritual master. *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov* tells the story:

He lived in a small village and made his living by keeping a tavern. After he brought brandy to his wife he would cross the river Prut and retire into seclusion in a house-like crevice that was cut into the mountain. He used to take one loaf of bread for one meal and eat once a week. He endured this way of life for several years. On the eve of the holy Sabbath he used to return home. His brother-in-law, Rabbi Gershon of Kotov, thought him to be an ignorant and boorish person, and he used to try to persuade his sister to obtain a divorce from him. But she refused since she knew his secret but did not reveal it to anybody.⁴¹²

Later, the Ba'al Shem Tov moved from Okup to another town where he was employed as a teacher's aide. And then, when he revealed his true spiritual stature, he moved to Miedzybozh, in western Ukraine, where he assumed his role as a spiritual master to a small group of disciples who chose to live close by him, and to many others who would visit occasionally. He lived there till his death in 1760.

From the mid-1730's on, ... the Ba'al Shem Tov appears to be at the center of a group of men who see him as a source of inspiration and authority. These men, referred to in *Shivhei ha-Besht* as *anshei segulato* [his treasured people] all outranked him in family background, social status, and education. ... They saw him as having extraordinary mystical and spiritual qualities, as being endowed with inspiration and the gift of prophecy.⁴¹³

A story in *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov* shows the reverence in which the Besht came to be held. It begins with the Besht revealing his true identity to a student of Rabbi Gershon's. Gershon then instructs the student to go to the large sect of kabbalists in the town (whom he calls hasidim) and also to the rabbi of the community and say the following:

"There is a great light living near your community, and it will be worthwhile for you to seek him out and bring him to the town."

When all the hasidim and the rabbi heard these things, they decided that it must refer to the Besht. ... All of them went to his village to invite him to come to town. The Besht had foreseen what would happen and he went toward the town as they were going out to see him. When they encountered each other they all went to a certain place in the forest where they made a chair out of the branches of trees. They placed him on the chair and they accepted him as their rabbi. And the Besht said Torah to them.⁴¹⁴

The theme of the advanced soul disguised as an ordinary rustic simpleton is one which resonates in many periods of Jewish spiritual history. Many of Judaism's living masters appeared on the stage of life without their lofty spiritual nature being

revealed. For example, the prophet Moses, at the moment God called upon him to become the savior of the Israelites, told God that he was inarticulate, a stutterer, a simple shepherd certainly not qualified to be a leader of men.

The Zohar also contains many symbolic stories showing the true spiritual master disguised as a simple “man of the earth.” In the series of stories we read earlier, he appeared as a mule-driver accompanying two learned rabbis on a journey. When he hears their discussion, he interrupts with a deeper interpretation of the scriptures, and they recognize that he is no ordinary driver of animals. In another story, the spiritual master appears as a child. It is only when he speaks great wisdom to the assembled scholars that they recognize that he is not a child but their own great master. There are many other such instances in Jewish religious literature.

Ba’alei shem: Masters of the name

In taking a closer look at the Ba’al Shem Tov, we need to explore the significance of his name. The term *ba’al shem* was used from as early as the sixteenth century for a type of kabbalist who used kabbalistic or “magical” techniques to protect people from demons and evil spirits, and to relieve them of diseases and other types of misfortunes. The belief in demons was common among both Jews and non-Jews in Europe, and they sought relief from unexplained phenomena which they blamed on demons. There was a universal belief that crossed the boundaries of religion and class that “demonic powers have a vast potential for impairing the health and welfare of human beings. As if that did not suffice, it was further believed that magical means could be used to mobilize these demonic powers and press them into the service of humans.”⁴¹⁵

There were many *ba’alei shem* who wandered from village to village offering relief from ill-fortune and the influence of

demons. They were often called practical kabbalists – those who could apply the mysteries of Kabbalah to practical ends. Today we might call them magicians or healers; they exorcised evil spirits and taught charms that would protect newborn infants, pregnant women, and newly married couples from the demonic powers. They also knew natural remedies for many diseases. The charms and amulets they created used various permutations and configurations of the names of God, the angels, and the prayers.* The *ba'al ha-shem* who appeared in your village would personally intervene with the heavens on your behalf, or you could purchase books of charms that he sold and try the formulae on your own.

There are numerous unsubstantiated legends that Israel ben Eliezer was a member of the *nistarim*, a hidden society of *ba'alei shem*, and had inherited some of their secret manuscripts. Whether or not there is any truth to these legends of the *nistarim*, it seems certain that Israel ben Eliezer, the Ba'al Shem Tov, began his career as one of the wonder-working *ba'alei shem*. But because he was seen to have extraordinary supernatural powers he was called the Ba'al Shem Tov, the “master of the *good* name” of God, considered to be higher and more spiritually evolved than the ordinary *ba'alei shem* who derived their knowledge from intellectual study of kabbalistic and magical texts, not from their own spiritual, inner experiences.

Witnesses describe the remarkable spiritual powers of the Besht which attracted many followers: remote vision, the ability to predict the future, read people's past lives, hear divine decrees, and so forth. These were considered gifts of divine providence, to be used for the benefit of the populace as a whole.⁴¹⁶ Even his healing was done not only through incantations and spells but through his experiences of ecstatic prayer, a state he would enter

* This was a different use of the *yihudim* (unifications) and *kavanot* (concentration exercises) from those prescribed by kabbalists such as Luria, who were attempting to restore the balance in the divine realm.

into when praying with total *devekut* (adhesion to God).

It seems fairly certain that the reason we remember the Ba'al Shem Tov today is that he was not only a purveyor of charms but a channel to the divine realms, guide and protector of souls, an important link in the chain of transmission of spiritual knowledge through the generations.

Disciples

The Besht had many disciples, but there were three or four who were exceptionally close. These were Rabbi Gershon, his brother-in-law, who initially was unaware of his spiritual greatness, Rabbi Dov Baer, known as the Maggid (preacher) of Mezherich,^{*} and Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoy. All of them were renowned scholars who initially scoffed at the devotional, non-scholastic approach of the Ba'al Shem. But all were deeply moved by the master as they came in contact with him. And while Dov Baer became the successor to the Besht, it was Ya'akov Yosef who recorded many of the sayings and homilies of his master.

The "conversion," or initiation of Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef reveals the master's ability to affect the disciple to his very core. It involved not a new course of study or acceptance of new dogma, but a complete change in the personality and way of life of Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef, who until then was

a harsh, officious man, rigorous in his personal observance, devoted to study, aloof from the people and their problems, given to outbursts of anger and assertions of authority. . . .

The change which the Besht wrought in his soul was the turning point of his life. It reached down to the core of his

^{*} Literally, *maggid* means "the one who tells." It was used for an angel, who is considered a messenger of God. It was also used in more recent times for the preacher or leader of the Jewish community, as it is he who guides with the influence of the divine.

being, opened his eyes to what he had been and revealed what he must become.⁴¹⁷

There are several stories and traditions that describe this conversion. The Ba'al Shem Tov entered the town of Sharogrod where Ya'akov Yosef was rabbi and, with his gift of storytelling, soon attracted an audience. Ya'akov Yosef heard about the Ba'al Shem and felt he was disturbing the peace by gathering so many people around him. He went to confront him but the Ba'al Shem told him several stories: first one, then another, then another. After three stories, Ya'akov Yosef "entered into conversation with him and immediately 'was joined' to him."⁴¹⁸

"Entering into conversation" with his master describes their inner communion, soul to soul, in which he became "joined" to him. This implies a spiritual initiation, where the disciple merges with his master on a spiritual level and thus always has his internal guidance and protection.

According to another legend, the Ba'al Shem Tov told Ya'akov Yosef the story of a rabbi who had cruelly beaten a water carrier, and who then suffered for years because he could not find the man to apologize to him. Ya'akov Yosef recognized himself in the description of the haughty and cruel rabbi, and was deeply moved by the Ba'al Shem's knowledge of his most-secret guilt. We can read in Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef's own words what happened after one of his early meetings with the Ba'al Shem Tov, when he found himself doubting the Besht's spirituality:

Afterwards, during the prayer, I wept as never before in my life, and I realized that it was not my weeping. Later, when the Besht traveled to the land of Israel, I was left desolate until he returned. Then I began to travel to him and remained for some time with him. The Besht used to say that it was necessary to elevate me. After I had been with

him for about five weeks, I asked, “When, sir, will you elevate me?”⁴¹⁹

Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezherich, was witness to the Besht’s state of ecstasy on his very first visit to him. It was this experience that brought this great scholar and mystic, a kabbalist and ascetic who had been a professional preacher and leader of prayers in many communities, into the orbit of the Ba’al Shem Tov, to whom he became totally devoted.

According to tradition, the Maggid probably met the Besht in 1753. The circumstances are not entirely clear, but *In Praise of the Ba’al Shem Tov* recounts that the Maggid wasn’t well, due to the excessive austerities and fasting he used to indulge in, and another hasid advised him to seek a cure from the Besht. He stayed close to the Besht during his period of convalescence, and on one occasion the Besht called him to read Kabbalah with him. The Maggid read a couple of pages, and the Besht interrupted saying:

Not like that, I shall read it out to you! He began to read, and while he read he trembled. He rose and said: “We are dealing with the affairs of the merkavah and I am sitting down.” So he stood up and continued to read.

As he was talking he lay me down in the shape of a circle on the bed. I was not able to see him anymore. I only heard voices and saw frightening flashes and flares. And so it was for about two hours. I grew very frightened and that fear caused me to feel faint.⁴²⁰

The Maggid’s shortcoming was that he tried to interpret the text intellectually, but when the Besht took the book and read from it, he demonstrated the need to approach it in the sense of a

revelation. The Besht brought him to the level within that Moses had experienced on Mount Sinai – where he heard sounds and saw lightning within himself – and that Ezekiel had experienced in his spiritual ascent. And this is when the Maggid became the Besht's disciple, by virtue of the inner experience he bestowed on him.

On another occasion, on one of the holy days, the Maggid fell ill and left the prayer hall early, continuing his prayers in a small room nearby. Before one section of the service, the Besht entered the room to put on his *kittel*, the robe normally worn on the holiest days.

And the Maggid said that he realized the Besht was inspired by the Shekhinah, and that he was not in this world. And when the Besht put on his *kittel*, it wrinkled around his shoulders. The great Maggid grasped the *kittel* in order to straighten it, and when he touched the Besht he himself began to tremble. He held on to the table that was there and the table began to tremble with him as well. The Besht went away, but this kept on until he prayed to the Blessed Lord, that he free him from this trembling, for he could no longer endure it.⁴²¹

There are other stories describing the ecstatic states the Besht would enter during his prayers. He would appear to be not in this world, and others were drawn to him by the force of his magnetism.

There is also a legend that when the Besht was praying on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, his consciousness entered the inner worlds and he saw that there was a harsh divine decree against the Jews because their prayers had gotten blocked at an intermediate level and not reached God. He recounts his experience:

I had just one more gate to pass in order to arrive before the blessed Lord, blessed be He, and in that palace I found the prayers of fifty years which had not risen to their destination, and now that we had prayed on this Yom Kippur with proper kavanah all the prayers ascended and each prayer glowed as the bright dawn. I asked the prayers, "Why did you not rise beforehand?" They replied, "We were ordered to await Your Eminence to guide us." I said to them, "Come with me." And the gate was open.⁴²²

He then describes overcoming another obstacle when an angel comes along and bolts the gate and doesn't permit the prayers to rise. He then goes to the messiah for help, who gives him two holy names. This allowed him to release the bolt and open the gate, and he was able to drive in the prayers. As a result, the negative decree against the people was cancelled.

This legend reinforces the Ba'al Shem Tov's role as the spiritual guide to the Jews, who ensures that their prayers reach their destination – a symbolic way of describing his role as protector of the people, using the same symbolism of the prayers rising from one supernal realm to the next that we find in the heikhalot literature. Even the messiah acts as a helper to the Ba'al Shem. It is the Ba'al Shem who takes the role of redeemer. He seemed to regard himself also as being "a bridge and medium between earthly existence and the upper worlds."⁴²³

Above all, the Ba'al Shem Tov embodied the qualities of love and commitment to the well-being of his disciples. When he conversed with them they felt a sense of total communion, soul merging into soul, and thus into the divine soul. This is the meaning of the following story told about the Besht:

Every evening after prayer the Ba'al Shem went to his room. Two candles were set in front of him and the mysterious

Book of Creation [*Sefer yetsirah*] put on the table among other books. Then all those who needed his counsel were admitted in a body, and he spoke with them until the eleventh hour.

One evening when the people left, one of them said to the man beside him how much good the words which the Ba'al Shem had directed to him had done him. But the other told him not to talk such nonsense, that they had entered the room together and from that moment on the master had spoken to no one except himself. A third, who had heard this, joined in the conversation with a smile, saying how curious that both were mistaken, for the rabbi had carried on an intimate conversation with him the entire evening. Then a fourth and a fifth made the same claim, and finally all began to talk at once and tell what they had experienced. But the next instant they all fell silent.⁴²⁴

In reading the accounts of Ya'akov Yosef, Dov Baer, and others, one gets a total picture of the man:

Above all, one gets a sense of the Ba'al Shem Tov's ability to blur the borders between the divine and the human, between the fantastic and the real. . . . He was a man whose soul ascended to heaven, conversed with the inhabitants of the higher worlds, and learned their wisdom; he strolled in the Garden of Eden, but inspired his followers on earth with a profound sense of freedom, imagination, and creativity powered by the infinite resources of language as the link between man and God. He saw himself as part of the mystical chain of people who cross the line between earth and heaven – prophets and kabbalists, thinkers and visionaries, redeemers and messianic figures – and return inspired with novel ideas that reconfigure the relations

between the heavenly and the earthly, new knowledge of God, and original insights that transform the world.⁴²⁵

THE BESHT'S LETTER TO RABBI GERSHON

The only surviving document written in the Besht's own hand – his only words that can be absolutely authenticated – is an eloquent letter he wrote to Rabbi Gershon of Kotov, his brother-in-law and a close disciple. In it the Besht recounts his spiritual journey to higher realms.

For on the day of the New Year of the year 5507 [September 1746] I engaged in an ascent of the soul, as you know I do, and I saw wondrous things in that vision that I had never before seen since the day I had attained to maturity. That which I saw and learned in my ascent it is impossible to describe or to relate even from mouth to mouth. But as I returned to the lower Garden of Eden I saw many souls, both of the living and the dead, those known to me and those unknown. They were more than could be counted and they ran to and fro from world to world through the path provided by that column [the inner path of the successive sefirot] known to the adepts in the hidden science [Kabbalah]. They were all in such a state of great rapture that the mouth would be worn out if it attempted to describe it and the physical ear too indelicate to hear it. Many of the wicked repented of their sins and were pardoned, for it was a time of much grace. In my eyes, too, it was a great marvel that the repentance was accepted of so many whom you know. They also enjoyed great rapture and ascended, as mentioned above. All of them entreated me to my embarrassment, saying: "The Lord has given your honor great understanding to grasp these matters. Ascend together with us, therefore, so as to help us and assist us."

Their rapture was so great that I resolved to ascend together with them.⁴²⁶

Here he tells Rabbi Gershon of his inner ascent through higher regions and his vision of many souls ascending and moving about, all in a state of joy. Even the sinners were in a state of joy as they had been forgiven through grace. Later he describes ascending even higher with them. He meets the messiah and experiences even greater joy, to the point where he thinks he must have died, but discovers that he's still alive. Poignantly he asks the messiah, "When will the Master come?" and the messiah replies:

You will know of it in this way; it will be when your teaching becomes famous and revealed to the world, and when that which I have taught you and you have comprehended will spread abroad so that others, too, will be capable of performing unifications and having soul ascents as you do. Then will all the *kelipot* be consumed and it will be a time of grace and salvation.⁴²⁷

The Besht becomes distressed when he hears this, as he realizes it may be a very long time before his teaching is known in the world. As a consolation, he is taught some specific remedies and combinations of holy names that would help the people of his generation. He becomes hopeful that by teaching these methods to his peers they too would be able to attain to the stages he has attained and engage in the ascents of the soul as he has. But, he realizes, "no permission was given to me to reveal this secret for the rest of my life. I did request that I be allowed to teach it to you but no permission at all was given to me and I am duty bound on oath to keep the secret."⁴²⁸ There were none ready to receive the teaching. No one was at a spiritual level equal to the

Besht's. So, paraphrasing several biblical passages, he advised his brother-in-law:

Let your ways be set before the Lord and never be moved,⁴²⁹ especially in the Holy Land. Whenever you offer your prayers and whenever you study,⁴³⁰ have the intention of unifying a divine name in every word and with every utterance of your lips. For there are worlds, souls, and divinity in every letter. These ascend to become united one with the other and then the letters are combined in order to form a word so that there is complete unification with the divine. Allow your soul to be embraced by them at each of the above stages. Thus all worlds become united and they ascend so that immeasurable rapture and the greatest delight is experienced.⁴³¹

This last paragraph is a beautiful summation of how the Besht took the name practices of the kabbalists and transformed them. Since human language originates from unspoken spiritual sound, it is taught that the letters of the physical alphabet carry, in potential, the spiritual power of their origin in the higher realms. When he says that "there are worlds, souls, and divinity in every letter" he means that the letters of our human language can be a window to a higher reality, "allowing the light of the life-giving divine infinity to shine through."⁴³²

Human language and divine speech are in a continuous dialectic relationship. When a person "unites" himself with the letters, they then carry his soul to their supernal source. Thus the words of the prayers become a vehicle to raise the soul from the mundane to the spiritual.

This account is reminiscent of the *Apocalypse of Enoch*, written in the last centuries BCE and found among the Dead Sea

Scrolls, in which Enoch raises his consciousness within and meets the messiah, who is called the Elect One. It also resembles the merkavah mystics' accounts of their inner journey to the spiritual heikhalot.

It is interesting that even here, the Besht is inclusive. He sees the souls of sinners as well as the virtuous, all experiencing grace and joy, and it is his mission to help them find salvation. He also has the desire to share the experience of the inner ascent with his colleagues and co-religionists, but he is not given permission to do so. He wants the messiah to come and relieve the pain of the people, but he is told it is not yet time. At the very least, he can teach Rabbi Gershon and others how to pray, how to unite with the letters of the prayers and raise their souls above the mundane level.

Earlier, the Besht had engaged in certain activities and prayers designed to bring about the messiah. This was in keeping with kabbalistic practices attempting to create harmony within the divine realms and correct the primal disharmony which was felt to be the current state of the world, symbolized by Adam's initial fall and the scattering of the sparks of divine light into the realms of matter.

The Besht's letter, written sometime between 1740 and 1746, marks definitively the point in time when he gave up on this pursuit of collective salvation. From then on he focused on the individual salvation of the souls of his followers, and thus became the first of the hasidic tsadikim, those spiritual masters who minister to individuals, turning away from the kabbalistic model of correcting worlds and realms of divinity.

The doctrine of the tsadik

The concept of the tsadik in Hasidism grew around the spiritual mastership of the Ba'al Shem Tov although the term was not

used for the Besht during his lifetime.* All the same, he was the *living* example on whom all subsequent written definitions and descriptions were based. It was the Maggid of Mezherich and Ya'akov Yosef who first articulated the concept of the tsadik from the 1760's onward. They both drew on many scriptural, rabbinic, and kabbalistic references to explain the concept, but ultimately the literary expression grew from their dynamic living relationship with their own master, the Ba'al Shem Tov.

Eventually many later hasidic masters who traced their spiritual heritage back to the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Maggid Dov Baer would add further writings about the importance of the tsadik. In each hasidic lineage there was a single charismatic individual who was the embodiment of the ideal.⁴³³ The body of literature that developed in Hasidism about the importance of the tsadik was neither abstract, nor buried under layers of obscure symbolism. This literature was all based directly on the writers' own experiences of living spiritual masters.

One of the key metaphors Ya'akov Yosef used for the tsadik comes from a biblical saying from the book of Proverbs, "*tsadik yesod olam*" (the tsadik is the foundation or cornerstone of the world).⁴³⁴ This statement was interpreted by the rabbis of antiquity to mean that the tsadik is the pillar, the axis, foundation stone, or sacred center of the world. Put otherwise, the world stands on a single pillar. As *yesod* (foundation) is also the name of the ninth sefirah in the kabbalistic system of the sefirot and is considered the channel through which the divine abundance flows to the earth, it is also taken to mean that the tsadik is the earthly incarnation of the divine principle symbolized by *yesod*;

* Interestingly, the term "prophet" was not used for Abraham or Moses during their lifetimes. These terms are applied to the saints and mystics after their death, although they themselves are the models whose lives and teachings define the terms.

he is the channel through which the divine grace, the spiritual knowledge, comes into the world.*

The tsadik is called the heart of the body, for he is a channel which draws the bounty of life [*shefa*] from the Life of all Life to all the other limbs, which are the people of his generation.⁴³⁵

Similarly, the Maggid Dov Baer of Mezherich wrote:

Now it is known that *yesod* has the power to ascend and draw the divine abundance forth from above, because it includes all. The same is true of the earthly tsadik: he is the channel who allows the abundance to flow down for his entire generation.⁴³⁶

Ya'akov Yosef had said that only when one joins himself to the living tsadik upon whom the Shekhinah rests does one actually join oneself to the Lord.⁴³⁷ The hasidim often used the metaphor of rungs on a ladder to describe the spiritual levels attained by individuals. The Besht taught that the master moves from the higher rung – where his attention is completely immersed in the spiritual planes of oneness with the holy spirit – to the lower rungs which are closer to the earth. He then brings his attention into the physical plane and uses his body and mind to communicate with his disciples:

And this is what was revealed to our father Jacob [in his dream in the Bible], a ladder fixed in the earth whose head

* In the sefirotic system of the Kabbalah, *yesod* is symbolic of the male organ. It might possibly be a direct parallel with the *shiv lingam* of the Hindus, which is a vertical pillar symbolic of the divine creative power.

reached the heavens, which means – even when the tsadik is fixed in the earth, with the lowly, common people of the earth, among scoffers and gossips and the like, nevertheless his head, his thoughts, reach the heavens, joining his thoughts to his Creator. For the divine name is before him. In this manner, the angels of the Lord – those who come into this world to do the bidding of the Lord [the tsadikim] – are called messengers of the Lord . . . and ascend the ladder [of the world].⁴³⁸

The tsadik as *axis mundi* is metaphorically the central pillar linking heaven and earth. He stands between both realms and is a conduit for the spiritual energy of each to reach the other. He connects the two. He *becomes* the ladder of Jacob's dream on which the angels ascend and descend from heaven. Here also he becomes the ladder, and all spirituality comes into this world through him. It was believed that the prayers of the devoted rise to God by virtue of his intervention.

Only a living tsadik can descend to the rung of the ordinary man and gather those souls yearning to return to the Lord. Ya'akov Yosef wrote:

In this world every day or at certain times the tsadik descends from his rung in order to join himself with those lesser in degree . . . for when he again ascends to his rung, he brings them up as well. But it is only possible for one to ascend with him if he too joins himself to the tsadik.⁴³⁹

Although the body of the tsadik is finite and lowly, through it he is able to reach the divine, which is infinite and lofty. Only the tsadik could ascend the ladder to heaven, enter the supernal realms, meet the divine, and bring the divine grace back to earth.

Samuel Dresner summarizes the writings of Ya'akov Yosef concerning the special mission of the tsadik: "Through the tsadik, the austere loftiness of heaven and the abject lowliness of earth, the transcendence of God and the humanity of man, meet. What seems set apart and unalterably opposed find in him a mediating principle which brings them together."⁴⁴⁰ He quotes Ya'akov Yosef:

It is only possible to join together two opposites through a third force.⁴⁴¹ The tsadik is the foundation of the universe, which is peace, for he joins together two opposites as when one makes peace between a man and his neighbor.⁴⁴²

In the sixteenth century, as we read earlier, Jewish mystics like Isaac Luria had taught that at the time of the creation, sparks of the primal light had become entrapped in shards of matter – a metaphor for the imprisonment of the soul in the material world. This idea lent itself to the concept of the tsadik who descends from the spiritual to the material rungs of existence in order to liberate the sparks – the souls of those yearning for communion with God. This means that in order to liberate the good from its attachment to evil, it is necessary to descend to the realm of evil. "In order to raise a lower rung to a higher one it is necessary that the tsadik join himself to that lower rung; only then he will be able to raise those who dwell upon it."⁴⁴³

The tsadik in Hasidism was understood as simultaneously embodying the opposites of Being (*yesh*) and Nothingness (*ayin*) – two important kabbalistic concepts adopted by Hasidism. His body is Being – it has substance and is physical – while he actually is Nothing, without substance; he exists in the divine eternity, in the realm of spirit. The noted contemporary scholar of Hasidism, Rachel Elior, offers a quotation from a twentieth-century hasidic mystic concerning the ability of the tsadik (the rebbe) to exist

both on the divine and human levels simultaneously.* His soul is one with the divine, but he lives through the physical body. It is this that gives him his spiritual power.

In the twentieth century, Habad hasidism has provided strong testimony to the idea that the charismatic authority of a tsadik derives from an unmediated relationship between the divine and the human: the tsadik is an “infinite substance garbed in flesh and blood; the rebbe being an infinite substance clothed in the rebbe’s body.”⁴⁴⁴

For the hasidim to be in the presence of the physical tsadik while he was also in touch with the spiritual dimension must have been extraordinary. Many stories and quotations testify to their sense of wonder and at being with their master. Buber recounts:

News was brought to Rabbi Moshe Leib that his friend the rabbi of Berditchev had fallen ill. On the sabbath he said his name over and over and prayed for his recovery. Then he put on new shoes made of morocco leather, laced them up tight and danced.

A tsadik who was present said: “Power flowed forth from his dancing. Every step was a powerful mystery. An unfamiliar light suffused the house, and everyone watching saw the heavenly hosts join in his dance.”⁴⁴⁵

Other hasidic tsadikim in the later generations also taught about the spiritual qualities of the tsadik. Some used the term *medugal be-herut*, “outstanding in his freedom.”⁴⁴⁶ He was free

* *Rebbe* is an affectionate term for the rabbi, and was often used by the hasidim for the tsadik they were devoted to.

because of his ability to rise to higher realms and draw down the divine grace (*hesed*) for the benefit of the community. He had the kind of freedom that no one else had – he could move between the physical and heavenly worlds and take his disciples' souls with him.

By virtue of his ascent to higher realms, the tsadik had another kind of freedom also – he was free to interpret the scriptures according to the needs of his disciples – as time and place dictated. He was not subject to rigid traditions of interpretation of scripture which were based on the authority of past teachers and masters. The tsadik's authority was his own mystic experience, which was manifested outwardly as his charisma, his magnetic attraction for others.

People were naturally attracted to him, to his presence, beyond even his teachings. It was his very person that radiated love and it was this love that they received from him, that enveloped them. It hardly mattered how or what he taught intellectually. His followers were linked through their mutual love for him, for God, and through that for each other.

For the rank and file hasidim, the main purpose in their lives was to connect themselves with a tsadik who could elevate their souls and liberate them from worldly suffering. They attributed supernatural powers to him, with the ability to influence the spiritual and physical worlds. This teaching is explicitly discussed in *Ma'or va-shemesh* (Light and Sun), written by the later tsadik Kalonymus Epstein: "The main thing is to bind oneself to a tsadik who can elevate and repair the souls of Israel; this is the tsadik who conforms to the paradigm of the supernal tsadik [God] who connects all things."⁴⁴⁷

Elior explains that "the tsadik was seen as having the power to liberate his followers from the shackles of the physical world through his ability to mediate between the heavenly and earthly realities and draw the divine abundance down to this world."⁴⁴⁸

She writes about the important change in the way the hasidim regarded their relationship with God due to the presence of the tsadik among them:

With the development of the doctrine of the tsadik, the individual hasid is no longer required to devote himself to God but instead to attach himself to the tsadik, relying on the latter's communion with God. For the doctrine of the tsadik implies the transformation of the direct relation between the hasid and God that characterized early Hasidism into an oblique, mediated relationship in which the tsadik is the link between this world and the higher worlds.⁴⁴⁹

Many of the later hasidic rebbes also wrote about the importance of the tsadik as intermediary and channel for divine grace. Elijior cites a few of their writings:

For the tsadik must connect and unify the higher worlds with the lower.⁴⁵⁰

The tsadik must ... draw down the abundance into the world.... In this context the tsadikim are called angels, meaning messengers, for they are God's emissaries to benefit His creatures.⁴⁵¹

Because God's effect is exceedingly great and it is impossible to receive His influence except through an intermediary, that is the tsadik who receives the abundance from on high and he transmits it to all.... Thus the abundance through the tsadik is a reciprocal loving kindness with the whole world, as he receives the abundance from above and distributes it to all, and it emanates from God.⁴⁵²

There is an intimate relationship between the tsadik and the hasid, the master and the disciple. They both need each other. The hasid needs the tsadik to mediate with God, to protect and guide him. The tsadik needs the hasid so that he can fulfill his mission of guiding souls and creating the ideal Jewish community. He not only has his own mystic ideal to pursue, but he has a social responsibility that derives from his contact with the divine. He has to elevate the souls of his followers and bring down the divine grace for his community, not for himself.

We can distinguish the social role of the tsadik in Hasidism from the role that the kabbalists of previous centuries had envisioned for themselves. The kabbalists saw themselves as ascetic recluses whose duty it was to meditate for endless hours every day, performing complex prayers and rituals, responsible only to themselves and their small fellowship of companions or disciples. The tsadik of Hasidism was at one with the entire humanity, his entire community. So although some of the kabbalist ideas and symbolism had penetrated Hasidism, the role of the tsadik and the social structure of the movements greatly differed from one another.

In some hasidic circles it was taught that several tsadikim could be alive at the same time, but there was one *tsadik ha-dor*, a supreme tsadik for each generation. The designation of “tsadik” was extended to all the holy mystics and teachers of the past, even if it wasn’t used during their lifetimes. For example, the biblical Moses; the rabbis Haninah ben Dosa in the last centuries BCE; Simeon bar Yohai, legendary author of the Zohar, and Isaac Luria – these were all considered the great tsadikim of their generation, the *tsadik ha-dor*. And the Ba’al Shem Tov became the latest to be included in this rare and elevated grouping.

Teachings

The twentieth-century philosopher Martin Buber wrote about how the tsadik, exemplified by the Ba'al Shem Tov, transformed others by the way he lived, not by an intellectual teaching:

The Ba'al Shem himself belongs to those central figures in the history of religion what have done their work by *living* in a certain way, that is to say, not starting out *from* a teaching but aiming *toward* a teaching, who *lived* in such a way that their life acted as a teaching, as a teaching not translated into words.⁴⁵³

The Besht taught, perhaps more by his example and the magnetic influence of his presence than by his words, that *deveikut* was the aim of spiritual practice. Jewish mystics since medieval times had used the term *deveikut*, but with a different meaning. For them, *deveikut* referred to a variety of techniques to foster devotion, such as ascetic practices, using the intellect to continually keep God in mind, and mentally attaching oneself to the *sefirot* or the *Shekhinah* in prayer. To Jewish mystics before the Besht, *deveikut* was possible only for very advanced souls after a long period of self-purification and preparation.

The Ba'al Shem Tov used the term *deveikut* to describe the spiritual state of superconsciousness in which the divine reality is experienced as a unity that transcends diversity and compartmentalization. The term *deveikut* appears in all hasidic literature as the goal of every spiritual practice. The Besht told a parable to explain the state of *deveikut*:

There once was a wise and great king who did everything through illusion, constructing imaginary walls and towers and gates. And he commanded the people to come to him through the gates and the towers, and instructed that royal

treasures be scattered at each and every gate. And there were some people who came to one gate and took the money and went away while others, etc., until his loving son made an effort to go directly to his father the king, and then he saw that there was no barrier separating him from his father, for it was all illusion.⁴⁵⁴

In *devekut*, one realizes through one's own personal experience that the divine presence is everywhere, saturating the entire creation; that the divine is not removed from the creation – it is closer than one's own breath. As Ya'akov Yosef explains the parable, "For all concealment is but an illusion. In truth everything is of His substance."⁴⁵⁵

Personal instincts, appetites, and desires are the walls, towers, and partitions that separate us from our Maker. It is our own weaknesses, not external obstacles that hinder our *devekut*. The son of the king represent the Besht himself. Through mystical ecstasy, devotees of the Lord have the ability to rise above these obstacles and realize the true spiritual nature of everything. The Besht knew that all the divisions and walls, the diversity of the creation, were simply an illusion.

Martin Buber recounts an anecdote that defines the state of *devekut*, the ecstasy the hasidic *tsadikim* attained, through which they experienced God's presence in everything, and that all is Him.

It is told of one master that he had to look at a clock during the hour of withdrawal in order to keep himself in this world; and of another that when he wished to observe individual things he had to put on spectacles in order to restrain his spiritual vision; "for otherwise he saw all the individual things of the world as one."⁴⁵⁶

The hasid who was a beginner in spiritual development might not yet be able to experience *devekut* himself, but to be near his *tsadik* gave him a taste of this blissful state which no wordy teaching could convey. By attaching himself to the *tsadik* who was in the state of *devekut*, the simple hasid could also enjoy some of the ecstasy that radiated from the *tsadik*.

Thus, in Hasidism, asceticism, self-mortification, and intellectual study were rejected as ineffective in removing the barriers. The way to *devekut* was through attachment to the *tsadik*.

RAISING THE MATERIAL TO THE SPIRITUAL

The Besht believed that one could combat the lower instincts by “raising” the lower tendencies to the spiritual level rather than by suppressing them. All of a person’s tendencies, both good and evil, come from God – because everything is God. It is simply a matter of redirecting one’s energies and inclinations towards the divine. The Besht even believed that one should satisfy one’s appetites for food and drink in order not to create an unhealthy suppression, which would lead to depression and a turning away from God. Far from fasting and rigorous self-mortification, most hasidic groups indulged in drinking, ecstatic singing, and dancing in their worship of God.

Ya’akov Yosef summarized the Besht’s attitude to good and evil with the following quotation from his master. He taught that one must confront the evil, the mundane, the profane, the material, and raise it to the holy, the good, to service of God. “To be in the world, but a little above it, is the goal. Not to escape the evil thought or the evil man, but to take issue with them both, and turn them to the Lord.”⁴⁵⁷

For the Besht, there was no paradox in existing in a state of *devekut* while engaged in the material world, as he didn’t see a contradiction between the physical and spiritual natures of

man. They both originated in the divine. The foundation of this principle is the experience of divine immanence: the divine is in every corner of creation. Because it is present in everything, we can worship God through the physical. Thus even mundane activities can become spiritual “by virtue of the thought that illuminates them and the intention that accompanies them.”⁴⁵⁸

The Besht taught:

In truth, where one’s thought ranges, that is where one is. In truth, his glory fills *all* the earth and there is no place vacant of him. In all places that a man is, that is where he will find attachment [devekut] to the Creator in the place where he is, for there is no place void of him. . . . In *all* places is divinity.⁴⁵⁹

The Besht urged that every earthly activity a person engages in be converted into worship of God. He recounted the rabbinic story of Hanokh, a cobbler, who thought of God with every stitch, “and in doing so, would bind the material deed from the lower world, by the thought that it is “empowered,” to the spirituality of the Upper World.”⁴⁶⁰

ELEVATING STRAYING THOUGHTS

Similarly, the Besht taught that just as God is immanent in every aspect of life and can be realized in mundane, material activities, so our thoughts are also part of the divine, even our most sinful or straying thoughts. He taught that we simply have to “elevate” our straying thoughts rather than suppress them.

The kabbalists before him had taught that the way to control sinful thoughts or a meandering mind that would not concentrate in prayer was through severe penances, self-mortification, and ascetic practices. In contrast, the Besht viewed these straying

thoughts as originating in the divine realms, and that it was man's duty to elevate those thoughts to their source. In fact, that was their purpose in coming into the mind: so that they would get elevated and redeemed. This was connected with the Lurianic notion of uplifting the sparks that are trapped in the material realm.

In practice, the Besht's disciples found his methods of controlling the mind more effective than severe penances or self-deprivation.⁴⁶¹ Rabbi Nahman of Horodenka reminisced about the tremendous austerities he had undergone in order to control his mind, until he encountered the Besht:

[Earlier] I went every day to a cold *mikveh* [ritual immersion bath]. There is no one in this generation who could bear such a mikveh! When I went home I did not feel warm for about an hour even though it was so hot the walls were like fire. Despite this I was unable to free myself of wayward thoughts until I turned to the wisdom of the Besht.⁴⁶²

Rabbi Ephraim of Sadlikov, grandson of the Besht, wrote of the method he had received from his grandfather to control his straying thoughts:

And I say according to what was handed down to me, that all thoughts are entire levels and they come to a man because they desire to be redeemed, and when a man considers this and knows that the Lord, Blessed be He, and Blessed be his name, is the root of all the thoughts and from him come all thoughts, he can return them to their roots, as is known from my grandfather of Blessed Memory, and convert all thoughts to good and uplift them to sanctity.⁴⁶³

PRAYER FOR ITS OWN SAKE

Just as *devekut* took on a different meaning among the *hasidim*, so did *kavanah* (intention, concentration). The kabbalists generally took a more mechanistic view of worship – they recited specific prayers in order to influence the supernal realms, and so they would mentally direct their prayers to specific *sefirot*. Immanuel Etkes, an important contemporary scholar of Hasidism, remarks that for the *hasidim*, prayer was a form of delight in God. One prayed with *kavanah* simply for the delight it brought to the person praying as well as to God. He writes: “The kabbalists viewed the principal objective of prayer in terms of its influence on the upper worlds. The Besht, by contrast, maintained that the primary purpose of prayer was the ‘delight’ [*ta’anug*] it produced; that is, the private experience and spiritual ascent that the person praying undergoes, the climax of which is mystical ecstasy.”⁴⁶⁴ Etkes then brings us a quote from *Keter shem tov* (The Crown of the Good Name), an anthology of the Besht’s teachings:

From the Besht: the reward of a *mitsvah* [commandment] is a *mitsvah*, as a man has no greater reward than the delight he feels from the *mitsvah* itself when he performs it with joy... The chief virtue is to take a greater delight in the worship of the Lord than in all other pleasures.⁴⁶⁵

Later hasidic masters also taught that prayer was not only a means of reaching God, it was an end in itself. Rabbi Pinhas of Korets said: “Prayer is not *to* God; prayer *is* God himself.”⁴⁶⁶ He also wrote of the state reached in truly concentrated prayer, when one loses all consciousness of the self:

The world imagines that the stripping off of corporeality is a marvel, but that is incorrect. It is only that when a man is nothing to the utmost degree in his own eyes, he is in the

category of stripping off the form, and then the ascent of soul comes automatically.⁴⁶⁷

Rabbi Ya'akov Yits'hak of Pshysskha, known as the Yud (the Jew), said it very simply:

Do you wish to know what is proper prayer? When you are so engrossed that you do not feel a knife thrust into your body, then you are offering prayer correctly.⁴⁶⁸

The detachment one attains through one-pointed devotion is common to the mystic practices of all religious traditions. Prayer as taught by the Besht was a type of meditation, in which the hasid loses himself. He enters as one person, and leaves it transformed. In his experience of union, he forgets himself and thus is permanently changed. He gains more compassion for others and the bonds of his worldly attachments become loosened.

The goal of worship, according to the Habad lineage of Hasidism, is to “reach the level of nothingness that is included in the Infinite . . . and to annul one’s reality.”⁴⁶⁹

Zechariah Mendel of Yaroslav taught the importance of concentration in prayer or meditation, not so much out of benefit to ourselves, but because the inability to concentrate prevents us from giving God what is due to him.⁴⁷⁰

EBB AND FLOW OF DEVOTION

Another important teaching of the Besht, which brought comfort to his disciples, concerned the internal states of *katnut* (smallness) and *gadlut* (greatness, expansiveness). Many hasidim were troubled by inconsistencies in their devotion. They experienced alternating periods of inspiration and dryness. The Besht reassured them that this was normal, that it was part of the natural ebb and flow, expansion and contraction, in devotion. *Katnut*

de mohin (smallness of mind) and *gadlut de mohin* (greatness of mind) were the terms used to express these alternating periods, these changeable states of mind.

From the Besht of Blessed Memory: "...for a delight that is perpetual becomes a habit and ceases to be a delight; therefore there are rises and falls in a man's worship of the Blessed Lord so that he will have the delight, which is the main purpose of worshipping the Blessed Lord."⁴⁷¹

Everyone seeks to have a continuous communion with God, but the Besht taught that inspiration, like the ocean, must ebb and flow. An added benefit of accepting a process of rising and falling is that one can survive the pain of the lower state more easily – one understands that the state of smallness is temporary and is a phase of greatness, as it were. The Besht and some of the hasidic masters after him revealed that although they had achieved spiritual heights, even they experienced states of relative smallness from time to time. They are two ends of the same rope.

HUMILITY

Another important teaching of the Besht was that people don't have to be perfect in their devotion in order to serve God – rather, they need to start from whatever rung on the ladder they are on, and work up from there. They may begin with ulterior motives (a low rung on the spiritual ladder) but ultimately they will serve and worship for love's own sake.

Through the conduct of his own life, the Besht taught the importance of humility. The Besht did not communicate through complex discussions of religious law, nor did he act superior to those who couldn't participate, but he tried "to shape a mold which could contain all the people, even those who were not deeply learned. When speaking to the common people he was

able to express profound thoughts with plain words in a way they could understand and were subsequently influenced by.”⁴⁷²

In all of his teachings the Ba'al Shem Tov stressed the importance of pure devotion over the intellectual brilliance of the religious scholars. This is a major theme of the legends about him as well. In this he differs greatly from previous generations of kabbalists and mystics, as well as from the rabbinical leaders.

He had great empathy for the sufferings of the common man. There are numerous stories collected in *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov* where the Besht helps sinners repent. As the Besht could see into the heart and soul of everyone and knew who was spiritually pure and who was not, he was able to uncover the “popular tsadik” – the ordinary person of exceptional spiritual rank.⁴⁷³

In another collection in Hebrew called *Gedolim ma'asei tsadikim* (Great Wonders of the Tsadikim), there are several stories that illustrate the Besht's belief that even the most ordinary person has the potential to be the greatest devotee. An example is the famous story of a village boy who brought a flute to the service on Yom Kippur, and against his father's admonishments began to play it. The congregation became very disturbed, and the Besht concluded the service quickly. Afterwards he said that the reason the prayers were concluded quickly is that the sound of the boy's flute uplifted all the prayers and relieved him of having to do so. The boy could not read and didn't know how to pray, but his devotion carried the prayers up to God, as “the Almighty looks to the heart.” “The strength of his desire played the flute from the truth of the core of his heart without distraction, wholly dedicated to His Blessed Name.”⁴⁷⁴

In the context of Judaism, a spiritual tradition that had emphasized the importance of scholarship and study and correct worship according to prescribed techniques, the Besht brought a revolutionary change – a true democratization of man's relationship with God.

Fountain of grace and wisdom

When the Besht passed away, his disciples accepted the leadership of Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezherich, without exception. Rabbi Yehiel, another close disciple, recounted:

He had been commanded from the heavens to accept the Besht as his rabbi and to go to learn from him, and he was shown springs of wisdom which streamed toward him [mystical knowledge]. And when the Besht passed away, he was commanded to accept the great maggid Rabbi Dov as rabbi, and he was shown those very springs which had gone to the Besht now streaming to said rabbi and maggid.⁴⁷⁵

About the Besht's close disciples, it was said that they "all had drunk at the same fountain, namely the divine Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov of blessed and righteous memory."⁴⁷⁶

The Maggid often used to praise the Besht to his own disciples and told them that the source of the Besht's mystical attainments was the revelation from Elijah and other high levels. The Maggid also said the Besht had taught him "the language of birds and the conversation of trees, etc., and also studied the secrets of holy names and unifications with him."⁴⁷⁷ He then listed the many secrets the Besht had shared with him. The Maggid was asked why he didn't disclose his own spiritual rank earlier; he responded that he considered himself a mere student who had done nothing on his own: "I found a light in a closet, and all I did was open the door," he said.⁴⁷⁸

It was under the leadership of the Maggid that the hasidic fellowship matured and evolved into the hasidic court, with the tsadik, the rebbe, at its center, a shape it would maintain for the next couple of hundred years.

The fountain of wisdom and love that the Ba'al Shem Tov had embodied through his very being flowed into his successor,

Rabbi Dov Baer. While Ya'akov Yosef had written of the ideal of the tsadik as experienced through the example of the Ba'al Shem Tov, it was during the mastership of the Maggid that the concept developed. The Besht never referred to himself as a tsadik.

The Maggid embodied the ideal of the "teaching thinker," as Buber put it in his insightful introduction to his classic, *Tales of the Hasidim*. Initially, as we have seen, he was a practicing mystic, a scholar and kabbalist, an itinerant preacher or maggid, and an ascetic. Once he came to the Ba'al Shem Tov, he was remolded so that his spiritual energies were no longer directed only at the salvation of his own soul, but towards the spiritual needs of his disciples. He had "always been a man given to ecstasy, only that, under the influence of the Ba'al Shem, this ecstasy was diverted from ascetic solitude to the active life of teaching disciples. From that moment on, his ecstasy assumed the shape of teaching. . . . He poured into his disciples all the strength of life."⁴⁷⁹

The Maggid's method of teaching Torah was designed to awaken the imagination of his disciples, for he believed that the truth lay within them and all he was doing was lighting the candle. Thus he did not give one interpretation of a passage of Torah, he would give very divergent interpretations. And he would not complete his thoughts, but rather throw out parables, hints, suggestions, and leave it for his disciples to decide what he meant and how one thought related to another.

He submitted himself completely in the service of God and he became in essence an ecstatic expression, in physical form, of God's will. The effect on his disciples is recounted by a young man who later became the revered tsadik known as the Seer of Lublin: "When I came before the master, before the Maggid, I saw him on his bed: something was lying there, which was nothing but simple will, the will of the Most High." That is why, Buber recounts, "the disciples learned even more and greater things from his sheer being than from his words."⁴⁸⁰

Gershom Scholem tells the story of a hasid who said: "I did not go to the Maggid of Mezherich to learn Torah from him but to watch him tie his bootlaces." Scholem comments that for the hasidim, "It is no longer his [the tsadik's] knowledge but his life which lends a religious value" to contact with him.⁴⁸¹ This is a significant change from the model of the master as a scholar, an intellectual, who teaches Torah and the secrets of Kabbalah.

Through the Maggid's devotion to his mission, the teachings of Hasidism spread to different parts of Europe, as his disciples traveled extensively, gathering the scholars and kabbalists as well as the common man, and revealing to them this radically new teaching of devotion which leads to ecstasy. Communities of hasidim began to appear, with the leaders becoming the center of their own groups of disciples.

The popular growth of the movement evoked opposition from the religious authorities, who saw it as bordering on heresy. Its emotional form of prayer, elevation of prayer over the study of Talmud, the central role of the tsadik as a quasi-supernatural being, and the independent attitude of the hasidim to the talmudists, all sparked a negative response. In 1772 the entire movement was put under a ban (*herem*), signed by the famous Gaon of Vilna (Sage of Vilnius) and the religious court. Shortly afterwards, in 1773, at the death of the Maggid, the movement split into many separate domains, each ruled by a different tsadik. Unfortunately there were tensions between the disciples of the various masters and sometimes between the masters themselves, as they all emphasized different aspects of their teachings and had different styles of interacting with their disciples. Thus the Maggid was the second and last universally accepted leader of the hasidim. With only one exception, every hasidic master to appear afterwards was either directly or indirectly a disciple of the Maggid.⁴⁸² Nevertheless, the movement survived the internal dissension and flourished throughout Russia, Poland,

the Ukraine, Lithuania, and Hungary over the next 150 years or so – until World War II effectively ended the Jewish presence in Eastern Europe.

Some of the tsadikim of later periods saw themselves as ethical and moral guides with the mission of helping their disciples to live a balanced life through Torah, worship, and charitable actions. Others stayed true to the mystical aspects of Hasidism and taught their disciples to submerge themselves in ecstatic prayer and meditation. Still others integrated the traditional rabbinic emphasis on the scholarly with kabbalistic techniques of meditation. Others stressed their ability to work miracles, or discern signs from the synchronicity of ordinary events. They even taught their hasidim to discern such signs for themselves. Still others, like the Seer of Lublin, used powers of clairvoyance to guide their disciples. Sometimes they would recite scriptures or Psalms and then await the answers to their queries. Telepathic power was also common among the tsadikim. Like Jewish mystics in previous generations, the tsadikim believed that the appearance of Elijah the prophet, the Ba'al Shem Tov, and even their own ancestors, in their dreams or in mystic trance, were gifts of divine providence.

Some tsadikim used the telling of the miraculous story to actually work the miracle. A story about a miraculous event would take the place of the action and carry the same power (like the story at the beginning of this chapter). But the greatest sign or miracle, as an anonymous tsadik once said, was to “take a simple person and make a hasid of him.”⁴⁸³

Like the Zen masters and Sufis, the tsadik would often do unpredictable things or make paradoxical statements, to shake up and confuse the hasidim and remove their resistance, making them more receptive to their master's teachings.

Rabbi Yits'hak Isaac Kalov forcefully described the ideal tsadik:

When you find one who can take out your innards, wash them, and replace them, while you are still alive – that is a rebbe.⁴⁸⁴

Overriding everything was the underlying belief in, and experience of, the immanence of God in the entire creation. Thus the spiritual illumination that the tsadik gave his disciple through personal contact was the experience (not only the knowledge) that “there is nothing outside of God.” And ultimately, for each hasid, his rebbe was the head of all of Israel, the Moses of his generation, a savior.⁴⁸⁵

The court of the rebbe

First there was the *klaus* of the kabbalists, the small room in the synagogue where the “companions” would gather to study together and discuss. Then came the *havura*, the circle of companions around the Ba’al Shem Tov and successive early hasidic masters. The Ba’al Shem Tov traveled from town to town to see his disciples, and they would also visit him. Eventually, as the movement grew, the home of the tsadik became like a court, where – like the aristocracy of the time – he would receive his visitors, and they could enjoy his presence.

The court also developed because after the era of the Maggid of Mezherich the mastership was passed down through the family of the tsadik, from father to son or son-in-law. The court continued to gain in power and wealth as the successor generations of the disciples of a particular tsadik would remain loyal to the same lineage of tsadikim that their ancestors were devoted to. By the mid-twentieth century there were more than one hundred courts in Eastern Europe.

So, although the movement grew over time, it became evident that once the role of the tsadik became institutionalized, there would be decay and even abuse. Some unscrupulous persons,

who had inherited their positions, were not of the spiritual rank of their predecessors. In their desire for power and wealth, they exploited their followers.

But aside from that, one could say that the majority of the tsadikim were authentic, striving for their own spiritual enlightenment and the desire to teach others their way of experiencing God, and this created a dynamic force within Judaism that had not been seen for centuries. A strong current of true spirituality continued to reveal itself, in direct continuation of the teachings of the Ba'al Shem.

We have seen that Israel ben Eliezer, the Ba'al Shem Tov, exemplified the tsadik as the channel between God and man; his method of worship was ecstatic prayer and inner ascent, resulting in *devekut*, a state of union with God, while living a normal life in the physical world. He rejected asceticism and preached that one could raise one's material life to spiritual heights. The impact of the Ba'al Shem Tov was so great that he not only drew many disciples in his own time, but by the end of his lifetime he had revolutionized the relationship of spiritual master and disciple in the wider Jewish community.

Each of the hundreds of the hasidic masters was a unique personality, differing greatly from the others. They shared a great devotion to their hasidim and their hasidim to them. True to their own internal calling, the way they reached into the hearts of their disciples depended on their own personality and character, as well as the background and needs of the disciples – their intellectual level, place in society, and religious commitment. But fundamentally, it was the same spiritual wisdom that surged forth from them and poured from their souls to the souls of their disciples.

Within a short time in the second half of the eighteenth century, numerous masters inspired by the model of the Besht appeared, responding to the community's yearning for spiritual

and material release. In his seminal work, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem writes:

There are two things about the movement which are particularly remarkable. One is the fact that within a geographically small area and also within a surprisingly short period, the ghetto gave birth to a whole galaxy of saint-mystics, each of them a startling individuality. The incredible intensity of creative religious feeling, which manifested itself in Hasidism between 1750 and 1800, produced a wealth of truly original religious types which, as far as one can judge, surpassed even the harvest of the classical period of [Kabbalah in] Safed. Something like a rebellion of religious energy against petrified religious values must have taken place.⁴⁸⁶

Who were some of these “truly original religious types” that Scholem mentions, who came after the Besht’s direct successor, the Maggid of Mezherich?

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav embodied the power of storytelling to teach mystical truths that cannot be conveyed through linear discussion. Of course, Nahman, great-grandson of the Besht, was not the first hasidic master to tell stories, though perhaps he took the story into uncharted dimensions of reality and imagination. The Besht himself, as we saw in the “conversion” of Rabbi Ya’akov Yosef, used stories and parables to penetrate the hearts of his disciples with his teaching of mystic truth.

Rabbi Nahman’s stories are enigmatic and mysterious. Stories travel with the wind, and some of Nahman’s appear to be adaptations of Russian and Sufi stories or the Indian tales of Akbar and Birbal, which he may have heard during his journeys to Palestine

or Turkey. They are a combination of folktale, morality story, dreams in which the subconscious comes to the surface, and metaphors of the relation between mystical symbols. They seem to be both autobiographical and cosmological. For example, in some of the stories, like the "Seven Beggars," the characters are symbols of the sefirot, and the events of the story are actually an explanation of the relationship between the sefirot. He told his stories to his disciples orally, in Yiddish, and they were written down by his faithful disciple, Rabbi Nathan of Nemerov.

Rabbi Nahman had an extraordinary sense of human psychology in its relation to the spiritual life. We are our own greatest obstacles. This physical world (and the body) is a shadow that obscures the divine light of God strongly shining within. Here are a few of his sayings on the subject:

All the troubles of man proceed from himself. For the light of God continually pours over him, but man, through his all too physical life, makes himself a shadow so that the light of God cannot reach him.⁴⁸⁷

Man is afraid of things that cannot harm him, and he knows it, and he craves things that cannot be of help to him, and he knows it; but in truth the one thing man is afraid of is within himself, and the one thing he craves is within himself.⁴⁸⁸

In his teachings, Nahman emphasized the importance of the tsadik, as he believed that "only through the tsadik could a man attain an understanding of the divine."⁴⁸⁹ Nahman taught that the tsadik is the main channel which God has given man to find him. He regarded the tsadik as truly representing God on earth, and as having supernatural powers beyond the ability of normal human beings. He taught that "the words of the tsadik were more precious than the words of the Torah and the prophets."⁴⁹⁰

People find it difficult to understand why one must travel to the master in order to hear the teaching from his lips, because, as they see it, one can study moralistic works. But this is of great value, for there is a great difference between hearing the truth from the master directly, and hearing it quoted by others in his name, and certainly if the one quoting it only heard from another, for it descends to lower levels the more remote it is from the master; and there is especially a great difference between hearing it from the master and reading it in a book.⁴⁹¹

Rabbi Nahman describes how the disciple learns from the master just by looking at him and being in his presence:

Man must refine himself. Each one can see himself by looking at the master's face, as if it were a mirror. Even if the master does not reprove him or preach to him, a person will feel immediate remorse for his deeds by merely looking at him. By merely looking at his face, he will see himself, as in a mirror, and note how he is sunk in darkness.⁴⁹²

It is not just what the tsadik says that instructs, but by being in his presence a person becomes transformed. The master's presence makes an irresistible appeal to the inner being, even when he gives no verbal instructions. Rabbi Nahman said, "The person who listens to a discourse by a tsadik receives an imprint of his image, his mind, and his soul, and the physiognomy (countenance) of the tsadik becomes fixed in his mind."⁴⁹³

He gives a vivid description of the mission and power of the tsadik:

Even those who are remote from the tsadik receive vitality and illumination from the tsadik. He shelters them, like a

tree, which has branches, bark, and foliage, and all draw their sustenance from the tree. Even plants distant from the tree which do not appear to draw sustenance from the tree, do in fact draw from it. . . . Similarly, the tsadik has the equivalent of branches, bark and foliage. . . . And even those who are distant receive vitality from him by [his] sheltering them like a tree.⁴⁹⁴

The importance of the tsadik for human salvation is illustrated in a story he told, called “Two Turkeys.” It demonstrates that humanity is never abandoned by the God; he sends the tsadik to bring souls back to him, souls who have forgotten their divine origin. These tsadikim take on the garb of ordinary people of the world in order to gain the confidence of those souls destined for divine re-union. To use the kabbalistic and hasidic vocabulary, they descend from their high rung of spirituality and stand on the lower rung of the mundane material world to perform their mission of rescuing souls.

The king’s son once became insane and imagined himself to be a turkey. He removed his clothes and sat under the table naked, and renounced food, eating only grains and pieces of bones. The king tried all the physicians but no one could help him.

At last one wise man came to the king and said to him: I undertake to cure your son.

This wise man also removed his clothes, placed himself under the table next to the king’s son, and gathered grains and pieces of bones and ate them.

The king’s son asked him: Who are you and what are you doing here? The wise man replied: And who are you and what are you doing here? The king’s son answered him:

I am a turkey. The wise man replied similarly: I am also a turkey.

The two turkeys sat together until they became acquainted. The man then gave a signal to bring him a shirt, and after he put on the shirt he said to the king's son: Do you think that a turkey is not allowed to wear a shirt? He is allowed, and he does not thereby cease being a turkey. The king's son understood this and he also consented to wear a shirt.

After some time, the wise man signaled to bring him trousers; he put them on and said to the king's son: Do you think a turkey is not allowed to wear trousers? Even if he wears trousers he can still remain a real turkey. The king's son agreed and he, too, put on trousers, and then, following the wise man's example, he put on the rest of the clothes.

Then the wise man asked for regular food and he ate it, saying to the king's son: Do you think that a turkey is not allowed to eat good food? One can eat the best and remain a turkey as ever. The king's son followed him also in this, and he began to eat regular food.

Reflecting on the progress made so far, the wise man then said to the king's son: And do you really think that a turkey must remain confined under the table? Not at all. A turkey may also go where he chooses, and no one has a right to interfere with him. The king's son understood this and accepted the wise man's advice. And since he now stood up and walked like a person he began to behave like a person.

Similarly, the tsadik robes himself in worldly garments and behaves like ordinary people in order to draw them to God's service.⁴⁹⁵

Rabbi Nahman's appreciation of the importance of the living tsadik, and the seriousness of his mission, made him critical of those tsadikim whom he felt were dishonest, and who abused the trust of their disciples. Because of his forthright attitude towards his contemporaries he made many enemies as well as supporters. And his disciples were persecuted by the followers of other hasidim.

Nahman died in 1810 at the age of thirty-eight, after a long struggle with tuberculosis. He accepted his death as "an ascent to a new stage of great wandering, to a more perfect form of total life."⁴⁹⁶ He said: "To him who attains the true knowledge, the knowledge of God, there is no separation between life and death, for he cleaves to God and embraces him and lives the eternal life like him."⁴⁹⁷

Rabbi Nahman named no successor, and so his disciples became known as the "dead hasidim," as they had no living master. Yet the spiritual influence of Rabbi Nahman has outlived him. In recent years many young people have been attracted by the figure of Rabbi Nahman and several groups devoted to his teachings have emerged in Israel. Yet they are still in search of a living master to lead them. Buber considers Rabbi Nahman to be the last of the great masters and mystics of Hasidism who was true to his mystical calling.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady and Habad-Lubavitch

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, Russia (1747–1812) was another important hasidic master, whose spiritual ministry was very different from that of Rabbi Nahman, or even the Ba'al Shem Tov. Yet he too was true to his calling.

Shneur Zalman was first in the line of the Habad-Lubavitch lineage of hasidim. It is the most well-known of the hasidic lineages to persist till today. The term *Habad* (sometimes spelled *Chabad*) is actually an acronym of the three highest sefirot of the

Kabbalah, which are the highest faculties of the mind: Wisdom (*Hokhmah*), Understanding (*Binah*), and Knowledge (*Da'at*).* It was Shneur Zalman's belief that all the faculties of the mind had to be in harmony and work together in order for a hasid to pursue the spiritual path.

Born in central Russia, in his childhood Shneur Zalman was considered a prodigy in religious studies and brilliant in the secular subjects of science and mathematics. He studied Kabbalah from his early youth. As he matured, he became known as a great scholar and sage. However, he experienced a still greater pull to the mystical life of a hasid, and joined the group of disciples devoted to Dov Baer, the great Maggid. He moved to Mezherich for several years to be close to his master. On the death of the Maggid, Shneur Zalman was asked to become the head of the hasidim in Lithuania, where there was a lot of opposition to the movement from those who objected to it as an emotional, devotional, tsadik-centered cult. The *mitnagdim* (the opposers) persecuted him and even denounced him to the Russian government authorities as a subversive influence. He was jailed twice in St. Petersburg and finally emigrated to Palestine to escape confrontation. Eventually he returned and settled in Lyady from where his influence spread throughout Russia.

Known as the Alta Rebbe (old rebbe), Shneur Zalman is significant because of his great influence during his own time and through his lineage. As an intellectual as well as a mystic, he synthesized the two strains of Jewish worship. His most important writings are the *Likutei Amarim* (Collected Essays), known as the *Tanya* ("it has been taught"), from the first letters which appear in the book. This work so defined Rabbi Shneur Zalman that he

* *Da'at*, while strictly speaking not one of the ten sefirot, was considered a "shadow" sefirah formed by the dialectic relationship of *hokhmah* and *binah*. It is an energy center of its own created by the meeting of the opposing energies of *hokhmah* (masculine, outward) and *binah* (feminine, inward).

himself was often called the Tanya. In this work he attempts to systematize the teachings of Hasidism and reconcile them with Kabbalah. In a sense one could say that in Shneur Zalman there is a synthesis of the many opposing strains of Jewish religious approaches – Hasidism, Kabbalah, and mainstream rabbinic Judaism. He represents a return to the intellectual approach rather than the purely devotional that had been introduced by the Ba'al Shem Tov. He emphasized the importance of the study of Talmud (in contrast to some previous hasidim who had mocked the scholars' obsession with Talmud study). It is probably this combination of the different strains of religious insight that gave the teachings of Shneur Zalman the great appeal and force that has sustained the Habad line for several hundred years.

Shneur Zalman introduced a new approach to the role of the tsadik. The Ba'al Shem Tov had taught that the rebbe's task was to make the disciples as independent of him as possible. The tsadik was not to do the spiritual work of the disciple; rather he was to serve as a mentor and guide, to prepare the disciple for his inner spiritual journey. Buber calls the tsadik the "helper" who is needed for both body and soul. He says:

Over and over he takes you by the hand and guides you until you are able to venture on alone. He does not relieve you of doing what you have grown strong enough to do for yourself. He does not lighten your soul of the struggle it must wage in order to accomplish its particular task in the world.

And all this also holds for communication of the soul with God. The tsadik must make communication with God easier for his hasidim, *but he cannot take their place*. This is the teaching of the Ba'al Shem and all the great hasidim followed it; everything else is distortion and the signs of it appear relatively early. The tsadik strengthens his hasid in

the hours of doubting, but he does not infiltrate him with truth. He only helps him conquer and reconquer it for himself; . . . he never permits the soul of the hasid to rely so wholly on his own that it relinquishes independent concentration and tension, in other words, that striving-to-God of the soul without which life on this earth is bound to be unfulfilled.⁴⁹⁸

This was the Ba'al Shem Tov's approach, yet there were many who felt adrift because of their inability to live according to his high moral standards and pursue the life of devotion he prescribed. Letters from the Besht's disciples to their master complaining of their plight still exist. This is what perhaps fueled another model for the tsadik, which developed after the time of the Ba'al Shem Tov. It was this model that was taught by Shneur Zalman and most of the later hasidic rebbes. Here the people depended on the tsadik totally, for everything – material as well as spiritual. Every personal and family decision was made by the tsadik. It was believed that the tsadik would lift the hasid with him to his level, and thus the hasid did not need to apply himself to his own spiritual development. He was counseled to depend on the tsadik as he himself would not be capable of the “great work.” This is based on the concept that the tsadik and the hasid are basically different species, and that the tsadik is so far above the hasid that the hasid could never rise to that level on his own.

Shneur Zalman taught that the tsadik is born with a special soul and that the ordinary man cannot aspire to that level. The ordinary person is generally governed by his animal nature, the “evil inclination” (*yetser ha-ra*) that drives him into the hands of his passions. Only the true tsadik, he taught, can overcome his animal nature completely. Yet there is hardly anyone who is a true tsadik, a true saint.

Most people fall into the category of *beinoni* (in between),

the average person who was neither *tsadik* nor caught in the web of evil. The *beinoni* is governed by the rational soul which stands in between the animal soul (which governs the wicked) and the divine soul (which governs the saintly). The *beinoni* has made the commitment to live a spiritual life, not to “derive life energies from any source other than God. This means he considers each sin as idolatry.”⁴⁹⁹

The *beinoni*, although he feels the pull of the spiritual life, is in need of constant moral support and spiritual reinforcement, and so the *tsadik*, the master, must enter the world of the *beinoni* in order to help him. By entering that world, he descends from his spiritual stature as *tsadik* and enters the world of duality – in which there is the pull of good and evil, and where decisions must be made. This is a practical application of the metaphor of the *tsadik* who descends from his higher spiritual rung on the ladder of spirituality to the lower rung of the material world. It is said that Shneur Zalman modestly said of himself: “I am only a *beinoni*.”

Shneur Zalman’s concept of the *tsadik* as a special sort of soul engendered the elevation of the *tsadik* to a divine level – and a form of discipleship in which the *hasidim* became totally dependent on the *tsadik*. Hasidism’s detractors pointed to the worship of the *tsadik* as a type of idolatry. They felt he was elevating the *tsadik* to a level equal to a prophet or messiah, and this is why Shneur Zalman was denounced by his enemies.

On the death of Shneur Zalman in 1814, his eldest son, Rabbi Dov Baer (named for Shneur Zalman’s master, Dov Baer the *Maggid* of Mezherich), assumed leadership of the Habad *hasidim*. On Dov’s return from central Russia where he had accompanied his father during the Napoleonic wars, he settled in the town of Lubavitch, which remained the seat of the Habad movement until 1916.

DOV BAER OF LUBAVITCH

Known as the Middle Rebbe, Dov Baer (1774–1827) above all emphasized the importance of achieving spiritual ecstasy in prayer through disciplined practice. He rejected what he called physical ecstasy, which comes from the stirring up of emotions. Although many hasidim and kabbalists practiced meditation, there are few who wrote explicitly on their experiences. Dov Baer, however, has left as his legacy two unusual (though dense and difficult) works on the subject, *Tract on Ecstasy* and *Tract on Meditation*. Following are a few selections from *Tract on Ecstasy* concerning the ecstasy arising from devekut – the state of attachment to God.

There is a difference between love and attachment [devekut]. Attachment is life itself, since it is the binding of the soul to the Life of Life, the Infinite Light, which is called the Source of Life for all souls.⁵⁰⁰

This is the concept of the souls' intrinsic attachment, and it is even higher than the soul's Wisdom [the second level of the soul in Kabbalah]. This is called attachment, since the soul is attached and drawn because of the intrinsic godliness that is in it. It is automatically attracted and attached, just as a spark is drawn to a flame. This is genuine godly ecstasy.⁵⁰¹

Above this is the concept of pure desire, which is much higher even than meditation... Our entire discussion in this chapter of how ecstasy in the heart and mind come through meditation is really only a beginning. The fifth level, however, involves the intrinsic passion that exists in one's wisdom and understanding, and this also shines into the heart.⁵⁰²

LIFE AT THE COURT OF THE LUBAVITCH REBBE

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a twentieth-century Canadian-American spiritual leader who was raised as a Lubavitch hasid and spent his life trying to convey Hasidism's values to contemporary American Jewish youth, has written an interesting book called *Spiritual Intimacy*, in which he looks closely at the tsadik-hasid relationship, especially among the contemporary Lubavitch hasidim. Schachter-Shalomi's detailed descriptions of life at the court of the rebbe give an intimate and specific sense of the relationship between hasid and tsadik.

One of the most important events in the life of the hasid was the private interviews he had with his rebbe. At least once a year, the hasid would seek an interview with his master. In Habad Hasidism, this personal interview was called the *yehidut* (joining). Schachter-Shalomi says that during the *yehidut* with the rebbe, the hasid and the rebbe became one, as soul was open to soul, and there was no sense of one being superior or above the other. As Schachter-Shalomi wrote, the rebbe's task is to disclose the undisclosed, the inner spirit, in himself and in the hasid.⁵⁰³

When the rebbe would meet the hasid, he would know the hasid's soul-history, its incarnations in various lives. This was considered his true identity. He would be given a special name that he would use in all visits to the tsadik. Thus a person's identification with his body, his old self, would be broken. He would discover that his true self lies beyond that, revealed through his contact with the tsadik.

The belief in reincarnation underlies all the Lubavitch teachings. When people came to see the rebbe, the rebbe would see the record of the soul's development through its incarnations. As he goes back in time, he sees the soul as it was when it first separated from the Lord – in the primordial Adam Kadmon (original Adam). "It is a vision in which all the potentialities of a soul are realized in divine fullness. The rebbe's task is to see that the hasid

realizes this plenitude – if possible, in this present lifetime.”⁵⁰⁴ Schachter-Shalomi writes about the rebbe’s mission in this life.

The rebbe sees his life task as the sanctification of the Divine. Having known the great illumination, he knows the purpose of his present incarnation as well as of his past incarnations.⁵⁰⁵

When the hasid meets the rebbe in his *yehidut*, the rebbe not only looks at the hasid himself but also at his ancestors. They all plead for the tsadik to help the hasid with his needs. He takes into himself the anguish of the hasid and he sighs. The sigh indicates that he is flooded with “immense compassion,” as a result of his state of union with God. He looks within himself, and focuses completely on the hasid. In a sense he *becomes* the hasid. After the hasid answers the rebbe’s questions, questions which are framed by the inner knowledge the rebbe has attained of the hasid, the rebbe offers his advice and blesses him.⁵⁰⁶

A payment (called *pidyon*, ransom) was given to the rebbes. In some cases it was a monthly fee which the rebbe could use or distribute as he wished. It represented the ransom for the person’s soul to be liberated from the realm of the material world to the protection of the tsadik. It seals the commitment. It is also like the sacrifice on the altar that the people would bring in biblical times. This is because, to the hasid, the rebbe is like an “altar, a sacrifice without blemish, a high priest offering the sacrifice by eating of the hasid’s gift and raising it up to God in fervent prayer and study.”⁵⁰⁷

On other occasions, the rebbe would deliver sermons, tell stories, or explain a verse from Torah or Talmud to make his point. Often these interactions took place at the third sabbath meal, and they were called table talks or *tisch* (table) celebrations. The third sabbath meal was a special occasion for the hasidim

to spend long hours in the company of the rebbe: “The table is like the altar, the rebbe is the priest, the food is the oblation, and the leftovers from the rebbe’s plate – the *shirayim* – are the peace offering. The highly stylized meal is at once a liturgical act and an agape love feast.”⁵⁰⁸

The *yehidut*, the *farbrengen* [fellowship of hasidim], and the table talks were occasions in which hasidim were treated to *ma’asiyot* [stories] told by the rebbes. A. J. Heschel defined the *ma’aseh* as “a story in which the soul surprises the mind.” Its purpose is to celebrate the rebbe’s wisdom and sanctity and to prepare the hasid to emulate him in his life.⁵⁰⁹

The Lubavitch line continued into the twentieth century. Despite the holocaust in Europe, which effectively ended many other hasidic lines, Lubavitch remained strong even after the rebbe moved his court to the U.S. and Canada. The last rebbe of the line, Mehahem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994) was named rebbe on the death of his father-in-law. Well-educated in Germany, Russia, and France, he was an electrical engineer until he took over the spiritual duties of his community. The Lubavitch synagogue at 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, N.Y., became his residence in 1988, and his followers would collect there regularly to hear his discourses and interpretations of Torah, and to seek his advice. He started a process of reaching out to secular Jews by training *shelihim*, emissaries, to live among them and teach Jewish values and rituals.

Although Hasidism after the Ba’al Shem Tov had turned Jewish messianic aspirations inward to the salvation of the individual, messianic hope was always simmering beneath the surface. For a few years before his death in 1994, rumors spread within the movement that Rabbi Schneerson was the long-anticipated

messiah. When he died suddenly the movement went through a crisis. Many of his adherents have refused to accept his death as final and still await his reappearance. This belief has caused a split in the Lubavitcher movement and has precipitated some disquiet in the wider orthodox Jewish world, as to most Jews the concept of the “second coming” taken literally as a physical reappearance on earth is strongly reminiscent of the Christian belief in the second coming of Christ. In fact, recently some of his followers have suggested that Schneerson and Jesus would return together.

Other tsadikim

Outside of the Lubavitcher line, there were many more hasidic masters who shared the light of their love for God. The limitless fountain of grace and wisdom, the nourishing waters of spirituality first unlocked by the Ba'al Shem Tov, flowed through these tsadikim and brought spiritual sustenance to hundreds of thousands of their followers in rural villages, towns, and cities, even through the worst times of suffering. A short glimpse of a few who were active in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries follows below.

RABBI ISAAC EIZIK OF KOMARNO

In the early nineteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Safrin (1806–74), known as Isaac Eizik of Komarno, wrote of his intensive life of Torah study and divine worship through which he attained “many lofty stages of the holy spirit.” However, he says, “I did not appreciate at the time that it was not the result of my own efforts, since I was still remote from true worship. . . . Many harsh and demonic forces rose against me. . . . Worse than all was the state of melancholy into which I was hurled.”⁵¹⁰

After finally overcoming these inner obstacles, Rabbi Isaac describes a wonderful light that he attributes to the Shekhinah that alighted upon him. He recounts that after this period of

spiritual delight, he fell once again, and finally realized, “I must journey to the saints who would draw down His light . . . upon me since I already had a refined vessel wherewith to receive the light.”⁵¹¹ Rabbi Isaac realized that all his worship and Torah study – even his seeing of the divine light of the Shekhinah – were just a preparation, an inner cleansing, to ready him for the real spiritual experience which he could attain only by seeking the company of a saint.

For Rabbi Isaac, the Ba’al Shem Tov was a divine being. He tells of a vision that he dreamed one night in which he was overcome by a great longing to see the face of the divine Ba’al Shem Tov:

I ran to his abode and stood in the outer room. They told me that he was reciting his prayers in the inner sanctum but he opened the door and I had the merit of seeing the radiant form of our master, the Ba’al Shem Tov. . . . I was in such a state of joy and dread that I could not move, but he came up to me, greeting me with a smile of his face. I delighted greatly in this and his form is engraved on my mind so that I can recall it.⁵¹²

When Rabbi Isaac writes of seeing the “radiant form” of the Ba’al Shem Tov, he is referring to a recognition based on spiritual insight into the master’s true “formless form,” his spiritual divine essence. It is not an impression of his physical body, but of the supernal reality taking the form of the Besht.

Although the Besht had died before Rabbi Isaac was born, he was the inheritor to several important kabbalists and hasidic dynasties through whom the teachings of the Besht would have come to him, and thus he saw the form of the Besht within. He associated himself so closely with the Besht that he believed he was his reincarnation.

RACHEL OF LUDOMIR

The late nineteenth century saw the appearance of Rachel of Ludomir, probably the only female hasidic rebbe, who – because she was a woman – was ostracized and banished from her community in Poland. Ultimately she settled in Jerusalem where she lived till her death in 1905, after ministering for more than fifty years to men and women seeking spiritual understanding. Little is known of her actual teachings or whether she taught a mystical path – she functioned more as a miracle worker to her disciples who came with requests for relief from earthly suffering.

There may have been other women saints in the Jewish community about whom we have no information, as they too would have been suppressed. Only men were permitted to read the holy scriptures and Talmud, and especially the mystical texts. Women were not included in the fellowships of the kabbalists or the hasidim.

RABBI KALONYMUS SHAPIRA

At the time of the Holocaust in Europe during World War II, Rabbi Kalonymus Shapira stands out as an unquenchable flame who brought hope and spiritual strength to his disciples who were interned in the Warsaw Ghetto. Heir to the dynasty of the great third-generation hasidic rebbe Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, Kalonymus Shapira was known as the Holy Fire (*Esh Kodesh*), which is also the title of his most important book, found buried in a canister after the Warsaw Ghetto was demolished. His writings attest to his internal spiritual growth as he was confronted by the horrific events he experienced and witnessed daily. Shapira's children and other relations were killed during the bombing of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1939, and he was interned in the Ghetto from 1939 to 1943 where he ran a secret synagogue and arranged for proper performance of many religious rituals and holy days. He continued bringing faith and solace to the Jews interned there

with him, and helped them to find God's presence within themselves, which gave them the strength to undergo their harsh fate. In 1943 the rabbi was taken to a labor camp where he was shot just before the war ended.

Shapira ministered selflessly, tirelessly, to the people in the Ghetto, helping them maintain faith in God when life seemed tragic beyond comprehension. At first he believed that the Holocaust would end and a messiah would come to liberate the Jews, but finally his passionate love for God led him to accept what was happening. He struggled with his faith but ultimately came to understand and accept everything as an expression of the divine will, and that the love of the divine being was always present. He never gave up on his belief in the tenets of Judaism and in a special loving relationship between God and the individual.

He pursued a path of inner meditative prayer as well as adherence to outward religion. His reflections on quieting the mind are quite relevant. This quotation is from a letter written by one of his students.

The master continued with his well-known thesis that the ego constitutes a barrier to the heavenly influx. Thus, if one's thoughts and intellect are active, it is difficult for the heavenly flow to penetrate. However, when one sleeps, his mind and thoughts are quiet, and at such times he has no self-directed thoughts and it is possible for the heavenly influence to reach him.... Now when one sleeps, it is impossible for him to desire anything for himself, since he is unconscious. Thus our goal is to come to a sleep-consciousness while we are awake. That is to say, we wish to stem the flow of thoughts and impulses that is endemic to the working of the mind. This flow of thoughts is highly associative, and it is very difficult for a man to extricate

himself from it. . . . He then gave us concrete advice about this quieting.

He said first that one simply watches for a set period of time, observing his thoughts. He eventually will notice that the mind is emptying; his thoughts are slowing a bit from their habitual flow. He then must repeat a single verse or phrase, such as "God is truly God," in order to insert a thought of holiness into his now open mind.⁵¹³

RABBI ABRAHAM ISAAC KOOK

There were many mystics in the twentieth century who would not be considered part of the hasidic movement, yet they also were deeply involved in teaching the path to inner realization of God; they provided guidance to disciples in their quest for inner knowledge of the divine. The legacy of writings and letters of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, for example, who served as chief rabbi of Palestine till his death in 1935, reveal that he actively pursued the mystical life and had experienced the sublime inner light. He criticized the worship of outer names of God as a form of idolatry. He advocated the worship of the true divine essence which is beyond any outer names of God, even the name "God."

All the ideological controversies among people and all the inner conflicts that every individual suffers in his world outlook are caused by the confusion in the conception of God. This is an endlessly profound realm and all thoughts, whether practical or theoretical, are centered in it. . . .

All the divine names, whether in Hebrew or in any other language, give us only a tiny and dull spark of the hidden light to which the soul aspires when it utters the word "God." Every definition of God brings about heresy; every

definition is spiritual idolatry; even attributing to his intellect and will, even the term *divine*, the term *God*, suffers from the limitations of definition. . . .

The greatest impediment to the human spirit, on reaching maturity, results from the fact that the conception of God is crystallized among people in a particular form, going back to childish habit and imagination. This is an aspect of the offense of making a graven image or likeness of God [idolatry], against which we must always beware. . . .

The tendency of unrefined people to see the divine essence as embodied in the words and in the letters alone is a source of embarrassment to humanity, and atheism arises as a pained outcry to liberate man from this narrow and alien pit.⁵¹⁴

Here was a man in touch with the infinite spirit that we call God! It is no wonder that some scholars have called him the only true Jewish mystic of the twentieth century. Kook wrote of awakening to the depths of the inner worship, which he called the holiness of silence – the inner silence that creates the space within oneself to commune with the Lord. Once one has become absorbed in that kind of worship, then outer forms of worship or prayer will feel constricting.

If a person who has risen to the holiness of silence should lower himself to a particularized form of divine service, in prayer, [or] Torah study, to the limited problems of morality, he will suffer and feel oppressed. He will feel as though his soul, which embraces all existence, is being pressed as though with prongs, to surrender her to the lowland where everything exists within a prescribed measure, to the narrowness of a particular path, when all paths are open to him, all abounding in light, all abounding in life's treasures.⁵¹⁵

He wrote also of the divine light, or fire, that gives life to every heart. He urges people to let go of the burden of their material life and enjoy “the grace of God’s love”:

The flame of the holy fire of the love of God is always burning in the human heart. It is this which warms the human spirit and illumines life; the delights it yields are endless, there is no measure by which to assess it. And how cruel is man toward himself, that he allows himself to be sunk in the dark abyss of life, troubles himself with petty considerations, while he erases from his mind this which spells true life, which is the basis for all that gives meaning to life. It is for this reason that he does not share in it, and walks this world bound by the heavy burden of his material existence, without light to illumine his way. But all this is contrary to the nature of life; indeed it is contrary to the nature of all existence. The grace of God’s love, a boon from On High, is destined to break out from its confinements, and the holiness of life will hew a path toward this delight, so as to enable it to appear in its full splendor and might. “No eye has seen what God alone will do for those who wait for him” (Isaiah 64:3).⁵¹⁶

In poignant simplicity, Kook wrote about the love for everyone that flowed from his divine soul:

I love everybody. It is impossible for me not to love all people, all nations. With all the depth of my being, I desire to see them grow toward beauty, toward perfection. My love for the Jewish people is with more ardor, more depth. But my inner desire reaches out with a mighty love toward all. There is veritably no need for me to force this feeling of love. It flows directly from the holy depth of wisdom, from the divine soul.⁵¹⁷

Kook's universality is expressed in another selection:

Conventional theology assumes that the different religions must necessarily oppose each other... But on reaching full maturity the human spirit aspires to rise above every manner of conflict and opposition, and a person then recognizes all expressions of the spiritual life as an organic whole.⁵¹⁸

BEN ISH HAI AND BABA SALI

Also in Israel, several Moroccan and Iraqi Jewish mystics like Yosef Hayim, known as *Ben Ish Hai* (son of the living man) and Yisrael Abuhateira (*Baba Sali*) have provided comfort to thousands of disciples. *Baba Sali*, which means "our praying father," was the inheritor of an important lineage of kabbalists who had migrated from Damascus to Morocco more than four hundred years earlier. In Morocco, where he was a teacher and spiritual master, both Jews and Arabs came to him for blessings and advice. He moved to Israel in 1964 where the number of his visitors was even greater. At his direction, his teachings were not written down or recorded as he believed in the importance of personal contact. He was humble and honest, known for his self-sacrifice, purity, miracles, and loving magnetic nature. Hasidic rabbis came to him for blessings and he would ask them for their blessings. European and Eastern Jews (Ashkenazim and Sephardim) both revered him, and in him "they found the spring of sweet water that gave succor, help, blessing and reassurance."⁵¹⁹ He passed away in 1984.

The unending story

This is an unending story. There will never be a final chapter, as there will always be new spiritual masters coming to teach the way to inner knowledge, and disciples who are drawn to the spiritual

life. The mystic reality is constant and accessible if we look deep within ourselves. There is always a yearning for contact with God, a search for teachers who can show the way: In Judaism there have been those who emphasized the role of intellect, those who enfolded their teachings in complex symbolism or intricate methods of concentration, and those who taught the simpler way of devotion. Each movement influences the others, so the pattern is ever-shifting. But in all movements, in all periods, there were those who sought the inner truth under the guidance of their spiritual masters.

Jewish mystics have always emphasized creativity in worship, not rigidity. The kabbalists were enjoined to innovate as part of their adherence to the spirit of the mystical quest, as their response to the inner calling of the spirit of Elijah and other internal guides. There also have been many outside influences on Judaism from other religious traditions – Christian mystical and monastic sects, Muslim Sufis, and so forth. It is a dynamic process.

Today in Israel, in the U.S., U.K., and other Western countries, there is an unprecedented interest in Jewish mysticism on all levels. There are the neo-hasidim who are seeking to revive the values and devotion of Hasidism. There are the *ba'alei teshuvah*, the “repenters” – Jews brought up without a religious orientation but who are searching for inner spiritual enlightenment. Many of them have joined existing hasidic lineages, revitalizing them with modern practices and attitudes. The Habad-Lubavitch lineage may be the most well known, but there are also contemporary *hevras* emulating the teachings and spirit of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav and other tsadikim.

Kabbalah has been popularized through the efforts of the Kabbalah Center, whose leaders are the inheritors of the twentieth-century kabbalist Yehudah Ashlag. They reach out to Jews and non-Jews alike and have many celebrity followers. But they are not the only ones. There are numerous rabbis and

leaders of groups practicing kabbalistic meditations and trying to apply principles of Kabbalah to their daily lives. Even in some orthodox *yeshivas* (academies) in Israel, where traditionally *halakhic* (talmudic-legal) texts were studied to the exclusion of esoteric material, mystical texts have been added to the curriculum. Every day another popular book on Kabbalah is published, and the writings of early kabbalists and hasidic masters are being translated into English and published by a variety of secular, academic, and religious publishers. In practice, Kabbalah is often re-integrated with Hasidism and Hasidism with Kabbalah. Seekers of spiritual understanding are not content with an intellectual path to knowledge; they actively pursue techniques of meditation taught by past and contemporary masters.

Various spiritual leaders have large followings outside of the traditional religious institutions. Aryeh Kaplan, an orthodox scholar of Jewish mysticism who mined the Bible and later Jewish mystics for evidence of their meditation practices, taught meditation to Jews and non-Jews alike until his early death at the age of forty-eight. Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, mentioned earlier, is the founder of the *B'nai Or* (Children of Light) communities – now called ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. Ordained in the Lubavitcher movement, Reb Zalman has broadened his inspiration to include Christian monastic, Hindu, Sufi, and Buddhist traditions and meditative practices. The Renewal movement reflects this multireligious and multicultural orientation. Another aspect of the evolution of the Jewish consciousness today is the empowerment of women. Traditionally, Judaism has been patriarchal and male-dominated, and the feminine element of humanity has been missing from the spiritual life of Judaism. Today, however, women are in the forefront of the transformation of Judaism into a more holistic spiritual path, which embraces inner worship along with the outer religious traditions. Women are also taking leadership roles in the community: they

are being ordained as rabbis, accepted as scholars in Jewish religious studies and mysticism, and teaching courses in meditation.

It is a time of spiritual ferment and seeking, motivated by the deep inner pull of the spiritual reality that is the universal human heritage. When the Bible says that we are created in the “image of God,” it means that all human beings share the same divine core, the *ruah ha-kodesh*, which can be experienced within ourselves in contemplation and meditation. As Gershom Scholem wrote:

The story is not ended, it has not yet become history, and the secret life it holds can break out tomorrow in you or in me. Under what aspects this invisible stream of Jewish mysticism will again come to the surface, we cannot tell.⁵²⁰

APPENDIX 1

The Writing of the Bible

MOST SCHOLARS BELIEVE that the writing of the first part of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Pentateuch, took place at least five hundred years after the events it describes (such as the Exodus from Egypt and conquest of Canaan) could have taken place. It probably drew on older documents that had been preserved, as well on even older oral traditions.

Scholars have analyzed the text of the Pentateuch and discovered that there are at least four main strains, written by at least four authors or groups of authors between the ninth and sixth centuries BCE. These are generally called E, J, P, and D.

The author of E uses the name El for God, which is the name of the “Bull” God El, the chief God in the Canaanite pantheon. (Other forms of El he uses are Eloha and the plural Elohim.) He only adds the term YHWH to Elohim after the arrival of Moses on the scene. The author of E was probably a priest from the northern shrine of Shiloh, of the family of Moses. He projects great reverence and affection for Moses and promotes his priestly lineage – the Levites. It is E, for example, who portrays Moses as destroying the golden calf at Sinai, thus emphasizing Moses’

leadership and heroism in ridding the people of the unacceptable form of worship. E was probably written in the time just preceding the conquest and exile of the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria (northern Iraq) in 722 BCE.

The second strain in the Pentateuch is J, which uses the name YHWH for God (never Elohim or El),* and establishes the priesthood of Aaron as the legitimate lineage. It does not insist on centralized worship at Jerusalem but assumes the existence of numerous shrines in the countryside. J was probably written at approximately the same time as E. When the refugees from the northern kingdom fled to Jerusalem, after the Babylonian conquests, E probably became merged with J.

P is the priestly strain of the Bible, and includes the priestly laws and stipulations. It was probably written a little later than the other two strains by a Jerusalem priest descended from Aaron, Moses' brother, who was intent on consolidating the power of his lineage. It comprises most of Leviticus and much of Numbers, as well as selected sections of the other books of the Pentateuch. It emphasizes that worship of the one God YHWH must take place at the Temple in Jerusalem, where the priests of the lineage of Aaron were the only legitimate priests. P includes the grand story of the creation that has been enshrined in Genesis and presents a formal, cosmic, transcendent view of God.

D is the fourth strain, referring to the book of Deuteronomy, which repeats many of the stories found in the earlier, interwoven narratives of E, J, and P, but with a different bias. According to Israel Finkelstein in *The Bible Unearthed*, Deuteronomy "contains an uncompromising condemnation of worship of other gods, a new view of God as completely transcendent, and the absolute prohibition of the sacrificial worship of the God of Israel in any place but the Temple in Jerusalem."⁵²¹ D was supposedly "found"

*YHWH was formerly written as Jehovah, hence the designation J for this author.

in the Jerusalem Temple during the reign of King Josiah in the late seventh century BCE.

It is believed that when the northern kingdom fell and its refugees streamed into Jerusalem, the consciousness of young King Josiah of the southern kingdom was awakened. Probably under the influence of the priests of YHWH and prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, he attributed the conquest of Israel to its failure to adhere to the covenant. God's love and compassion are emphasized for his "chosen people," who are warned that nonadherence to the covenant would bring suffering and doom.

The biblical books that follow Deuteronomy – Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings – are written in the same style, and it is generally accepted that they were all written by the same person. Together they constitute a seamless account, starting with the death of Moses, through the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, the period of the judges, the early united monarchy, the division into two kingdoms, and the conquest of the northern kingdom by Assyria. The history ends with the glorious reign of Josiah, followed by the exile of the southern kingdom to Babylon. It is not known who the author of D was, but scholars believe that he was one of the priests of the northern shrine of Shiloh who had resettled in Jerusalem.

R is the name scholars have given to the Redactor, the Editor who brought together the opposing strains of J/E with P and masterfully combined them into one text. Then he added D at the end, with the story of Moses' death tacked on to provide a fitting finale. R was probably active during the period of the exile in Babylon (sixth to fifth century BCE). Other scholars believe that the Pentateuch received its final editing even later.⁵²²

EDITING THE PROPHETS

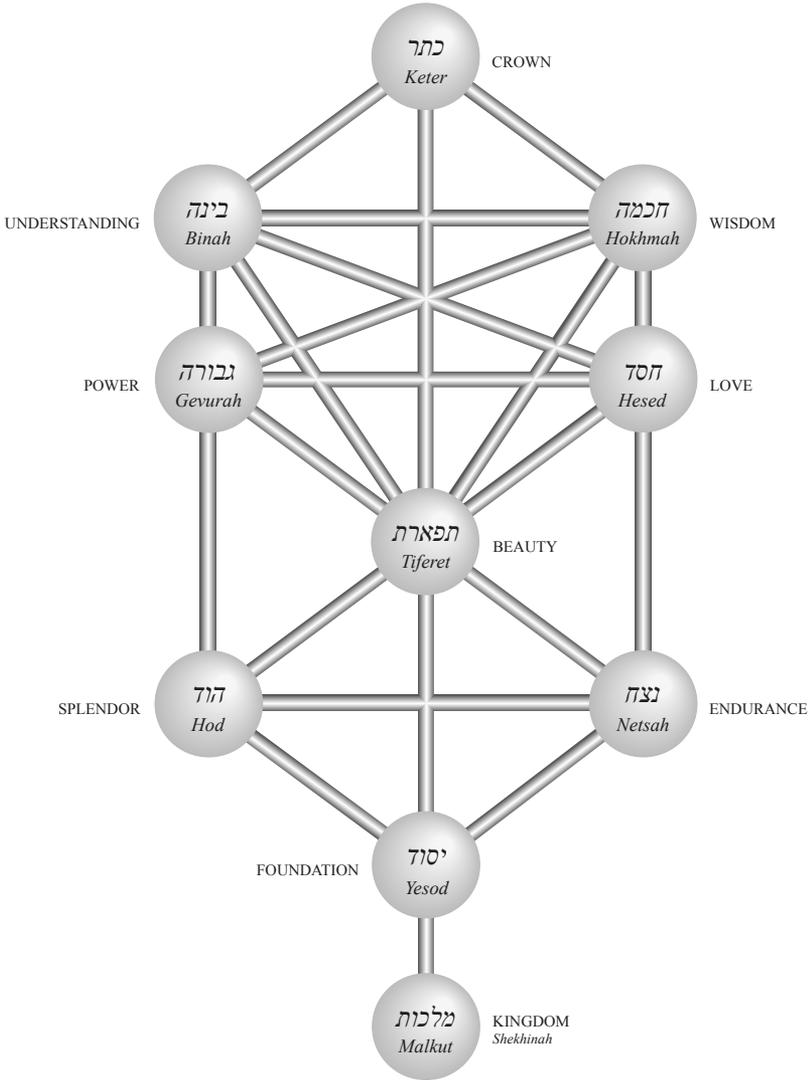
The prophets of the Bible were active beginning in the eleventh century BCE, the time of Samuel, and continuing for about seven centuries. Their writings were heavily edited in order to make

them conform to the established religious view. So, although the prophets' authentic sayings, which are couched in poetry and proverbs, reverberate with their spiritual message, the narratives of their lives and the historical events they lived through were heavily edited in later centuries, with commentaries and interpolations added to the text. Often they were made to predict distant political troubles or natural disasters, meted out as divine punishment for nonadherence to the covenant, when in fact these events had already taken place during the time the editors were writing. They interpreted the suffering they were experiencing as punishment for their unfaithfulness to God.

Many contemporary scholars believe that the objective of these scribes was to solidify YHWH as the Israelites' sole god, whose worship was to be centralized in Jerusalem, under the priesthood descended from Aaron. Adherence to the covenant, in the sense of establishing the supremacy of YHWH and the royal lineage of David, was the underlying unifying theme emphasized by the scribes who brought the prophets' writings in line. These editors, bent on creating strong religious institutions and a sense of nationality at a time when the people were in exile, may not have understood, or simply overlooked, the spiritual content of the prophets' messages or their metaphorical and allegorical implications.

During the period of editing, from the seventh through the third centuries BCE, changes were entered into the text itself, thus significantly altering the reader's understanding of the prophets' teachings. However, as these works were finally shaped into their canonized form at the beginning of the second century BCE, the later generations of priests and editors could no longer alter or expand the original text. Their editorial "improvement" process took place through separate commentaries that were attached to the text.⁵²³

APPENDIX 2: The Sefirot



APPENDIX 3

Theurgy and Augmentation in Hasidei Ashkenaz and Early Kabbalah

AS WE HAVE SEEN, by mystical prayer and *kavanah* in performance of the *mitsvot*, the kabbalists believed that they could affect the higher realms, even to augment their power and maintain them. For example, Moshe Idel explains that the kabbalists believed that if people fail to perform certain *mitsvot*, some of the divine power that is now dispersed among the sefirot, maintaining the higher realms and the creation, would retreat into the source of the pleroma, the “divine *dynamis*,” the Ayn-Sof, the Godhead. Thus sin diminishes the divine power manifested in the creation, and the performance of the *mitsvot*, such as study of Torah, increases it by drawing down the power from the Godhead into the realm of the sefirot.

This is an extension of the midrashic and talmudic concept that the divine power is dependent on man’s participation, and demonstrates the maxim that the Torah maintains the universe;

and that the tsadik, as the one who understands and performs the commandments most adeptly, is the axis (or tree of life) who maintains the universe.⁵²⁴ What the kabbalists did is give a structure to the midrashic concept by injecting the symbolism of the sefirotic system. Thus, particular *mitsvot* would be performed, and prayers would be directed to particular sefirot, and this would result in maintaining the balance between them, sometimes correcting or changing the balance, and sometimes augmenting their power. Some kabbalists aimed to increase the power of mercy over judgment, in an attempt to improve the destiny of the Jewish people.⁵²⁵

Underlying this conception is the belief that God is not aloof from humanity, but he is affected by it most deeply. The reward and punishment he dispenses are affected by human acts.

Idel summarizes “the myth that underlies the augmentation theurgy” in the following terms:

Divine power is dependent upon human activity, which is able to strengthen or to diminish it; alternatively, the relationship between the divine attributes is a function of human deeds. The performance of the divine will via the commandments is therefore the means by which man participates in the divine process.... [Thus] theurgical activity [was regarded] as the main *raison d'être* of the commandments.⁵²⁶

According to Idel, the obligation to draw down the divine power from the concealed realm of the Godhead into the realm of creation, the realm of the sefirot, is the purpose of the *mitsvot* and a significant aspect of the kabbalists' theurgical theory and practice. It is presumed that when Adam perpetrated the primal sin, which humanity has emulated ever since by its continued sinning, it forced the Shekhinah, the immanent “indwelling

presence” of God, to retreat to the Godhead. Thus the *mitsvot* are an antidote to sin: they are a means of drawing down the Shekhinah into the sefirotic realm and they facilitate its immanence in the creation. Other ancient and kabbalistic practices, such as the pronunciation of combinations of divine names, were intended to have the same theurgic drawing-down effect, according to Idel.

One of the underlying assumptions of all theurgic activity was the concept of the macrocosm and the microcosm – that man, as the microcosm of the higher structure, is integrally linked to it, and thus his actions would have an influence on the higher. Idel quotes kabbalist Meir ibn Gabbay (1626–1676), who comments on a midrash about the relationship between God and man:

In the Midrash, [we learn] that the Holy One, blessed be he, said to Moses: “God, tell Israel that my name is *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* [I am what I am].” What is the meaning of *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*? Just as you are present with me, so am I present with you. Likewise David said: “the Lord is thy shadow upon thy right hand.” What does “the Lord is thy shadow” mean? Like thy shadow: Just as thy shadow laughs back when you laugh to it, and weeps if you weep to it, and you show it an angry face or a pleasant face, so it returns, so is the Lord, the Holy one, blessed be he, thy shadow. Just as you are present with him, so is he present with you.⁵²⁷

“Man is the archetype of the revealed aspect of the Deity,” explains Idel. “No longer is the image of God understood as the basic archetype; now, the human image is regarded as the original, reflected by the divine structure. . . . As form, man possesses in his own being the archetypal structure of the Divine.”⁵²⁸ This also fits in very nicely with the paradigm of the cherub, the Shiur

Komah seated on the divine Throne, who is also symbolized as the primal Adam, the Adam Kadmon, who is the macrocosm that contains the entire creation with him in potential. Rabbi Ezra of Gerona wrote: “Man is composed of all the spiritual entities [the sefirot] . . . Man is composed of all things and his soul is linked to the supernal soul.”⁵²⁹ Thus human activity would affect the form and size of the Shiur Komah figure itself.

In this vein, Idel quotes another passage from ibn Gabbay’s writings:

When the supernal luminary [God] watches men and sees their good and proper deeds, [then] in accordance with what they stir below, they stir above, and he opens his good storehouse and pours the fine oil upon the head [of the highest sefirah of *keter* (crown)] and from thence upon his other attributes.*

The good deeds of humanity, therefore, cause changes in the realm of the sefirot, and provoke the Godhead to release his “fine oil,” the flow of his divine power or essence, to *keter*, and from there to the lower sefirot or attributes. This means that the performance of good deeds stimulates the flow of the divine grace into the creation.

This concept is the reversal of what is usually taught by mystics, even by later kabbalists – that the human is the lower reflection of the Divine, and that everything that happens on the human level has already taken place on the “idea” or causal/archetypal level, in the mind of God, as it were. According to this kabbalistic concept, the Divine needs human help or power in

* The fine oil symbolizes the supernal “influx,” or the release of the divine power or will by the Godhead from where it flows to the uppermost sefirah of *keter*. *Mitsvah Ya’akov* (Commandment of Jacob) folio 4a, quoted in Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 177.

order to restore the lost harmony of the sefirot. The kabbalist, comments Idel, becomes an arch-magician, “who seeks God’s redemption by human intervention,” rather than human salvation by the intervention of God.⁵³⁰ Man “is given unimaginable powers, to be used in order to repair the divine glory.”⁵³¹ The entire cosmos depends on human action.

Man is therefore an extension of the Divine on earth; his form and soul not only reflect the Divine but also actually are divine, hence the interdiction against killing a person. . . . Destroying a person is tantamount to diminishing not only the divine form on earth but . . . divine power itself.⁵³²

According to the early kabbalists like Rabbi Ezra of Gerona, the original emerging of the sefirot from their divine source was not conceived as an act of gentle emanation, but rather a violent act of “uprooting these entities from their primeval preexistence in the bosom of the Godhead.”⁵³³ The logical result of this violent origin is the natural tendency of these divine emanations or entities to return to their source. This is understood as a negative tendency vis-à-vis the needs of humanity, as it diminishes the divine power’s activity in sustaining the earthly realms. The spiritual influence in the world becomes reabsorbed into its source, leaving a vacuum believed to be the source of evil. The kabbalists set about to neutralize this tendency and counteract the ascending movement of the divine influence through various prayers and rituals. Rabbi Ezra mentioned three prayers that would “counteract the upward movement by the drawing down of emanation upon the higher and lower sefirot.”⁵³⁴

The Torah as divine body

Idel summarizes the key concept at work in the kabbalists’ attitude to ritual:

It is absolutely necessary continuously to perform the ritual that is intended to sustain the divine manifestations in their perfect state.... By the intentional performance of the Jewish ritual, the kabbalist directs his intention to God, causing His manifestation to man; this basic reciprocity is attained by the instrument revealed by the Divine: the Torah.⁵³⁵

The Torah, as the embodiment of the commandments, functioned as an intermediary and link between the human level and the divine. It links the human who performs the commandments with their source in God. The *mitsvot* act as a bridge and maintain the structure of the sefirot. Thus the kabbalist, whose objective is to obey God's will by performing the commandments, becomes a partner in the divine activity by maintaining and even augmenting aspects of the activity of the sefirot.

The Torah was considered divine because it embodies God's commandments. That is the exoteric level of understanding. But each letter of the Torah was also conceived esoterically as divine, as "shapes or forms of God," the entire Torah being the "name" or "being" of God himself. Thus the copying or writing of the Torah, which had to be done perfectly and precisely for obvious reasons, was like "making God" and carried its own mystical weight, augmenting and sustaining the divine *midot*, the qualities or sefirot, just as the performance of the commandments did. The performance of the commandments leads to the creation of a "complete" Torah, and thus the creation of a "supernal" man – the God who sits on the throne. Menahem Recanti, a later kabbalist, explaining the views of the early kabbalists, wrote:

Each commandment is branch and limb of the supernal form, so that by the completion of the entire Torah the

supernal man is completed, as each and every sefirah of the ten sefirot . . . make, by being linked, one form.⁵³⁶

Not only did performance of the commandments attain cosmic significance in the mind of the kabbalists. Even the permutation and combination of the letters and words of the Torah was viewed as a holy and divinely created technique by mystics such as the Hasidei Ashkenaz, the Cohen brothers of Castile, and Abraham Abulafia, whose practices were aimed at drawing down the divine influx and ascending to divine knowledge.

Augmenting the relationship through prayer

A beautiful symbol that was developed over time by Jewish mystics was the concept of the “ascent of the *atarah*,” the crown of God. The Shiur Komah, seated on the Throne of Glory, was always depicted as wearing a crown. There are also many descriptions of God as the king who wears a crown. Many pages of the heikhalot texts focus on the ascent of the prayers of the righteous. In the texts of the Talmud and Midrash from the rabbinic period, as well as the heikhalot texts, the angel Sandalfon (Metatron) is presented as forming crowns out of the words of the prayers and binding them to God’s head. The crown is made of the ineffable (unpronounced) divine name. If Israel neglects or omits its prayers, the crown is diminished. The crown must be complete and perfect for it to ascend to the divine realm. The crown, or *atarah*, is identified with the “supernal *demut*” (astral or radiant form) and the Shekhinah.

In the writings of the Hasidei Ashkenaz this theme is explored, and then echoed and developed by the kabbalists. Eleazar of Worms wrote of the prayers of the faithful reaching the divine realm and augmenting it. Eleazar wrote that the prayer of Israel “ascends to the firmament above their heads and goes to sit on the head of the Holy One, and becomes a crown for him. . . . And

so the prayers and the crowns which ascend to the throne are like a throne, and the throne is made of a sapphire stone.”⁵³⁷ (The sapphire is a biblical reference to the brilliant spiritual light of the higher regions. The throne is identified with the Godhead itself.)

In an early kabbalistic work, *Sefer ha-navon* (Book of the Wise), the symbol is developed with beautiful imagery:

Whoever answers “amen” to a blessing of the prayer, he [adds] a knot to the *atarah* of God; for if there is no knot, each and every letter, each and every word of the prayer would fall away from the *atarah*.⁵³⁸

When the *atarah* ascends to the head of the Divine, it becomes transformed into *keter* (crown), the highest sefirah, considered part of the divine pleroma, supernal source of the other sefirot.

With the development of Kabbalah, every human action took on symbolic, mystical, macrocosmic, divine significance. The life of the tsadik, the mystic, was conceived at its most mythic level as being the enactment and redemption of Adam’s mission in Paradise, the Garden of Eden. He was supposed to have maintained and cultivated the Garden, but he failed and was banished. It is up to humanity to reset the balance and keep the divine realms in harmony. Sin caused the contraction of the divine realms – the return of the sefirot to their source, their withdrawal from the human realm. The opportunity to correct this divine, cosmic imbalance was at the heart of more-and-more complex layers of symbolism and theurgic rituals that were created by Jewish mystics in the succeeding centuries. Kabbalist symbolism gives a new and profound level of meaning to the understanding of scripture and performance of *mitsvot*.

APPENDIX 4

Testimony of Abulafia's Disciple⁵³⁹

I, SO AND SO, one of the lowliest, have probed my heart for ways of grace to bring about spiritual expansion, and I have found three ways of progress towards spiritualization: the vulgar [common], the philosophic, and the kabbalistic way. The common way is that which, so I learned, is practiced by Muslim ascetics.* They employ all manner of devices to shut out from their souls all "natural forms," every image of the familiar, natural world. Then, they say, when a spiritual form, an image from the spiritual world, enters their soul, it is isolated in their imagination and intensifies the imagination to such a degree that they can determine beforehand that which is to happen to us. Upon inquiry, I learned that they summon the Name, Allah, as it is in the language of Ishmael. I investigated further and I found that, when they pronounce these letters, they direct their thought

*The text of the translation read: "vulgar." I have substituted "common," as "vulgar" was probably used in the translation in an archaic sense of ordinary or common.

completely away from every possible “natural form,” and the very letters ALLAH and their diverse powers work upon them. They are carried off into a trance without realizing how, since no kabbalah has been transmitted to them. The removal of all natural forms and images from the soul is called *Effacement*.

The second way is the philosophic, and the student will experience extreme difficulty in attempting to drive it from his soul because of the great sweetness it holds for the human reason and the completeness with which that reason knows to embrace it. It consists in this: That the student forms a notion of some science, mathematics for instance, and then proceeds by analogy to some natural science and then goes on to theology. He then continues further to circle round this center of his, because of the sweetness of that which arises in him as he progresses in these studies. The sweetness of this so delights him that he finds neither gate nor door to enable him to pass beyond the notions which have already been established in him. At best, he can perhaps enjoy a (contemplative) spinning out of his thoughts and to this he will abandon himself, retiring into seclusion in order that no one may disturb his thought until it proceeds a little beyond the purely philosophic and turns as the flaming sword which turned every way. The true cause of all this is to be found in his contemplation of the letters through which, as intermediaries, he ascertains things. The subject which impressed itself on his human reason dominates him and his power seems to him great in all the sciences, seeing that this is natural to him. He contends that given things are revealed to him by way of prophecy, although he does not realize the true cause, but rather thinks that this occurred to him merely because of the extension and enlargement of his human reason. . . . But in reality it is the letters ascertained through thought and imagination, which influence him through their motion and which concentrate his thought on difficult themes, although he is not aware of this.

But if you put the difficult question to me: “Why do we nowadays pronounce letters and move them and try to produce effects with them without however noticing any effect being produced by them?” The answer lies, as I am going to demonstrate with the help of *Shaddai* [a name of God], in the third way of inducing spiritualization. And I, the humble so and so, am going to tell you what I experienced in this matter.

Know, friends, that from the beginning I felt a desire to study Torah and learned a little of it and of the rest of Scripture. But I found no one to guide me in the study of the Talmud, not so much because of the lack of teachers, but rather because of my longing for my home, and my love for father and mother. At last, however, God gave me strength to search for the Torah; I went out and sought and found, and for several years I stayed abroad studying Talmud. But the flame of the Torah kept glowing within me, though without my realizing it.

I returned to my native land and God brought me together with a Jewish philosopher with whom I studied some of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* and this only added to my desire. I acquired a little of the science of logic and a little of natural science, and this was very sweet to me for, as you know, “nature attracts nature.” And God is my witness: If I had not previously acquired strength of faith by what little I had learned of the Torah and the Talmud, the impulse to keep many of the religious commands would have left me although the fire of pure intention was ablaze in my heart. But what this teacher communicated to me in the way of philosophy (on the meaning of the commandments), did not suffice me, until the Lord had me meet a godly man, a kabbalist who taught me the general outlines of the Kabbalah. Nevertheless, in consequence of my smattering of natural science, the way of Kabbalah seemed all but impossible to me. It was then that my teacher said to me: “My son, why do you deny something you have not tried? Much, rather, would it befit you

to make a trial of it. If you then should find that it is nothing to you – and if you are not perfect enough to find the fault with yourself – then you may say that there is nothing to it.” But in order to make things sweet to me until my reason might accept them and I might penetrate into them with eagerness, he used always to make me grasp in a natural way everything in which he instructed me. I reasoned thus within myself: There can only be gain here and no loss. I shall see; if I find something in all of this, that is sheer gain; and if not, that which I have already had will still be mine. So I gave in and he taught me the method of the permutations and combinations of letters and the mysticism of numbers and the other “Paths of the *Sefer yetzirah*.” In each path he had me wander for two weeks until each form had been engraven in my heart, and so he led on for four months or so and then ordered me to “efface” everything.

He used to tell me: “My son, it is not the intention that you come to a stop with some finite or given form, even though it be of the highest order. Much rather is this the “Path of the Names.” The less understandable they are, the higher their order, until you arrive at the activity of a force which is no longer under your control, but rather your reason and your thought is in its control.” I replied: “If that be so [that all mental and sense images must be effaced], why then do you, sir, compose books in which the methods of the natural scientists are coupled with instruction in the holy Names?” He answered: “For you and the likes of you among the followers of philosophy, to allure your human intellect through natural means, so that perhaps this attraction may cause you to arrive at the knowledge of the holy Name.” And he produced books for me made up (of combinations of) letters and names and mystic numbers, of which nobody will ever be able to understand anything, for they are not composed in a way meant to be understood. He said to me: “This is the Path of the Names.” And indeed, I would see none of it, for my reason

did accept it. He said: "It was very stupid of me to have shown them to you."

In short, after two months had elapsed and my thought had disengaged itself (from everything material) and I had become aware of strange phenomena occurring within me, I set myself the task at night of combining letters with one another and of pondering over them in philosophical meditation, a little different from the way I do now, and so I continued for three nights without telling. The third night, after midnight, I nodded off a little, quill in my hands and paper on my knees. Then I noticed that the candle was about to go out. I rose to put it right, as oftentimes happens to a person awake. Then I saw that the light continued. I was greatly astonished, as though, after close examination, I saw that it issued from myself. I said: "I do not believe it." I walked to and fro all through the house and, behold, the light is with me; I lay on a couch and covered myself up, and behold, the light is with me all the while. I said: "This is truly a great sign and a new phenomenon which I have perceived."

The next morning I communicated it to my teacher and I brought him the sheets which I had covered with combinations of letters. He congratulated me and said: "My son, if you would devote yourself to combining holy Names, still greater things would happen to you. And now, my son, admit that you are unable to bear not combining. Give half to this and half to that, that is, do combinations half of the night, and permutations half of the night." I practiced this method for about a week. During the second week the power of meditation became so strong in me that I could not manage to write down the combinations of letters (which automatically spurted out of my pen), and if there had been ten people present they would not have been able to write down so many combinations as came to me during the influx. When I came to the night in which this power was conferred on me, and midnight – when this power

especially expands and gains strength whereas the body weakens – had passed, I set out to take up the Great Name of God, consisting of seventy-two names,* permuting and combining it. But when I had done this for a little while, behold, the letters took on in my eyes the shape of great mountains, strong trembling seized me and I could summon no strength, my hair stood on end, and it was as if I were not in this world. At once I fell down, for I no longer felt the least strength in any of my limbs. And behold, something resembling speech emerged from my heart and came to my lips and forced them to move. I thought – perhaps this is, God forbid, a spirit of madness that has entered into me? But behold, I saw it uttering wisdom. I said: “This is indeed the spirit of wisdom.” After a little while my natural strength returned to me, I rose very much impaired and I still did not believe myself. Once more I took up the Name to do with it as before and, behold, it had exactly the same effect on me. Nevertheless I did not believe until I had tried it four or five times.

When I got up in the morning I told my teacher about it. He said to me: “And who was it that allowed you to touch the Name? Did I not tell you to permute only letters?” He spoke on: “What happened to you represents indeed a high stage among prophetic degrees.” He wanted to free me of it for he saw that my face had changed. But I said to him: “In heaven’s name, can you perhaps impart to me some power to enable me to bear this force emerging from my heart and to receive influx from it?” For I wanted to draw this force towards me and receive influx from it, for it much resembles a spring filling a great basin with water. If a man (not being properly prepared for it) should open the dam, he would be drowned in its waters and his soul would desert him.

*The Great Name of 72 names is derived from the letters of verses 19 to 21 of the book of Exodus.

He said to me: "My son, it is the Lord who must bestow such power upon you, for such power is not within man's control."

That Sabbath night also the power was active in me in the same way. When after two sleepless nights, I had passed day and night in meditating on the permutations or on the principles essential to a recognition of the true reality and to the annihilations of all extraneous thought, then I had two signs by which I knew that I was in the right receptive mood. The one sign was the intensification of natural thought on very profound objects of knowledge, a debility of the body and strengthening of the soul until I sat there, my self all soul. The second sign was that imagination grew strong within me and it seemed as though my forehead was going to burst. Then I knew that I was ready to receive the Name. I also, that Sabbath night, ventured at the great ineffable Name of God (the name YHWH). But immediately that I touched it, it weakened me and a voice issued from me saying: "Thou shalt surely die and not live! Who brought thee to touch the Great Name?" And behold, immediately I fell prone and implored the Lord God saying: "Lord of the universe! I entered into this place only for the sake of heaven, as Thy glory knoweth. What is my sin and what my transgression? I entered only to know Thee, for has not David already commanded Solomon: 'Know the God of thy father and serve Him'; and has not our master Moses, peace be upon him, revealed this to us in the Torah saying: 'Show me now Thy way, that I may know Thee, that I may there find grace in Thy sight'?" And behold, I was still speaking, and oil like the oil of the anointment anointed me from head to foot and very great joy seized me which for its spirituality and the sweetness of its rapture I cannot describe.

All this happened to your servant in his beginnings. And I do not, God forbid, relate this account from boastfulness in order to be thought great in the eyes of the mob, for I know full well that greatness with the mob is deficiency and inferiority with those

searching for the true rank which differs from it in genus and in species as light from darkness.

Now, if some of our own philosophizers, sons of our people who feel themselves attracted towards the naturalistic way of knowledge and whose intellectual power in regard to the mysteries of the Torah is very weak, read this, they will laugh at me and say: See how he tries to attract our reason with windy talk and tales, with fanciful imaginations which have muddled his mind and which he takes at their face value because of his weak mental hold on natural science. Should, however, kabbalists see this, such as have some grasp of this subject or even better such as have had things divulged to them in experiences of their own, they will rejoice and my words will win their favor. But their difficulty will be that I have disclosed all of this in detail. Nevertheless, God is my witness that my intention is in *majorem dei gloriam*, and I would wish that every single one of our holy nation were even more excellent herein and purer than I. Perhaps it would then be possible to reveal things of which I do not as yet know. . . . As for me, I cannot bear not to give generously to others what God has bestowed upon me. But since for this science there is no naturalistic evidence, its premises being as spiritual as are its inferences, I was forced to tell this story of the experience that befell me. Indeed, there is no proof in this science except experience itself. . . . That is why I say, to the man who contests this path, that I can give him an experimental proof, namely my own evidence of the spiritual results of my own experiences in the science of letters according to the book *Sefer yetsirah*. I did not, to be sure, experience the corporeal (magic) effects (of such practices); and even granting the possibility of such a form of experience, I for my part want none of it, for it is an inferior form, especially when measured by the perfection which the soul can attain spiritually. Indeed, it seems to me that he who attempts to secure these (magic) effects desecrates God's name,

and it is this that our teachers hint at when they say: Since license prevailed, the name of God has been taught only by the most reticent priests.

The third is the kabbalistic way. It consists of an amalgamation in the soul of man of the principles of mathematical and of natural science, after he has first studied the literal meanings of the Torah and of the faith, in order thus through keen dialectics to train his mind and not in the manner of a simpleton to believe in everything. Of all this he stands in need only because he is held captive by the world of nature. For it is not seemly that a rational being held captive in prison should not search out every means, a hole or a small fissure, of escape. If today we had a prophet who showed us a mechanism for sharpening the natural reason and for discovering there subtle forms by which to divest ourselves of corporeality, we should not need all these natural sciences in addition to our Kabbalah which is derived from the basic principles or heads of chapters of the *Sefer yetsirah* concerning the letters (and their combinations)... All this he would convey to us directly whereas now we are forced to take circuitous routes and to move about restrainedly and go out and come in on the chance that God may confront us. For as a matter of fact every attainment in this science of Kabbalah looked at from its point of view is only a chance, even though, for us, it is the very essence of our being.

This kabbalistic way, or method, consists, first of all, in the cleansing of the body itself, for the body is symbolic of the spiritual. Next in the order of ascent is the cleansing of your bodily disposition and your spiritual propensities, especially that of anger, or your concern for anything whatsoever except the Name itself, be it even the care for your only beloved son; and this is the secret of the Scripture that "God tried Abraham." A further step in the order of ascent is the cleansing of one's soul from all other sciences which one has studied. The reason for this is

that being naturalistic and limited, they contaminate the soul, and obstruct the passage through it of the divine forms. These forms are extremely subtle; and though even a minor form is something innately great in comparison with the naturalistic and the rational, it is nevertheless an unclean, thick veil in comparison with the subtlety of the spirit. On this account seclusion in a separate house is prescribed, and if this be a house in which no noise can be heard, the better. At the beginning it is advisable to decorate the house with fresh greens in order to cheer the vegetable soul which a man possesses side by side with the animal soul. Next, one should pray and sing Psalms in a pleasant, melodious voice, and (read) the Torah with fervor, in order to cheer the animal soul which a man possesses side by side with his rational soul. Next, one directs his imagination to intelligible things and to understanding how one thing proceeds from another. Next, one proceeds to the moving of letters which (in their combinations) are unintelligible, this to detach the soul (from the senses) and to cleanse it of all the forms within it. In the same way, one proceeds with the improvement of his (bodily) matter by meat and drink and improves it (the body) by degrees.

As to the moving of letters, we shall deal with some methods in the chapter "Letters." Next, one reaches the stage of "skipping," as Scripture says: "and his banner over me was love."^{*} It consists of meditating, after all operations with the letters are over, on the essence of one's thought, and of abstracting from it every word, be it connected with a notion or not. In the performance of this "skipping," one must put the consonants which one is combining into a swift motion. This motion heats the

^{*} The reference to "skipping" is in the midrash to Song of Songs 2:4 where the word *ve-diglo*, "his banner," is read as *dillugo*, "his skipping." In the context the meaning is that even if a man skips certain words of the prayers, God still hears them. Here the meaning is that an aspect of the technique is to skip certain letters and combine the others.

thinking and so increases joy and desire that craving for food and sleep or anything else is annihilated. In abstracting words from thought during contemplation, you force yourself so that you pass beyond the control of your natural mind, and if you desire not to think, you cannot carry out your desire. You then guide your thinking step by step, first by means of script and language and then by means of imagination. When, however, you pass beyond the control of your thinking, another exercise becomes necessary which consists in drawing thought gradually forth – during contemplation – from its source, until through sheer force that stage is reached where you do not speak nor can you speak. And if sufficient strength remains to force oneself even further and draw it out still farther, then that which is within will manifest itself without, and through the power of sheer imagination will take on the form of a polished mirror. And this is “the flame of the circling sword,” the rear revolving and becoming the fore. Whereupon one sees that his inmost being is something outside of himself. Such was the way of the *Urim* and *Thumim*, the priest’s oracle of the Torah, in which, too, at first the letters shine from inside and the message they convey is not an immediate one nor arranged in order, but results only from the combination of the letters. For a form, detached from its essence, is defective until it clothe itself in a form which can be conceived by imagination, and in this imaginable form the letters enter into a complete, orderly, and understandable combination. And it seems to me that it is this form which the kabbalists call “clothing,” *malbush*.

ENDNOTES

1. Arthur Green, "The *Zaddiq* as *Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (JAAR), XLV/3 (1977), p. 327.
2. Passage from M. Zelikson, *Kol mevasser ve-omer* (The Voice of the Herald Brings Good News and Proclaims), 32, 48–49 (Abraham Pariz-Slonim] (?Jerusalem, ?1965), quoted in Elior, *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 133.
3. Modernized rendition by the author from Scholem's translation in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 108. The hymn is generally attributed to Samuel though some scholars attribute it to his son, Judah he-Hasid.
4. Abulafia, *Haye ha-nefesh* (Life of the Soul), MS. Munchen 408, fol. 7b–8a, quoted in Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 157.
5. Hai Gaon (939–1038) quoted in B. M. Lewin, ed. *Otsar ha-geonim* (Treasury of the Geonim), 13 vols. Jerusalem: 1928–62), vol. 4, pp. 13–15; quoted in Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 32.
6. Nathan ben Yehiel, *Sefer he-arukh: Aruch Completum* (The Arranged Book) 1:14, quoted in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, p. 146. According to Wolfson, in his detailed study of the nature of the visionary experiences among Jewish mystics, Hai Gaon likened this mystical vision to the nature of prophecy in general.
7. Quoted in Fishbane, *As Light Before Dawn*, p. 111.
8. More information on the writing of the Pentateuch can be found in Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*
9. Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 30. Blenkinsopp summarizes the work of two important German scholars, Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel, in the late 19th and early 20th century. He says that Gunkel "made a clear distinction between the several literary types which were either employed in prophetic preaching or incorporated at a later time

- into prophetic books and those forms which were peculiar to prophecy... Genuine prophetic utterance ... proceeded from what Gunkel called the prophet's mysterious experience of oneness with God and identification with his purposes in history. This incommunicable and ultimately inexplicable experience was, for Gunkel, the essence of prophecy."
10. Drob, *Kabbalistic Metaphors*, pp. 94–95.
 11. *Encyclopedia of World Myth*, <http://towerweb.net/alt-lib/myth/pan-ku.shtml>, and *Myth, Legend, and Folk Belief in East Asia*, <http://www.continuinged.ku.edu/is/tapes/1ANTH293.html>. Also see Patanjali, *Thoughts on Indian Mysticism*, p. 34.
 12. "The Tzohar" [Tsohar], in Schwartz, *Gabriel's Palace*, pp. 59–62, based on the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Hagigah* 12a; Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* 31:11, and other sources.
 13. Several manuscripts and printed editions read here: "sons of Elohim, wise of the generation, and whoever are privileged to contemplate it discover higher wisdom" [footnote 1042 in Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 1, p. 238].
 14. Zohar 1:37b, in Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 1 (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 237–239.
 15. See Fohr, *Adam and Eve*, pp. 39–41.
 16. Judah Leib Alter of Ger, *Otsar ma'amraim u-mikhtavim* (A Treasury of Sayings and Writings) (Jerusalem: Makhon Gahaley Esh, 1986), p. 75f; quoted in Green, *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow*, p. 22.
 17. Cf. Zohar 1:79b, in *The Zohar*, Sperling and Simon, trans., vol. 1, pp. 268–269.
 18. Zohar 1:89a, in *The Zohar*, Sperling and Simon, trans., vol. 1, pp. 295–296.
 19. Green, *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow*, p. 24.
 20. Zohar 1:102b, in Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 2, pp. 128–29.
 21. Ya'akov Yosef, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef* (Events of Ya'akov Yosef) (Lemberg, 1863), 127b, quoted in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 127.
 22. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sukkah* 45b, quoted by Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 112.
 23. Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, Paul Fenton, trans., p. 112.
 24. *Mahzor Vitry* (Prayer book of Vitry), eleventh and twelfth centuries (the work of pupils of Rashi, 1040–1105), S. Hurwitz, ed., Nurnberg, 1923, quoted in *Living Talmud*, Goldin, trans., p. 195.
 25. Cf. Zohar 1:83a, in *The Zohar*, Sperling and Simon, trans., vol. 1, p. 276. The rabbis are in discussion about Abram's journeys, and Rabbi Abba comments that the Bible makes a point of saying that he went to the South. Rabbi Simeon then gives his interpretation:

“Observe that these words have an inner meaning, and indicate to us that Abram went down to the ‘lower degrees’ in Egypt, and probed them to the bottom, but clave not to them and returned unto his Master. He was not like Adam, who, when he descended to a certain grade, was enticed by the serpent and brought death upon the world; nor was he like Noah, who, when he descended to a certain grade, was enticed and ‘drank of the wine and became drunk and was uncovered in the midst of his tent’ (Genesis 9:21). Unlike them, Abram came up again and returned to his place, to the upper grade to which he had been attached previously. This whole incident is related in order to show that he was steadfast in his attachment to Wisdom, and was not seduced, and returned to his former condition. ‘Into the South’: this is the higher grade to which he was attached at first, as it is written, ‘going on still to the South.’ The inner significance of this narrative is that if Abram had not gone down to Egypt and been tested there, his portion would not have been in the Lord.”

26. Abulafia, *Haye ha-nefesh* (Life of the Soul), MS. Munchen 408, folio 7b–8a, quoted in Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 157.
27. Green, *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow*, pp. 34–35.
28. Green, *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow*, p. 21.
29. Cf. Zohar 2:20b–21a, in *The Zohar*, Sperling, Simon, & Levertoff, trans., vol. 3, pp. 295–296. See also Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, pp. 7–8.
30. Simon ben Tsemakh Duran, *Magen avot* (Shield of our Fathers) 2:2 (Livorno, 1785), p. 16a, quoted in Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 89.
31. Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 2.
32. Epstein, *Kabbalah: Way of the Jewish Mystic*, p. 156.
33. According to Fishbane’s “Biblical Prophecy as a Religious Phenomenon,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, Green, ed., vol. 1, p. 62, contemporary scholars have “attempted to locate the phenomena of biblical prophecy within the context of the larger contemporary ancient Near Eastern environment in which it occurred. . . . There are valuable studies that trace (or relate) the origins of Israelite prophecy to comparable phenomena in ancient West Asia (like the mantic-ecstatic type of prophet known from twelfth-century [BCE] Byblos or ninth-to-eighth century BCE Aram) or in Mesopotamia proper (like the messenger type known from eighteenth-century [BCE] Mari).” Also see Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, 98–115, 129–34, and Bibliography.
34. Discussion in this section draws on Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, pp. 36–37.
35. “In Israel, as everywhere else in the Near East, ecstatic prophets were

- attached to temples and carried out specific functions there including intercessory prayer and the giving of oracles, especially in critical situations. Apart from explicit attestations, some aspects of their activity can be cautiously deduced from prophetic oracles in the hymns and the attribution of psalms to prophets. We have seen that one or another of the canonical prophets may have belonged to the ranks of these temple ecstasies, while others may have begun their career, but not ended it, in that capacity.” Discussion in Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, pp. 252–253.
36. Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 27.
 37. Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 27.
 38. See Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 30 and throughout the book.
 39. Blenkinsopp, commenting on a passage in the biblical book of Chronicles, written in the second century BCE, in *History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 254.
 40. Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 124.
 41. Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, *Derekh ha-shem* (The Way of the Name), pp. 3:4:2,4, as quoted in Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, pp. 65–66.
 42. Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 66.
 43. Cited in Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 88.
 44. Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 90.
 45. Bible, 1 Kings 8:23. See also discussion on the term “servant of God” on pp. 104–112.
 46. Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 87.
 47. See Davidson’s *Divine Romance*, pp. 34–62, for an expansive discussion of an ancient allegorical text on this subject, “The Virgin, the Harlot and the Bridegroom,” found among the Nag Hammadi trove.
 48. “Wisdom literature” is a term used for a loose body of work in which Wisdom is personified as a feminine entity. This literature is found in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, and ancient Israel. The canonized books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are generally included in the Israelite Wisdom literature, as well as some of the Psalms, and also in some non-canonized works like the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus). There are similarities and probably influences of these literatures upon each other. The nature of Wisdom varies in use – and can be interpreted on many levels – both as an esoteric essence, and as common sense and a developed intellect. It is probable that this literature was a refined literary form in which many of the ancient prophets, from the time Isaiah and Hosea, conveyed their teachings. Scholars still debate its origins, who its

- authors were, and its intended audience. A discussion of the research in this area is covered in Crenshaw's "The Wisdom Literature" in Knight and Tucker, ed., *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, pp. 369–407.
49. See also Davidson, *Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part 1, vol. 3, pp. 341–345.
 50. Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, Introduction, n.p.
 51. "The Isaiah scroll, one of the longer units in the Hebrew Bible, comprises prophetic material collected over a period of about half a millennium. While the nucleus of this collection goes back, directly or indirectly, to Isaiah ben-Amoz, to whom the entire book is attributed (1:1), at least two thirds of the text derives from anonymous disciples, seers, scholiasts, and interpreters of either the First or Second Temple period" (Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 107). As early as the eighteenth century it was realized that chapters 1–39 were written in the eighth century BCE, at least 150 years before chapters 40–66, and constitute a separate collection. Further analysis revealed that chapters 40–55 were written during the exilic period (early and mid-sixth century BCE) and chapters 56–66 were post-exilic (late sixth century BCE). Of course, even these divisions are rough, as there were also interpolations into the earlier sections by writers from later periods. For example, in chapters 24–27 there are well-known passages promoting Jerusalem as the spiritual center of the world, a reflection of the aspirations of an exiled community for the reestablishment of its temple and religious center. (Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 209.) The well-known Chapter 11, predicting the advent of a future prophet-king-messiah who brings peace and harmony, may also have been an interpolation from the period of exile. (Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, pp. 117–118.)
 52. Isaac Abarbanel, commentary on Ezekiel 1:4, in Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 47.
 53. Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 195.
 54. Elior, *The Three Temples*, p. 31ff.
 55. The discovery of a very early manuscript of the Isaiah scroll among the Dead Sea Scrolls has illuminated the meaning of this text. Before this discovery, the earliest copies of the Hebrew Bible were dated from the ninth century CE (the traditionally received or masoretic text), and this passage had always confounded scholars as it didn't quite make sense. In the traditional reading, the passage says: "As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man," The text in the Dead Sea scroll of Isaiah reads "anointed" instead of "marred," a change of only one letter in the Hebrew (from *nishkhat* to *mishkhat*).

56. Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 218.
57. Concerning Joel and Zechariah this is especially true, as scholars have shown. (Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, p. 259.)
58. Cf. Isaiah 11:1.
59. Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 117.
60. 1QH, quoted in Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, p. 187.
61. 1QH, quoted in Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, p. 182.
62. 1QH, quoted in Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, pp. 184–186.
63. 1QH, Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, pp. 166–167.
64. 1QH, Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, p. 204.
65. See Dan, “Jewish Mysticism in History, Religion and Literature,” in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, Dan and Talmage, ed.
66. *Hashmal*: lightning; literally, electrical light.
67. Translation of this excerpt by Carol Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (4Q405 20 ii 22:6–14) (1985) p. 303; as quoted and slightly retranslated by Yudith Nave and Arthur Millman in Elior’s *Jewish Mysticism*, p. 125.
68. 1 *Enoch, the Apocalypse of Enoch*, is also called the *Ethiopian Book of Enoch*, because the first manuscripts found were in the Ethiopic language (Geez), which is very close to the original Aramaic (the language spoken by the Jews of the last centuries BCE). Earlier copies of fragments in Aramaic were found in the 1940’s among the Dead Sea scrolls. A later book, called 2 *Enoch*, or *Secrets of Enoch*, is also referred to as the *Slavonian Book of Enoch* (after its earliest existing manuscript). There are several more works originating in late antiquity bearing Enoch’s name.
69. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 28–29.
70. Citations are drawn from E. Isaac’s translation as published in Charlesworth’s edition of *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, modified by reference to some of the alternative readings he cites, and to Charles’ translations in *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. 2. The final selection, of Enoch’s advice to his family, is drawn entirely from the Charles translation, and is available online at http://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/enoch/enoch_3.htm. In a few places I have taken the liberty of modernizing some of the awkward archaic construction and choice of words.
71. Translation by Michael O. Wise, cited by Tabor on his website “The Jewish Roman World of Jesus.” Wording adjusted in reference to Wise’s translation of the same text in Eisenman and Wise, *Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, pp. 21–23.
72. Author’s translation of passages from *Tefillat Shemoneh Esrei*.

73. See Bible, Matthew 11:5 and Luke 7:22.
74. Tabor, website “The Jewish Roman World of Jesus.”
75. Tabor, website, “The Jewish Roman World of Jesus.”
76. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, p. 31.
77. Moses Maimonides, “Letter to Rabbi Hisdai ha-Levi,” quoted in Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 74.
78. Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 74.
79. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 44–45 [92a–97b], Pines, trans., vol. II, pp. 394–403.
80. “In Philo’s philosophy, the logos is the Divine Mind, the Idea of Ideas, the first-begotten Son of the Uncreated Father, eldest and chief of the angels, the man or shadow of God, or even the second God, the pattern of all creation and archetype of human reason.” (See QE 2.124; Conf. 41; Mig. 103; Conf. 63, 146; Deus 31; Her. 205; Fug. 112; Mos. 2.134; Euseb. PE. 7.13.1; LA 3.96; quoted in David Winston, “Was Philo a Mystic?” in Dan and Talmage, ed., *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 15–39, quote on 20–21.)
81. Recounted in Buchler, *Some Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety*, footnote on pp. 90–91, quoting from *Sefer ma’asiyot* (The Book of Actions), Gaster, ed., Ramsgate, 1896, p. 115ff.
82. Talmud, Mishnah *Avot* (Fathers) 3:12, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 227.
83. Talmud, Mishnah *Ta’anit* (Fasting) 25a, in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, article on “Hasidim (‘pietists,’ talmudic term).”
84. Talmud, Mishnah *Berakhot* (Blessings) 33a, in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, article on “Hasidim (‘pietists,’ talmudic term).”
85. Talmud, Mishnah *Avot* 5:14, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 234.
86. Talmud, Mishnah *Shabbat* (Sabbath) 31a, in Buchler, *Some Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety*, p. 23.
87. Midrash *Leviticus Rabbah* (Rabbinic Interpretation of Leviticus) 1:5, in Buchler, *Some Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety*, p. 13.
88. Talmud, Mishnah *Avot* 1:14, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 221.
89. Quoted in Buchler, *Some Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety*, p. 20. (Primary source not given.)
90. Baraitha *Sotah* 48b, in Buchler, *Some Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety*, p. 55.
91. Baraitha *Sotah* 48b, in Buchler, *Some Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety*, p. 56.
92. Buchler, *Some Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety*, p. 58.
93. Talmud, Mishnah *Avot* 1:12, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 221.
94. Talmud, Mishnah *Avot* 2:5, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 222.
95. Talmud, Mishnah *Avot* 2:7, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 222.
96. Talmud, Mishnah *Avot* 1:6, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 220.

97. *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan (Mishnah Avot de-Rabbi Nathan)*, Goldin, trans., pp. 172–73.
98. Neusner, “Varieties of Judaism in the Formative Age,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, vol. 2, Green, ed., p. 192. This article also appears in Neusner’s book, *Torah from Our Sages*, p. 185.
99. Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, p. 39.
100. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 201.
101. Matt, *God and the Big Bang*, p. 156. Matt acknowledges that his discussion of Jesus draws on Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); . . . “The Life of Jesus,” in *Christianity and Judaism: A Parallel History of Their Origins and Development*, Hershel Shanks, ed., (Washington, D. C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992), pp. 41–83.
102. Matt, *God and the Big Bang*, pp. 156–157. Talmudic and biblical references are from the Tosefta (supplementary Mishnah), *Mishnah Berakhot*, 3:20 and Mark 16:18.
103. Matthew 7:12.
104. Matt, *God and the Big Bang*, p. 159.
105. Matt, *God and the Big Bang*, p. 163.
106. Talmud, Tractate *Baba Metsia* (Middle Gate) 31b; Sukkah (Booth) 5a, quoted in Bokser, *Wisdom of the Talmud*, p. 87; also see Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 16.
107. *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, Goldin, trans., ch. 4, p. 34.
108. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 93.
109. Talmud, Tractate *Shabbat*, 153a, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 97.
110. Talmud, *Mishnah Avot* 1:21, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 231.
111. Talmud, Tractates *Baba Kamma* (First Gate) 9:30 and *Shabbat* 151a, in Bokser, *Wisdom of the Talmud*, p. 55.
112. Talmud, *Mishnah Avot* 4:29, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, pp. 231–232.
113. Talmud, *Mishnah Avot* 3:20, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 228.
114. Talmud, *Mishnah Avot* 3:19, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 227.
115. Talmud, *Mishnah Avot* 2:21, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 224.
116. Cf. Talmud, *Mishnah Sanhedrin* (Law Court) 74a, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 208.
117. Talmud, *Mishnah Berakhot* 61b, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, pp. 80–81.
118. Talmud, *Mishnah Berakhot* 61b, in Bokser, *The Talmud*, p. 81.
119. Bokser, *Wisdom of the Talmud*, p. 72.
120. Quoted in Bokser, *Wisdom of the Talmud*, pp. 78–79.

121. Talmud, Tractate *Baba Batra* (Last Gate) 165a. (JCL)
122. See Bokser, *Wisdom of the Talmud*, p. 81.
123. Neusner, *First-Century Judaism in Crisis*, p. 95.
124. Neusner, *There We Sat Down*, p. 95.
125. Neusner, *There We Sat Down*, p. 74.
126. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 122.
127. Neusner, *There We Sat Down*, p. 95.
128. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 201.
129. Neusner, *There We Sat Down*, p. 58.
130. Neusner, *There We Sat Down*, p. 78.
131. Neusner, *There We Sat Down*, p. 85.
132. Neusner, *There We Sat Down*, p. 85.
133. Neusner, *There We Sat Down*, p. 102.
134. Neusner, *There We Sat Down*, p. 86.
135. Neusner, *There We Sat Down*, p. 85.
136. As mentioned in the Talmud, in Tractate *Berakhot* 55a, referred to in Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, p. 82. Also see section on *Sefer yetsirah*, pp. 202–205.
137. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, p. 90.
138. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, pp. 86–87.
139. Dan, “Mysticism in Jewish History, Religion, and Literature,” in Dan and Talmage, ed., *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 3–4.
140. Talmud, Mishnah *Hagigah* (Celebration of a Feast) 14b; as translated in Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, pp. 30–31.
141. Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 32.
142. See Talmud, Mishnah *Yadayim* (Hands), 3:5.
143. Hai Gaon quoted in B. M. Lewin, ed. *Otsar ha-geonim* (Treasury of the Geonim), 13 vols. (Jerusalem: 1928–62), vol. 4, pp. 13–15; quoted in Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 32.
144. Nathan ben Yehiel, *Sefer he-arukh: Aruch Completum* 1:14, quoted in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, p. 146. According to Wolfson, in his detailed study of the nature of the visionary experiences among Jewish mystics, Hai Gaon likened this mystical vision to the nature of prophecy in general.
145. Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 30. Rashi translated *pardes* as heaven, though the meaning is more strictly garden or orchard.
146. *Heikhalot rabbati* 1:2–5, in Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 57.
147. *Heikhalot rabbati* 6:3–5, in Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 59.
148. *Heikhalot rabbati* 7:1–3, in Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, pp. 59–60.

149. *Heikhalot rabbati* 15:2–3, in Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, p. 57.
150. *Heikhalot rabbati* 16:1, in Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, p. 59.
151. *Heikhalot rabbati* 16:3, in Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, p. 60.
152. *Heikhalot rabbati* 22:2,3, in Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, p. 73.
153. *Heikhalot rabbati* 24:2,3, in Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, p. 78.
154. *Heikhalot rabbati* 24:4,5, in Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, p. 79.
155. *Heikhalot rabbati* 25:1, in Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 80–81.
156. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 47.
157. *Sefer yetsirah* 1:1, in *Sefer Yetzirah*, Kaplan, trans. and ed., p. 5.
158. *Sefer yetsirah* 2:2, in *Sefer Yetzirah*, Kaplan, trans. and ed., p. 100.
159. *Sefer yetsirah* 6:8, in *Sefer Yetzirah*, long version, Kaplan, trans. and ed., p. 281.
160. Ba'al Shem Tov, in *Tsava'at harivash* (The Testament of the Besht) §75, quoted in Elior, *Jewish Mysticism*, p. 107.
161. In *Likutim yekarim* (Precious Collections), 132b, quoted in Elior, *Jewish Mysticism*, p. 110.
162. Abu Yusuf Yaqub al-Qirqisani, *The Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, "Al-Qirqisani's Accounts of Jewish Sects and Christianity," Leon Nemoj, trans., *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 7 (1930), quoted in Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, pp. 72–73.
163. Abulfatah Muhammad al-Shahrastani, *Book of Beliefs and Sects of Opinions* [*kitab al-milal wal-nahal*], from the Hebrew translation in Aescoly, *Movements*, p. 145f, quoted in Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, pp. 74–75.
164. Al-Qirqisani, *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, quoted in Nemoj, p. 383; cited in Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, p. 76.
165. Al-Shahrastani, *Book of Beliefs and Sects of Opinions*, translated into Hebrew by Aescoly in *Movements*, pp. 150–151; cited in Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, pp. 76–77.
166. Fenton in Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, Introduction, pp. 1–2. (Roman numerals in the text have been translated into Arabic numerals.) This section is heavily based on Fenton's remarkable study.
167. Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 3.
168. Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 54; footnote 3 to p. 2.

169. Isaac Myer, *Qabbalah*, p. 3.
170. Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 4.
171. Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 74.
172. Moses Maimonides, Letter to Rabbi Hisdai ha-Levi, quoted in Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 75, cf. Heschel, *Maimonides: A Biography*, J. Neugroschel, trans., p. 245.
173. Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Pines, trans., III, 9; quoted in Heschel, *Maimonides: A Biography*, p. 245.
174. Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh torah, hilkhoh teshuvah* (Repetition of the Torah, Laws of Repentance), 10:1, quoted in Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 81.
175. Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 45.
176. Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, pp. 8–9.
177. Quotations on the following pages are from the Pines translation of *Guide of the Perplexed*, vol. 2, pp. 618–628; cf. Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, pp. 45–60. For certain passages, I have used the translation by Kaplan, published in his book *Meditation and the Bible*, where he brings out the spiritual meaning of the passages more clearly. I have also retranslated the unfortunate, ambiguous word “apprehension” as comprehension, knowledge, perception or enlightenment.
178. Cf. Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, pp. 9–10.
179. Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, pp. 50–51.
180. Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Pines, trans., vol. II, p. 623.
181. Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Pines, trans., vol. II, p. 623.
182. Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Pines, trans., vol. II, p. 622.
183. Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh torah, yesodei ha-torah* (Repetition of the Torah, Principles of Faith), 2:2, cited in Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 120.
184. Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Pines, trans., vol. II, p. 627. Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 58.
185. Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, pp. 58–59.
186. Moses Maimonides, *Yad yesodei ha-torah* 7:1, quoted in Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 22.
187. *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, III:4, p. 149; cited in Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, pp. 5–6.
188. Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 6.
189. Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 6.
190. *Kifayat al-abidin (Kifaya)* (The Compendium for the Servants of God), II, p. 290, cited by Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 7. In a Genizah letter

- (Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection, Cambridge University Library, 20.44), he is referred to as “the head of the Pietists.” Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 7. See also note 27 on p. 57.
191. Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 7.
 192. *Kifaya* II, p. 320, cited by Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 8.
 193. Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 8.
 194. Letter in Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection, Cambridge University Library, 13 J 9.12, published by E. Ashtor, *A History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria*, III (Jerusalem, 1944–71), pp. 28–32. The letter is addressed to Rabbi Hayim, whose father was a judge at David Maimonides’ court and presumably also a pietist. Greetings are sent to both David and Obadyah. Quoted in Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 25 and note 6 on p. 66.
 195. See Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, Introduction pp. 26–53, for an overview of *Treatise of the Pool*.
 196. Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, Fenton, trans., p. 93.
 197. Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, Fenton, trans., pp. 35–36 and note 16 on p. 67. He writes that *dawq* is “a Sufi technical term meaning ‘to grasp through mystical experience,’ cf. *Risala*, I, p. 220. Moreover the term is frequently used by the Jewish Sufis to designate the esoteric sense of a verse. See nos. 47 and 58 of our [Fenton’s] ‘Some Judaeo-Arabic Fragments,’ and H. Corbin, *L’Archange Empourpre*, pp. 341–2. . . . Moses Maimonides claimed in the Introduction to his third volume of the *Guide*, Qafih, p. 449, that he had arrived at the comprehension of some of the esoteric mysteries of the Torah, the knowledge of which had practically disappeared.”
 198. Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, Fenton, trans., p. 41.
 199. Summarized by Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 42 and note 39 on p. 70.
 200. Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, Fenton, trans., pp. 112–113.
 201. Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, Fenton, trans., p. 92. Fenton, in his footnote to this passage, maintains that Obadyah’s reference to the mediator or intercessor is to Reason, the Active Intellect, as the mediator between sensual and spiritual worlds. However, he also cites the opposing view held by the renowned scholar Georges Vajda, who wrote the introduction to Fenton’s volume, that the intercessor refers to the *sayh* or spiritual mentor. (Vajda in “The Mystical Doctrine of Rabbi Obadyah, Grandson of Moses Maimonides” in *Journal of Jewish Spirituality*, VI p. 221.) Fenton also concedes that in Sufi literature, Reason is often personified as the Prophet. Obadyah, writing in the Jewish context, parallels

- Moses with Reason. Thus the reference to the intercessor can be understood on two levels – as both Reason (the Active Intellect or Word), and as the spiritual master or mentor. (Note 88 on pp. 123–24.)
202. Fenton, Introduction to Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 9.
 203. Quoted in Fenton, Introduction to Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, pp. 9–10.
 204. *Kifaya*, I, p. 142. Fenton remarks that this itinerary corresponds to the Sufi *mahafa, mahabba, ma'rifa* – “fear,” “love,” and “gnosis.”
 205. Fenton, Introduction to Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 11.
 206. Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, Fenton, trans., p. 93.
 207. Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, Fenton, trans., p. 90.
 208. Letter in Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection, Cambridge University Library, Arabic 1b.27, published in Paul Fenton, “Some Judaeo-Arabic fragments of Rabbi Abraham he-Hasid” in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, XXVI (Manchester, UK: 1981), pp. 47–72, quoted in Fenton, Introduction to Obadyah Maimonides’ *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 17.
 209. *Rubai 117*, in Ezekiel, *Sarmad*, p. 261.
 210. *Rubai 108*, in Ezekiel, *Sarmad*, p. 259.
 211. *Rubai 166*, in Ezekiel, *Sarmad*, p. 272.
 212. Cf. Verman, *Books of Contemplation*, p. 6.
 213. Dan, Introduction to Dan and Kiener, *Early Kabbalah*, especially p. 27.
 214. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 102.
 215. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 81.
 216. *Sefer hasidim*, §1, in Singer, trans., *Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, p. 3.
 217. The five treatises collected in *Sodei razaya* have also been published as *Sefer Raziel (The Book of the Angel Raziel)*. *Sefer Raziel* has become a key text of occult and magical practices in modern times.
 218. They knew Saadia’s teachings through a “strange, lyrical, almost quasi-mystical Hebrew paraphrase of what was originally a dry, scholastic philosophic treatise.” (Dan, Introduction to Dan and Kiener, *Early Kabbalah*, p. 18.)
 219. Dan, Introduction to Dan and Kiener, *Early Kabbalah*, p. 19.
 220. Paraphrase by Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 111, of Saadia’s ideas which Ibn Ezra and Judah adopted.
 221. Eleazar of Worms, *Sha’arei ha-sod ve-ha-yihud* (Gates of the Secret and the Unity) p. 9, quoted in Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 112.
 222. *Sefer Raziel* (ed. 1701), folio 8b, quoted in Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 108. Modernized rendition by the author for purposes of clarity.

223. Modernized rendition by the author from Scholem's translation in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 108. Scholem attributes this poem to a disciple of Judah's, but most modern scholars view it as the work of Judah's father.
224. Quoted in Dan, "Emergence of Mystical Prayer," in Dan and Talmage, ed., *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 94.
225. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 116.
226. Quoted in Dan, "Emergence of Mystical Prayer," in Dan and Talmage, ed., *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 98.
227. Jerusalem MS 8° 3296, frag.7r, quoted in Dan, "Emergence of Mystical Prayer" in Dan and Talmage, ed., *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 89; also in Marcus, "The Devotional Ideals of Ashkenazic Pietism," in Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality I*, p. 360.
228. Dan, "Emergence of Mystical Prayer" in Dan and Talmage, ed., *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 90.
229. Dan, *Early Kabbalah*, p. 21.
230. Dan, "Emergence of Mystical Prayer" in Dan and Talmage, ed., *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 91.
231. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 100.
232. Quoted in Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 85.
233. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 104.
234. A story related by Isaac of Akko (Acre) cited in Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 106.
235. *Sefer hasidim*, §1556, in Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 105–106.
236. *Sefer hasidim*, §161, in Singer, *Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, p. 97.
237. Aryeh Kaplan, trans., *Bahir*, p. xii.
238. A reference to the passage from the Bible, in Ezekiel: "Blessed be the Glory of God from its place" (Ezekiel 3:12). Joseph Dan explains that "in its place" in this parable means that "the Glory itself is known and present among the people . . . , only her place of origin is hidden. They bless the princess in her presence, and they refer to her origin as 'wherever she comes from.'" (Dan and Kiener, *Early Kabbalah*, p. 64.)
239. Dan writes: "The Gnostic character of the Bahiric symbolism is apparent here more than in almost all other sections of the book. The picture of the 'daughter of light,' in exile in the material world, representing her hidden, unknowable place of origin 'on the side of the light' is a stark Gnostic one." (Dan and Kiener, *Early Kabbalah*, p. 64.)

240. *Bahir*, §132, in Dan and Kiener, *Early Kabbalah*, p. 64, with reference to the translation in Kaplan, *Bahir*, pp. 48–49.
241. *Bahir*, §4, in Kaplan, *Bahir*, p. 2.
242. *Bahir*, §98, in Kaplan, *Bahir*, p. 46. For a complete discussion of the thirty-two paths of wisdom, see also Kaplan, trans., *Sefer Yetzirah*.
243. *Bahir*, §22, in Kaplan, *Bahir*, p. 9.
244. *Bahir*, §23, in Kaplan, *Bahir*, p. 9, and Bokser, trans., *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 84.
245. *Bahir*, §119, in Kaplan, *Bahir*, p. 45 and Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 84.
246. *Bahir*, §195, in Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, pp. 86–87.
247. Dan, *Early Kabbalah*, p. 5.
248. Cf. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 14–18, 233–238.
249. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 238.
250. The quotation is taken from the important statutes *Hukei torah* (Laws of the Torah), published by M. Güdemann in *Geschichte des Erziehungswesen und der Kultur der Juden in Deutschland und Frankreich* (Vienna, 1880), 268. Quoted in Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 229.
251. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 229–230.
252. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 231.
253. *Sefer yestsirah*, 1:6, quoted in Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 307.
254. Quoted in Hallamish, *Introduction to the Kabbalah*, p. 40.
255. See Scholem, *Kitvei yad* (Writings of the Hand), pp. 227–29. Quoted in Hallamish, *Introduction to the Kabbalah*, pp. 66–68.
256. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 36.
257. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 35–36. Scholem also shares an interesting observation about a parallel source of revelation in mystical Islam: “A notion analogous to that of *giluy Eliyahu* can be found in Sufi mysticism in the accounts of revelations of Khidr (the Muslim metamorphosis of Elijah). Reports or testimonies concerning such revelations exist with regard to Muhi al-din ibn Arabi (1165–1240) of Andalusia, who shortly before 1200 – the time of Rabad and Isaac the Blind – was still wandering about in Spain.” (Cf. G. Husaini, *The Pantheism of Ibn Arabi*, 28, quoted in *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 246.)
258. Dan, *Early Kabbalah*, p. 31.
259. Menahem Recanti, *Perush al ha-torah* (Discourse on the Torah) (Jerusalem, 1961), *Parashat naso* (Portion: “Lift up”). Quoted in Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 103.

260. Quoted in Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 206.
261. Quoted in Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 207.
262. Nahmanides, *Derashah 'al kohelet* (Interpretation of Ecclesiastes), in Part 1 of *Kitvei ha-Ramban* (The Writings of the Ramban), H. D. Chavel, ed., p. 190, quoted in Hallamish, *Introduction to the Kabbalah*, p. 108.
263. Shem Tov ibn Gaon, *Baddei ha-aron u migdal Hanan'el* (Linens of the Ark and the Tower of Hananel) (Jerusalem, 1978), p. 27; quoted in Hallamish, *Introduction to the Kabbalah*, p. 108.
264. Rabbi Jacob ben Sheshet, *Ha-emunah ve-ha-bitahon* (Faith and Confidence), in *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, Chavel, ed. (Jerusalem, 1964), 1:364. The English citation is based on Kiener's translation in Dan and Kiener, *Early Kabbalah*, p. 122.
265. Quoted by Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 202.
266. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 200.
267. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 207.
268. Cited by S. Blickstein, *Between Philosophy and Mysticism* (Jewish Theological Seminary of America [JTS] dissertation, 1983), 17, n. 45; referred to by Verman in *Books of Contemplation*, p. 188.
269. Quoted in Hames "Exotericism and Esotericism in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah." Also reproduced in Hames' *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century*, p. 51. Hames writes in his footnote to the letter: "I have compared between MS. Vatican Ebr. 202, ff. 59a–60a and G. Scholem's transcription in 'A New Document for the History of the Origins of the Kabbalah' (Hebrew), in J. Fichman, ed., *Sefer Bialik*, (Tel Aviv 1934), pp. 143–4. A translation of part of the letter is to be found in Scholem's *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton 1987), pp. 394–95. My translation and interpretation differ somewhat from Scholem's in both the aforementioned places."
270. Hames, "Exotericism and Esotericism in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah," p. 106.
271. Moses Cordovero, *Shiur komah* (Warsaw, 1883), folio 17a, quoted by Hallamish, *Introduction to the Kabbalah*, p. 25.
272. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 277.
273. Isaac the Blind discussed in Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 282.
274. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 284.
275. Thus in MS. British Museum, Margoliouth 752, folio 36a. A very similar passage also in *Keter shem tov* (Crown of the Good Name), in Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik*, 41. Quoted in Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 451.

276. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 243–44.
277. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 299. Scholem is quoting from Isaac's commentary to chapter 3 of *Sefer yetsirah*. Hebrew: "Kol ha-devarim hoz-rim le-shoresh ikaram."
278. Isaac's commentary to the *Sefer Yetsirah*, translated by Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 300–301.
279. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 301.
280. This important prayer is recited at every service: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One [*ehad*]."
281. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 309.
282. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 279–80.
283. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 301–302. Although Scholem preferred to insist that the goal of kabbalistic meditation was not union with God, or *unio mystica*, but rather mystic *communion* – a less than total contact or an incomplete merging with the divine source – later scholars disagree, and point out that Scholem ignored evidence of *unio mystica* in some of the kabbalistic texts, and suggest that he held a traditionalist's bias against the possibility of total mystic union. (Scholem refers to Tishby's disagreement with him in fn. 206, p. 303. Moshe Idel also disagrees, as attested in his *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 124 ff.)
284. Azriel of Gerona (thirteenth century), "Commentary on the Ten Sefirot," in Meir ibn Gabbay, *Derekh emunah* (The Path of Faith) (Warsaw, 1850), 2b-c, {167} 3a-d; cf. Dan and Kiener, *Early Kabbalah*, 89–91, 93–94. As rendered by Matt, *Essential Kabbalah*, pp. 29–30.
285. Azriel on the Aggadoth, 38; quoted in Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 415.
286. Dan, ed., *The Heart and the Fountain*, p. 117.
287. Quoted in Dan, ed., *The Heart and the Fountain*, pp. 117–120.
288. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 419.
289. Verman, *Books of Contemplation*, p. 3.
290. Verman, *Books of Contemplation*, pp. 37–42.
291. Dan, *Early Kabbalah*, p. 27–28.
292. Verman, *Books of Contemplation*, p. 61.
293. Verman, *Books of Contemplation*, p. 62.
294. Verman, *Books of Contemplation*, pp. 55–56.
295. See Verman, *Books of Contemplation*, pp. 142–144.
296. The detailed study by Mark Verman cited in this section brings to light, in the Hebrew with the accompanying English translation, several versions of *The Book of Contemplation*, *The Fountain of Wisdom*, *The Book of Unity*,

- and other fragments. Verman also presents a detailed historical overview of the mystic circles of the period and analysis of their teachings and symbolism.
297. Dan, *Early Kabbalah*, p. 12.
 298. Taken from Isaac's diary, *Sefer divrei ha-yamim*, which is cited in Avraham Zacuto's *Sefer ha-yuhasin*, and quoted in Matt, trans., *Zohar: Book of Enlightenment*, pp. 3–4. Reference also to a translation of the original text of Zacuto in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. i, Introduction, pp. 13–17.
 299. "Contemporary scholarship on the Zohar (here we are indebted especially to the pioneering work of Yehuda Liebes and its more recent development by Ronit Meroz) has parted company with Scholem on the question of single authorship. While it is tacitly accepted that de León did either write long or edit long sections of the Zohar including the main narrative-homiletical body of the text, he is not thought to be the only writer involved. Multiple layers of literary creativity can be discerned within the text. It may be that the Zohar should be seen as the product of a school of mystical practitioners and writers, one that could have existed even before 1270 and continued into the early years of the fourteenth century." (Green and Fine, *Guide To The Zohar*, p.166.)
 300. Moses de León, *Or zaru'a*, Alexander Altmann, ed., *Qovez al yad*, n.s. 9 (1980): 249. Quoted in Matt, trans., *Zohar: Book of Enlightenment*, pp. 6–7.
 301. Green, preface to Matt, trans., *Zohar: Book of Enlightenment*, p. xiii.
 302. Hellner-Eshed, *Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar: The Zohar Through Its own Eyes*. In Hebrew, doctoral dissertation, Hebrew university, 2000, p. 19. Quoted in Green and Fine, *Guide to the Zohar*, p. 69. English translation published as *A River Flows in Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*.
 303. Zohar 3:152b, Sperling and Simon, trans., *The Zohar*, vol. V, p. 211.
 304. Zohar 1:5a, Sperling and Simon, trans., *The Zohar*, vol. I, pp. 20–21.
 305. Zohar 1:11a, Sperling and Simon, trans., *The Zohar*, vol. I, pp. 45–46.
 306. Zohar 3:36a, Sperling and Simon, trans., *The Zohar*, vol. IV, p. 395.
 307. Throughout Jewish history, back to the time of the merkavah mystics, we find the fellowship of mystics sitting in an *idra*, which is the Greek word for a semi-circle. In fact, the term is used in the Zohar for the important subdivisions of text, suggesting the fellowship and its pattern of interaction that produced the text, such as *idra zuta* (small *idra*), and *idra rabba* (large *idra*). Kabbalists in later periods even called their fellowships *benei idra* (companions of the *idra*). (Hallamish, *Introduction to the Kabbalah*, p. 61.)

308. Green and Fine, *Guide to the Zohar*, p. 72. Emphasis in original.
309. Zohar 3:79b, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 150.
310. Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy*, p. 12.
311. Zohar 2:149a, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, pp. 148–149.
312. Zohar 2:14a–15a, *Midrash ha-ne'elam*, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 134.
313. Zohar 2:14a–15a, *Midrash ha-ne'elam*, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, pp. 134–35.
314. Zohar 2:14a–15a, *Midrash ha-ne'elam*, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 131.
315. Zohar 3:287b–288a, *Idra zuta*, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 162.
316. Zohar 3:144a–144b, *Idra rabba*, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 159. By calling him “Sabbath,” he is likening him to the seventh day of the week which illumines the other days with its holiness.
317. Zohar 3:296b, *Idra zuta*, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 164.
318. Zohar 1:216b–217a, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 165.
319. Zohar 1:216b–217a, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 166.
320. Green and Fine, *Guide to the Zohar*, p. 71.
321. Zohar 1:5a–7a, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, pp. 173–174.
322. Wolfson, “From Mystic to Prophet,” extracted from “Jewish Mysticism: A Philosophical Overview,” in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, Frank and Leaman, ed., reprinted on website <http://www.myjewishlearning.com>.
323. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 131.
324. *Otsar gan eden ha-ganuz* (Treasury of the Hidden Garden of Eden), folio 162a, MS. Oxford 1580, in Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 143.
325. Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 143.
326. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 133.
327. *Sha'arei tsedek* (Gates of Virtue) quoted in Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 84. This passage also quoted in Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 79.
328. *Ve-zot le-Yehudah* (This Is for Judah), p. 16, corrected according to MS. New York – JTS 1887, and MS. Cambridge Add. 644, quoted in Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 83.
329. Quoted in Scholem, *Ha-kabbalah shel sefer ha-temunah ve-shel Avraham Abulafia* (The Kabbalah of the Book of the Figure and of Abraham Abulafia), J. Ben-Shlomo, ed., Jerusalem 1965, p. 208; Bokser, trans., *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, pp. 104–105.

330. MS. Oxford 1582, folio 52a, quoted in Scholem, *Ha-kabbalah shel sefer ha-temunah ve-shel Avraham Abulafia*, J. Ben-Shlomo, ed., Jerusalem 1965, p. 210f.; quoted in Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, pp. 99–101.
331. Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 40.
332. Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 39–40.
333. Hayim Vital, *Sha'ar ha-kavanot shel ha-shemonah she'arim* (The Gate of Intention of the Eight Gates) (Yehudah Ashlag edition, Tel Aviv, 1962), 2a-b; quoted in Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, p. 11.
334. “Cordovero’s mystical life was by no means restricted to the scholarly study of kabbalistic tradition.”... “That Cordovero also took an interest in the more esoteric forms of contemplation is evidenced by his use of writings of Abraham Abulafia, a thirteenth-century Spanish mystic”... “Cordovero’s importance as an author is equaled, if not surpassed, by the incalculable influence he exerted as a teacher.” (Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, p. 31.)
335. “Joseph ben Ephraim Karo was born in 1488 in Spain and died March 24, 1575, in Safed. He was also the principal rabbi of Safed and is best known for having written the last great codification of Jewish law, the *Bet Yosef* (House of Joseph). Its condensation, the *Shulkhan arukh* (The Prepared Table or The Well-Laid Table), is still authoritative for Orthodox Jewry.” Article on Karo, Joseph ben Ephraim, in *Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service*. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?tocId=9044760> [Accessed April 4, 2009].
336. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/JosephKaro.html> [Accessed April 4, 2009].
337. Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, p. 8.
338. Quoted in Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, p. 9.
339. Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, p. 9.
340. Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, pp. 34–36.
341. “When Luria arrived in Safed he was presumably an unknown quantity (although he quickly established himself as a teacher following Cordovero’s death), and it stands to reason that he would have sought out the renowned master. While one can only speculate about how differently things might have turned out had Cordovero lived longer than he did, the fact is that his death at the age of forty-eight left the kabbalists of Safed bereft of their most prominent authority and teacher. These circumstances could only enhance the opportunity for Luria to attract students of his own, thus filling the vacuum left by Cordovero’s passing.” (Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 82.)

342. *Likutei shas* (Collection from the Talmud) (Livorno, 1790), 3c, quoted in Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, p. 62.
343. Hayim Vital, *Ets hayim* 1, quoted in Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 143.
344. Hayim Vital, *Sha'arei kedushah* (Gates of Holiness) 3, end, quoted in Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, p. 143.
345. "Clearly, the act of repairing the world is arrogated to the Jewish people exclusively in this system (Lurianic Kabbalah). At first, God was hoping that Adam would be a perfect human being and therefore would complete the redemption by himself, but Adam's sin shook down more of the sparks. When God chose the Jewish nation and they heard the Revelation at Sinai, it became their task to restore the world.
 "The responsibility placed on the Jewish people is a collective one; under Luria's terms, the Jewish people should be seen as a fighting army under siege. No days off, no respite, a hard battle to live by the Commandments and to repair the world. If one falters, others must take up his burden. Consequently, Lurianic thinking combines a radical understanding of God and Creation with a profoundly conservative attitude towards Jewish observance. But it also reanimates the daily routine of observing the *mitsvot*, giving them a new and more intense significance than ever before." (Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, p. 384.)
346. Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 139.
347. Hayim Vital, *Sha'ar ha-hakdamot* (The Gate of Introductions), Introduction, is included in Vital's *Ets hayim* (Tree of Life) (Warsaw 1891). This version, Moshe Miller, trans., appears on several websites, namely <http://www.kabbalaonline.org/Safedteachings/sfari/> and http://www.meta-religion.com/World_Religions/Judaism [accessed July 3, 2009].
348. Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, p. 65.
349. Hayim Vital, *Sha'ar ha-mitsvot, parashat Noah* (Gate of the Commandments, Section "Noah"), p. 9, quoted in Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 89. Also quoted in Fine's *Safed Spirituality*, p. 68.
350. Hayim Vital, *Sha'ar ruah ha-kodesh* (Gate of the Holy Spirit), p. 33, quoted in Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 91. Also quoted in Fine's *Safed Spirituality*, p. 65.
351. Hayim Vital, *Sha'ar ha-mitsvot* (Gate of the Commandments), *Hakdamah* (Introduction), p. 1, quoted in Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 193.
352. Hayim Vital, *Sha'ar ha-kavanot* (Gate of the Intentions) of the *Shemoneh she'arim* (Eight Gates), 2a-b, as assembled by Meir Benayahu, *Sefer toldot ha-Ari* (The Book of the Events of the Ari's Life), pp. 315–344, as quoted in Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, pp. 11 and 66.

353. Luria's *Hanhagot* as presented by Hayim Vital in *Shemonah she'arim*, and later assembled by Meir Benayahu, *Sefer toldot ha-Ari*, pp. 315–344, as quoted in Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, p. 69.
354. Vital writes: "There is no doubt that these matters [i.e., esoteric knowledge] cannot be apprehended by means of human intellect, but only through Kabbalah [that is] from one individual [directly] to another, directly from Elijah, may his memory be a blessing, or directly from those souls that reveal themselves in each and every generation to those who are qualified to receive them." (Vital, Introduction to *Ets hayim* [Warsaw, 1891], p. 7, quoted in Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 99.) It should also be emphasized that according to Vital, Luria's master was Elijah, whom he first encountered in spiritual union while on the Nile.
355. Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 163.
356. "The whole idea underlying atonement, according to the rabbinical view, is regeneration – restoration of the original state of man in his relation to God, called *tekanah*... 'As vessels of gold or of glass, when broken, can be restored by undergoing the process of melting, thus does the disciple of the law, after having sinned, find the way of recovering his state of purity by repentance' (Rabbi Akiva in the Talmud, Tractate *Hagigah* 15a)." (From article on "Atonement" by Kaufmann Kohler in Jewish-Encyclopedia.com, 2004. <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=2092&letter=A#6428> [accessed April 4, 2009]).
357. Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, pp. 321–322, 329.
358. Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 276.
359. Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 277.
360. Fine, in *Physician of the Soul*, explores the subject in depth in Chapter 8.
361. The actual rite that he taught is somewhat similar to that of the Sufi sects of the Qadiriyyah and Naqshbandiyyah who had contact with and influenced Safed kabbalists. (Paul Fenton, "The Influence of Sufism on the Safed Kabbalah" [Hebrew] in *Mahanayim* 6 [1994], pp. 170–179. Cited in Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 274.)
362. Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 270.
363. Zohar 3:71b, quoted in Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 272.
364. Hayim Vital, *Sha'ar ruah ha-kodesh*, p. 108, quoted in Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 266.
365. Hayim Vital, *Sha'ar ha-gilgulim* (Gate of the Reincarnations), *Hakdamah* (Introduction) 36, pp. 127–128; *Hakdamah*, 38, pp. 132–37; *Sefer ha-hezyonot* (Book of the Visions), pp. 146–147, 152–54, 157. Quoted in Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 286.

366. Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 108. Quote is from Vital's Introduction to *Ets hayim* (Warsaw, 1891).
367. Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, p. 326. Quotes are from Vital's Introduction to *Ets hayim* (Warsaw, 1891).
368. Nathan Shapira in his addenda to Vital, *Sha'ar ha-amidah Peri ets hayim* (Gate of the Amidah Prayer, Fruit of the Tree of Life), ch. 19, quoted in Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, Weblowsky, trans., pp. 56–57. Scholem also remarks that among the Spanish kabbalists the messiah born in every generation is considered the reincarnation of Adam and King David.
369. Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 127. He used the term “intellectual” to mean using the mind and mental techniques for purposes of concentration.
370. Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 129.
371. Quoted in Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, pp. 101–102.
372. Quoted in Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, p. 102.
373. Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, p. 104.
374. Shlomo Molkho, *The Beast of the Reed* [Hebrew], A. Z. Aescoly, ed., (Paris, 1938), pp. 7–8; quoted in Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, p. 116.
375. Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 150.
376. MS. Moscow-Guensburg 302, n.p.; quoted in Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 150.
377. Scholem writes: “The talmudic statement that God had intended to make [the biblical eighth–seventh century BCE] King Hezekiah the messiah indicated to the kabbalists that God sent a spark of the messiah-soul into this world in every generation.” (Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, Weblowsky, trans., p. 56.) A kabbalistic book commonly read in Shabatai's time, quoted by Scholem, says: “In every generation He creates one perfectly righteous man, worthy – like Moses – on whom Shekhinah rests, provided that also his generation merits it; ... he will redeem Israel, but everything depends on the transmigration of the souls and their purification. It is in the hands of God whether to prolong or to hasten the creation of souls.” (*Emek ha-melekh* [Valley of the King], folio 33a., quoted in Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, Weblowsky, trans., p. 56.)
378. A book attributed to Shabatai, the *Raza de-mehimanuta* (Mystery of the True Faith), which discusses this secret teaching, is considered a forgery written by Abraham Miguel Cardozo, one of his disciples, who attributed it to his master. (Liebes, *Jewish Myth and Messianism*, p. 109.)
379. Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 197.
380. Liebes, *Jewish Myth and Messianism*, p. 110.
381. Letter published by A. Amarillo, “Sabbatean Documents from the Saul Amarillo Collection” [Hebrew], *Sefunot* 5 (1961): 266–268; quoted in Liebes, *Jewish Myth and Messianism*, p. 110.

382. Cf. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, Weblowsky, trans., pp. 146–47; Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 193.
383. As quoted in Scholem, *Researches in Sabbateanism*, p. 19; cited by Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 198.
384. Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 203.
385. Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 202–203.
386. Liebes, *Jewish Myth and Messianism*, p. 106.
387. Liebes, *Jewish Myth and Messianism*, p. 106.
388. Liebes, *Jewish Myth and Messianism*, p. 100.
389. Accounts of Paul Rycaut, quoted in Freely, *Lost Messiah*, p. 177.
390. Correspondence of Jacob Sasportas, *Sisath nobel Sevi* (The Fading Flower of Tsevi), manuscript copy made by Dr. Z. Schwarz, Isaiah Tishby, ed. (Jerusalem, 1953), pp. 260–62; also Baruch of Arezzo, pp. 59–61 (with minor variants); quoted in Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, Weblowsky, trans., p. 741.
391. Shabatai quoted in a letter from Nathan to their followers, quoted in Freely, *Lost Messiah*, pp. 177–178.
392. Quoted in Freely, *Lost Messiah*, p. 85.
393. Israel Hazzan, quoted in Freely, *Lost Messiah*, p. 179.
394. Israel Hazzan, quoted in Freely, *Lost Messiah*, p. 179.
395. Freely, *Lost Messiah*, p. 182.
396. Fenton, “Shabbetai Sebi” in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. III, no. 134, p. 81.
397. Fenton, “Shabbetai Sebi,” p. 82.
398. Fenton, “Shabbetai Sebi,” p. 84.
399. Halperin, *Abraham Miguel Cardoso*, Introduction, p. xxi.
400. Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, p. 167.
401. Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, p. 180.
402. Letters published by S. Ginzburg in *Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto u-benei doro* (Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto and Members of His Generation) (Hebrew: 1937), pp. 18–20; cited in Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, pp. 169–170.
403. Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, *Derekh ha-shem* (The Way of the Name), 3:3:5–3:4:1, in Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 32.
404. Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, *Derekh ha-shem*, 3:4:10, in Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 68.
405. Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, *Derekh ha-shem*, 3:4:2, 4, in Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible*, p. 66.

406. Letters published by S. Ginzburg in *Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto u-benei doro*, pp. 36–40; cited in Louis Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, pp. 172–173.
407. Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, pp. 225–262.
408. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, pp. xvii–xviii.
409. Elijor, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 34.
410. Ya'akov Yosef, *Tsofenat paneah* (Revealer of the Hidden) (Lemberg, Druker ed., 1866) 16a, *Ben porat Yosef* (Son of the Fertile Vine of Yosef) (Balaban ed., n.d.), 17d, 99c; author's paraphrase of translation by Dresner in *The Zaddik*, pp. 34–35.
411. Ya'akov Yosef, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef* (Lemberg, Stand ed., 1863), 158d, quoted in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 83.
412. Ben-Amos and Mintz, trans. & ed., *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov*, §19, p. 34.
413. Elijor, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 66.
414. Ben-Amos and Mintz, trans. & ed., *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov*, §15, p. 31. By "torah" here he probably means a scriptural interpretation.
415. Etkes, *The Besht*, p. 8.
416. Etkes, *The Besht*, p. 47.
417. Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 48.
418. Recounted in A. Kahana, *Sefer ha-hasidut* (Book of Piety) (Warsaw, n.p., 1922), p. 105; trans. and quoted in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 39.
419. Ben-Amos and Mintz, trans. & ed., *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov*, p. 62, quoted in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 45 (in Dresner's translation from the Hebrew).
420. Ben-Amos and Mintz, trans. & ed., *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov*, §62, p. 83, with reference to English version in Etkes, *The Besht*, p. 183.
421. Ben-Amos and Mintz, trans. & ed., *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov*, §36, p. 51, with reference to English version in Etkes, *The Besht*, p. 184.
422. As translated in Etkes, *The Besht*, p. 92, with reference to Ben-Amos and Mintz, trans. & ed., *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov*, §41, p. 56.
423. Etkes, *The Besht*, p. 110.
424. Recounted in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, pp. 189–190.
425. Elijor, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, pp. 66–67.
426. As published in Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, pp. 184–185.
427. Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 185.
428. Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 186.

429. Cf. Judges 18:6, Proverbs 5:21.
430. Cf. Proverbs 4:21.
431. Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 186.
432. Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 81.
433. Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 127.
434. Proverbs 10:25.
435. Ya'akov Yosef, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, 100a, in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 126.
436. Quoted in Green, "The *Zaddiq* as *Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism" in *JAAR* XLV/3 (1977), p. 338.
437. Ya'akov Yosef, *Tsofenat paneah*, 50d, quoted in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 130.
438. Ya'akov Yosef, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, 183a, in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 183.
439. Ya'akov Yosef, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, 118d, quoted in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 176.
440. Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 124.
441. Ya'akov Yosef, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, 99a, in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 124.
442. Ya'akov Yosef, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, 137c, in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 124.
443. Ya'akov Yosef, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, 59b, quoted in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, p. 174.
444. Passage from M. Zelikson, *Kol mevasser ve-omer* (The Voice of the Herald Brings Good News and Proclaims), 32, 48–49 (Abraham Pariz-Slonim) (?Jerusalem, ?1965), quoted in Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 133.
445. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, Book Two: The Later Masters*, p. 90.
446. Jacob Leiner of Radzhyn (son of Mordekhai Joseph Leiner), *Beit Ya'akov* (House of Jacob), "Shemot" (Exodus), 14a (Lublin, 1904), quoted in Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 128.
447. Kalonymus Epstein, *Ma'or va-shemesh*, quoted in Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, pp. 146–147.
448. Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 147.
449. Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 147.
450. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, *No'am Elimelekh* (Discourses of Elimelekh), Section "Terumah," 48 (Lemberg, 1788; repr. Jerusalem, 1952), Gedaliah Nigal, ed. (Jerusalem, 1978), quoted in Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 142.
451. Jacob Isaiah Horowitz (Seer of Lublin), *Zikhron zot* (In Memory of This), Section "Yeshayahu" (Book of Isaiah), 139 (Warsaw, 1869; Munkacs, 1942, repr. Ashdod, 2003), quoted in Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 144.
452. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, *No'am Elimelekh*, Section "Bo," 31. (Lemberg, 1788; repr. Jerusalem, 1952), Gedaliah Nigal, ed. (Jerusalem, 1978), quoted in Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 144.

453. Quoted p. 121 in Dresner, *The Zaddik*, primary source in Buber not given; emphasis added.
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469. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Ma'amrei Admor ha-zaken ha-ketsarim* (Short Sayings of the Old Rebbe) 61, quoted in Rachel Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, p. 111.
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480. Both quotes from Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, Book One*, p. 17.
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535. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 189.
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537. MS. New York, JTS 1786, folio 43a; MS Oxford 1812, folio 101b–102a; quoted by Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 193.
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539. Translated by Scholem and included in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 147–155, as well as in Jacobs, *Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, pp. 80–91. It was originally published by Scholem in Hebrew in *Kiryat sefer* (1924), vol. 1, pp. 127–139. It was found in two of the four extant manuscripts of a book called *Sha'arei tsedek* (Gates of Virtue), written by an anonymous kabbalist. According to both Jacobs and Scholem, although Abulafia isn't mentioned by name, he is obviously the teacher being referred to here.

GLOSSARY

(s) denotes singular, (p) denotes plural

Abraham Abraham is regarded as the spiritual father of the Jews because, according to the biblical story, he rejected idol worship and chose to worship YHWH, the one God. The Bible gives an account of Abraham's early life and his journeys, at God's command, from Ur in Mesopotamia, the "land of his fathers," to the land of Canaan. It tells of his devotion to YHWH and of YHWH's covenant with him. Abraham agrees that he will worship and devote himself to the one Lord. In exchange, God promises his unceasing love and care for Abraham and his descendents: that a great and mighty people would issue from him, to whom He would bequeath a land "flowing with milk and honey," provided that they continued to be faithful to Him.

Active Intellect Active Intellect was a term Moses Maimonides (twelfth century) borrowed from Aristotle (via the Muslim philosophers) to describe the flow of the divine spirit or influence from God into the creation through the prophets or mystics who were receptive to it. According to Maimonides there are ten "Intelligences" that emanate from God which direct the universe, and it is the Active Intellect, the last of these, which continuously mediates between the spiritual and physical worlds. Maimonides understood the biblical and rabbinic concept of angels as these intelligences. The kabbalist mystic Abraham Abulafia adopted

the concept from Maimonides, understanding it as an “ever-flowing stream of cosmic life . . . which runs through the whole of creation.” Abulafia also identified it with the primal speech or word of God – the *dibur kadmon*.

Adam Kadmon Original or primal Adam. The figure of Adam in the Bible, the first man, is regarded by the mystics at two levels. Symbolically the story of his and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden corresponds to the scattering of the primal divine light into the material creation. Originally they were absorbed in the divine unity; the state of Eden symbolizes their state of wholeness. Thus the story of their sin and banishment also symbolizes the exile of the soul from a state of grace in unity with God and its imprisonment in the physical creation. On another level, the concept of Adam Kadmon is extended further; he is the macrocosm – the blueprint or prototype of the human being – the “image of God” from which the entire creation was generated. Kabbalist Isaac Luria taught that at one time all souls were part of the Adam Kadmon at the divine level. Adam Kadmon was described as improbably huge; through his eyes the primal light streamed into the creation, from his veins, organs, and limbs the physical creation was generated.

assiyah Making; the realm of actualization, the physical universe, according to the Kabbalah. In the Kabbalah, four supernal realms are described, and of the four, *assiyah* is the lowest, where matter predominates and where the creative power or primal divine light is veiled. Each realm mirrors the one above, but at a lower vibration. *Assiyah* is also described as corresponding to the level of *Samael*, the evil angel or devil.

atarah Crown, diadem; a term used by kabbalists for the *sefirah* of *malkut*, the lowest of the *sefirot*, in symmetry with *keter* (crown), the highest *sefirah*. The prophet Isaiah used the term to describe the people of Israel, as when they are obedient to God’s will they become a means to spread his divine light and love in the creation, and thus they are his *atarah*. The kabbalists used the term to create a symbol based on this: that the crown of God is

made from the prayers of his faithful. The kabbalists believed that as people pray, their prayers, hymns, and the names of God they invoke ascend to the divine throne and are woven together as his crown. *Atarah* is also identified with the “supernal *demut*” (astral form) and the *Shekhinah* (immanent divine reality).

atsilut Emanation, proximity, possibly derived from the root *etsel* (beside, next to), implying “next to or one with God.” In the Kabbalah, four supernal realms are described. *Atsilut* is the highest, and is the first emanation of the divinity from its state of total concealment within the Godhead. It is the spiritual realm in which the potential of the divine qualities exists, but has not yet become differentiated.

ayin Nothing, without substance; a different grammatical form of *ayn* (as in *Ayn-Sof*, the primal divine source). *Ayin* is a term used in Kabbalah and Hasidism to designate the spiritual reality and unity which transcends the creation; as it has no substance, no element of materiality, it is “nothing.” *Ayin* is the opposite of *yesh*, “substance” – the material creation. It is also understood as the mystic’s state of total self-transcendence and union with the divine. Among the *sefirot*, *ayin* is identified with the *sefirah* of *keter*. According to some kabbalistic teachings, *ayin* is the first and highest of the two *sefirot* (*keter* and *hokhmah*) which, together with *Ayn-Sof*, make up the three-part Godhead.

Ayn-Sof Without end; the infinite or limitless one. A term used in Kabbalah that refers to God as the transcendent being who is beyond all limitations or definitions, who exists in undifferentiated unity and is not subject to duality. It is the realm of pure spirituality beyond even the most subtle act of emanation, beyond even the potential for the first emanation of divine qualities. It is transcendent in its concealment. In the system of the *sefirot*, *Ayn-Sof* is higher than the first *sefirah* of *keter* (crown). Some mystics equate it with the primary emanation of the divine name or light, which is referred to as *aur Ayn-Sof* (the infinite primal light). Other kabbalists like Isaac the Blind viewed both the *Ayn-Sof* and *keter* as being beyond the first utterance or

expression of divine will. Some kabbalists viewed *Ayn-Sof* and *keter* as equivalent. It is also equated with the everflowing divine essence or creative power itself.

ba'al shem Master of the name. A term used in Eastern Europe from as early as the sixteenth century for those who knew how to manipulate certain names of God. It described a type of kabbalist who used “magical” techniques (spells, charms, divine names) to exorcise demons and evil spirits, protect people (especially newborns and newly married couples) from all kinds of misfortunes, and heal them of disease.

beinoni In-between; the term given by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady (first of the Lubavitch or Habad hasidic masters) for the average person who was neither *tsadik* (saint) nor caught in the web of evil.

binah Understanding; the third of the ten *sefirot*; the receptacle for the creative energy of the second sefirah of *hokhmah* (wisdom). It is taught that the divine will or word emanates from *hokhmah* and flows to *binah*, from where the seven lower sefirot are emanated. Thus *binah* is often called the womb or mother of creation. Among the *partsufim* (configurations of the *sefirot*) described by kabbalist Isaac Luria, *Imma* (mother) is identified with *binah*. With *hokhmah*, *binah* is the first manifestation of the division of the divine power into the duality of positive and negative, masculine and feminine.

briah Creation; the second of the four divine realms into which creation is divided according to the Kabbalah. The highest of these worlds is called *atsilut*, emanation, signifying the spiritual realm in which the potential for the primal emanation of divine qualities exists but does not actually express itself. Below *atsilut* is *briah*, creation, the realm in which the divine will becomes active in creating the prototypes of the creation below. This is followed by *yetsirah*, the world of formation – the astral or ethereal level. The lowest world is the physical realm of *assiyah*, meaning “actualization” or “making.”

celestial academy Some mystics would cryptically refer to the source of their inner illumination as a revelation from the “celestial academy,” a metaphorical term for the influence of spiritual luminaries of earlier times, whose souls, they believed, still guided those on earth.

covenant Hebrew is *brit*, agreement or promise. The Bible says that God made a covenant with Abraham, the patriarch who is dated to 2500 BCE. It is believed that the concept or model of the covenant was modeled on ancient, legally binding agreements between two parties. Abraham agreed to worship the one God and give up idol worship, and God agreed to give him and his descendants a special land where they could live and become a great nation. This is where the concepts of “promised land” and “chosen people” come from. There were several other obligations Abraham took upon himself, including circumcision, which sealed the covenant, and in return God agreed to give unceasing care to Abraham and his descendants. The covenant is a promise of mutual faithfulness. It is a pledge between lovers, one divine and one human. Later, in the book of Exodus of the Bible, the covenant was reaffirmed by God with the revelation at Mount Sinai, in about 1400 BCE, when Moses ascended to the mountaintop and received the Ten Commandments and, according to tradition, the entire Torah. On behalf of the Israelites, Moses agreed to obey God’s commands and God affirmed his promise to give them their rightful heritage. Later, in the period of the prophets, the covenant was extended to include a promise to restore the monarchy of King David and his lineage, provided the people obeyed the terms of the covenant. In different periods the covenant was reaffirmed by the various prophets and spiritual leaders, and expanded to include the need to worship at the Jerusalem shrine and bring certain sacrifices and offerings. It is not known whether the later leaders used the concept of the covenant to bolster their power. It is also possible that the concept of the covenant initially referred to a mystical “binding” of the soul to the inner worship of God.

da'at Knowledge. While strictly speaking not one of the ten *sefirot*, *da'at* is considered a “shadow” *sefirah* formed by the dialectic relationship of *hokhmah* (wisdom) and *binah* (understanding). It is an energy center created by the meeting of the opposing energies of *hokhmah* (masculine, outward) and *binah* (feminine, inward).

devekut Attachment, cleaving; from the biblical verb *dabhak* (adhere, cleave to). A term used in Kabbalah and Hasidism to describe an intense and deep attachment to God through love. In early Kabbalah it was often used to describe the devotional process of approaching God through inward communion with the divine, by means of *kavanah* (concentration or intention of the mind in prayer or meditation). It was associated with the state achieved by the biblical prophets. Abraham Abulafia, the thirteenth-century kabbalist, taught *devekut* as a practical path of intimately joining with God through inner ascent. In Hasidism, *devekut* was used to describe a very high state of consciousness, of mystic union with God, achieved through meditation, and was the aim of all spiritual practice. According to the first hasidic master, the Ba'al Shem Tov, in the state of *devekut* one realizes through personal experience that the divine presence is everywhere, saturating the entire creation; there is nothing other than it. In Habad Hasidism it is associated with contemplation, and results in the experience of mystical ecstasy (*hitpa'alut*).

dibur, dibur kadmon Utterance, word; primal word. The term was often used by the kabbalist Abraham Abulafia as a synonym for the active intellect, the primordial divine speech or utterance which brought about the creation. It is the first projection of the creative power into the creation at a spiritual level, above the material. It is sometimes identified with the *sefirah* of *hokhmah* (wisdom).

din Judgment; another name for the fifth *sefirah* of *gevurah* (strength, might) in the kabbalistic system of the *sefirot*. It is the limiting power that channels the flow of the divine power of *hesed* (mercy), the fourth *sefirah*, to the lower *sefirot* and thence into the creation.

ecstatic Kabbalah A term given by scholars to the meditation practices taught by Abraham Abulafia in the thirteenth century. Their purpose was to develop an inner spiritual awareness – a direct experience of God, the *ruah ha-kodesh* (the holy spirit).

El Elohim One of the descriptive names of God used in the Bible. Literally it means “god of gods.”

El Shaddai One of the descriptive names of God used in the Bible. Literally it may mean “God the nourisher, the gracious one.” As described in the *Sefer yetsirah*: El Shaddai, Merciful and Gracious/High and Exalted/Dwelling in eternity/Whose name is Holy...

exile The Jews were exiled into the diaspora beginning in 586 BCE when the Israelite kingdoms fell first to the Babylonians and then to the Persians. (Earlier there was an Assyrian deportation in 722 BCE but those people were assimilated by the Assyrians and were lost to Jewish history.) The prophets used the political exile to impress on the people the importance of adhering to God’s commandments; it was accepted as a punishment for their failure to live up to the terms of the covenant. The biblical prophet Jeremiah reassured the people that eventually God would gather them from their exile and return them to the “promised land” through the agency of his shepherds, the prophets or messiahs of the future. The shepherd was identified with the mystic. Over time, the political exile of the people in the diaspora was understood symbolically as the exile of the people of Israel from their intimacy with God, and by the mystics as the exile of the soul from union with the divine; and even as the imprisonment of the *Shekhinah* (the divine presence or immanence) in the material world, and her exile from union with the Godhead.

gadlut de mohin Greatness of mind. According to the Ba’al Shem Tov (the first hasidic master), it is natural that people experience inconsistency in their devotion, as there is a natural ebb and flow, expansion and contraction, in everything. *Katnut de mohin* (smallness of mind) and *gadlut de mohin* (greatness of mind)

were the terms used to express these alternating periods, these changeable states of mind. Today the more common usage of these terms is *mohin de gadlut* and *mohin de katnut*.

gaon (s), geonim (p) Sage, sages. The *geonim* were the officially appointed leaders of the Jewish community in Persian-ruled Babylonia from the sixth to eleventh centuries. It is they who preserved many of the *heikhalot* and *merkavah* mystical texts. Mostly the *geonim* were a conservative influence, bent on the establishment of talmudic law. However, there were some who also provided a more spiritual form of leadership, particularly men like Saadia Gaon in the tenth century and Hai Gaon in the eleventh century.

gematria A technique of extracting esoteric meanings from words and passages of the Hebrew language, based on the fact that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet have numerical values. In *gematria*, one would find the numerical value of the Hebrew words and search for other words or phrases of equal value, thus establishing a connection between their meanings.

gerushin Banishments; a practice adopted by kabbalists in Safed in the sixteenth century, in which they would wander into the countryside to imitate the exiled *Shekhinah* and thus transform themselves into a receptive vessel for her return.

gilgul Rolling; kabbalistic term for reincarnation and transmigration. The concept first appears explicitly in the *Sefer ha-bahir*.

giluy Eliyahu Revelation of Elijah. Many Jewish mystics over the centuries have described their spiritual enlightenment as having come from a revelation bestowed by the prophet Elijah during mystic transport or in dreams. Elijah was the biblical prophet whose disciple Elisha witnessed his ascent to heaven in a chariot of fire, while he was still alive. Elijah was transformed in the Jewish mystical tradition into an almost mythic figure who brings inner knowledge and illumination.

hagah Repeat. According to some contemporary scholars like Aryeh Kaplan, *hagah*, as used in the Bible, refers to a meditation

practice involving repetition of words or sounds and is closely related to “mantra meditation.” It primarily means “directed existence.” *Hagah* can also mean to contemplate, and was used in association with the experience of spiritual light and sound, as in the prophet Ezekiel’s vision.

halakhah Walking or conduct; law. The entire body of Jewish law or a particular ruling of the sages is called *halakhah*, because Jewish law provides a path to correct conduct of Jewish life.

hanhagot Conduct; rules of mystical piety. A genre of literature produced by many of the Safed mystics as a daily guide for their brotherhood, which laid the foundation for their mystical teachings.

hashmal Normally translated as “electrum,” the word is used uniquely in the biblical account of Ezekiel’s vision (Ezekiel 1:27), where it is associated with the intense light or fire of the visible glory (*kavod*) of God. The precise definition of *hashmal* is unknown.

hasid (s), hasidim (p) Devout, pious, saintly, benevolent. The term comes from *hesed*, one of God’s qualities, meaning abundant and unbounded love, grace, lovingkindness, goodness, mercy, and compassion. The term *hasid* was sometimes used for the followers of the prophets in the Bible, and then onwards for the true devotees of God at various times in Jewish spiritual history: the “early” *hasidim* (*hasidim rishonim*) of the Second Temple period (third through first centuries BCE); in medieval times for the Jewish Sufis of Egypt as well as the Hasidei Ashkenaz (German Pietists). The kabbalists of the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries who met in small groups were also called *hasidim*. The term is most familiar in contemporary Judaism with Hasidism, the movement that began in eighteenth-century Poland and continues into modern times. *Neo-Hasidism* is a term coined recently to describe the Jewish renewal movement that seeks to draw on the devotional passion and commitment of the early movement.

Hasidei Ashkenaz German hasidim; a lineage of spiritual masters in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, whose teachings

incorporated some elements of the *heikhalot* and *merkavah* mystical texts that they preserved and transmitted to later generations. They taught meditation based on manipulations of names and letters, a variety of penances and austerities, and techniques of “mystical prayer.” Earlier considered a subgroup of the early kabbalists, contemporary scholars view them as having been a separate group whose influence can be seen in the early Kabbalah. Because of their intense use of “holy names” and letters to influence the supernal realms and the divine being, some of their writings are considered by modern occultists as magical texts.

havurah / hevra Fellowship, brotherhood; a common term for any group of disciples with their master; members of the fellowship were called the companions, the *haverim*. They were supposed to treat each other with love, as members of a family, and had a duty to help one another in all aspects of life.

heikhalot Sanctuaries, palaces, mansions; term used in reference to the seven spiritual sanctuaries or levels found in the heavens, as experienced by mystics in the talmudic period (second to fifth centuries CE) and later during their spiritual journey. The mystics would enter the *heikhalot* using various meditational practices, including repetition of holy names or syllables. At the highest stage they would see the image of the angel Metatron or another heavenly being (perhaps God himself) on the divine throne. They experienced the divine music of angels singing hymns to God and otherworldly lights, colors, and noises. They wrote of taking the spiritual journey in a *merkavah* (chariot) of their own body, the *merkavah* becoming transformed into the throne itself. The mystical literature they wrote about their experiences is called the Heikhalot literature; chief among them are the *Greater* and *Lesser Heikhalot*.

hesed Abundant love and mercy; a quality of God to be emulated by people. It is the name of the fourth *sefirah* in the kabbalistic system of the *sefirot* and is sometimes called *gedulah* (greatness). It is balanced by the fifth *sefirah* of *din* (judgment), which is also referred to as *gevurah*, strength.

- hitbodedut** Seclusion, self-isolation; a term used in the Bible, in medieval times by the Sufis and kabbalists, and by later Jewish mystics to refer to meditation practice. It implies that the practitioner cuts himself off from concerns of the world and focuses within, in order to experience the holy spirit (*ruah ha-kodesh*) through an ascent of the soul.
- hitbonenut** Contemplation; from the same root as *tevunah* (insight) and *binah*, the third *sefirah* of understanding. The term was used by kabbalists and *hasidim* for meditation as well as for deep concentration of the mind on some aspect of divinity in order to gain intuitive understanding and spiritual insight.
- hod** Splendor; a quality of God; it is the eighth *sefirah* in the kabbalistic system of the *sefirot*. It is sometimes translated as “reverberation.”
- hokhmah** Wisdom; the divine will or thought, second *sefirah* in the kabbalistic system of the *sefirot*. The term is also used to describe the first emanation of the divine power from the Godhead – it is the divine word or *logos*. *Hokhmah* is also personified in some biblical-era literature as a feminine persona who guides the individual from within.
- idra** Greek term for semi-circle; used for the fellowship of mystics since the time of the *merkavah* mystics in late antiquity. The term is used in the Zohar for the important subdivisions of text, suggesting the fellowship of mystics and its pattern of interaction which produced the text, such as *idra zuta* (small *idra*), and *idra rabba* (large *idra*). Kabbalists in later periods even called their fellowships *benei idra* (companions of the *idra*).
- iyun** Contemplation; The term *iyun* comes from the word *‘ayin* (eye or source, spelled in Hebrew differently from *ayin* which means nothing, without substance.). It means concentrated contemplation and it seems to suggest a technique of meditation. Gershom Scholem, scholar of Jewish mysticism, gave this name to a circle of thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalists he researched, whose writings include the *Sefer ha-iyun* (Book of Contemplation) and *Ma’ayan ha-hokhmah* (Fountain of Wisdom).

Kabbalah Receiving, tradition; the most renowned aspect of Jewish mysticism, which is often considered a movement in itself. The term refers specifically to a large number of esoteric writings dating from the thirteenth century which draw on personal spiritual experience, the Bible, the Talmud, early works of mysticism such as *Heikhalot* and *Merkavah* writings, the *Sefer yetsirah*, *Sefer ha-Bahir*, and much more legendary mystical material. The most famous piece of kabbalistic literature is the Zohar, by Moses de Leon of thirteenth-century Spain. Kabbalah also includes the works of Isaac the Blind, Nahmanides, Moses Cordovero, Abraham Abulafia, Isaac of Akko, Isaac Luria, and Moses Hayim Luzzatto, among many others. Kabbalistic teachings are characterized by use of complex symbolism to explain the nature of God and the origin of the creation, the nature of the soul, and various techniques of meditation that include manipulations of words, names, and letters, and contemplation on spiritual lights, qualities, and sounds.

katnut de mohin Smallness of mind. See *gadlut de mohin*.

kavanah Intention, concentration; from the word “to aim.” The term *kavanah* has been used since medieval times by kabbalists and *hasidim* to describe the focused or concentrated mind in prayer or meditation. It is considered a necessary element in devotion. Some kabbalists also included focused performance of the biblical commandments as an aspect of *kavanah* – as an external expression of the concept of divine service.

kavanot (plural of kavanah) Concentration exercises developed by kabbalists to help in devotion. Sometimes they involved repetition of specific passages from the Bible, repetition of names for God, or performance of biblical commandments in a focused manner.

kavod Glory. The term occurs in the Bible as a reference to God’s presence, sometimes as the visual aspect of the experience of this presence through which God revealed himself to the prophets. It was the goal of the priestly rituals in the Jerusalem temple. In medieval times, Saadia Gaon taught that the *kavod* was an

angel or intermediary by which the divine can touch the human realm. Other philosophers understood the *kavod* as the *logos*, the instrument of the revelation of God's presence or will; or as a semi-divine power that emanates from the Godhead. It is identified with the primal divine light through which God manifests himself, and as the *Shekhinah* – the feminine, immanent manifestation of the transcendent God. Some medieval mystics taught that the *kavod* has two aspects, a hidden, upper aspect (*kavod penimi* or *nistar*), which is the omnipresent and indwelling divine power that is not revealed, and an outer, revealed, visible aspect which is projected into the creation. Some mystics wrote about a series of ten or more manifested *kavods*, similar to the ten *sefirot*.

kelipah (s), kelipot (p) Shells, husks, shards. The term is used symbolically by kabbalists and *hasidim* to refer to the unholy, demonic, or material aspect of creation which conceals God's holiness and light. According to the teachings of the sixteenth-century kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria, at the time of creation there was a cosmic catastrophe – which he called the breaking of the vessels (*shevirat ha-kelim*), when the primal divine light was released into the creation in an uncontrolled manner. Sparks of that light became attached to matter, the *kelipot*, and were trapped in the material universe. The sparks can be understood as the individual souls which became separated from their divine source and were trapped in the physical creation through their association with the negative tendency of the mind. Luria also taught that there is a process by which the sparks can return to their source, which he called *tikun* (repair or restoration).

keter Crown; the highest of the ten *sefirot*, or divine emanations, in the kabbalistic system. Some kabbalists identified it with the *Ayn-Sof*, the divine transcendent infinite, which is beyond any expression of the divine will, even beyond the beginning of being or the beginning of the divine utterance. Below *keter* the divine will separates into subtle forms of masculine and feminine energies – the positive and negative poles. Within *keter* all remains as the one undifferentiated divine. All the other *sefirot* were

emanated from it in a subtle process that is too subtle even to describe. It was also called *ayin* (nothing, empty).

ma'amar (s), ma'amarot (p) Utterance, word; mystically, a reference to the ten utterances, emanations, qualities, or powers through which God created the universe, which in later Kabbalah are more commonly referred to as the *sefirot*. In the biblical book of Genesis, God spoke ten times as he created the various aspects and realms of the creation, starting with "Let there be light." According to a mystical rabbinic interpretation of Genesis, this signifies that he brought about the creation of the cosmos through ten utterances or sounds. The term is used in the *Sefer ha-bahir* (Book of Brilliance).

ma'aseh bereshit Work or events of creation; could also be translated as the miracle of creation. Generally refers to the mystical literature describing the process of creation, the being of God, and the laws of nature. Some scholars, like Rachel Elior, link the term *ma'aseh* with ritual utensils and the work of the Tabernacle and the Temple.

maggid Angel, speaker, messenger, channel. The term was used for great sages, rabbis, and preachers, and also for angels or beings who communicated spiritual secrets in dreams or internal visions. Numerous kabbalists and *hasidim* reported receiving internal illumination, insights, and instructions from such spiritual messengers. One such is *giluy Eliyahu* (the revelation of Elijah).

mahshavah Thought. The term was used by some kabbalists for the divine will or "thought," with a meaning similar to the more common *hokhmah* (wisdom). The mystic was enjoined to merge his thinking, intellect, or mental focus into the divine thought or expression of will.

makom Place, abode, dwelling, ground of creation; an epithet of God, referring to his abode, the spiritual realm of eternity; also, God's presence.

malkut Kingship, dominion; the lowest of the ten *sefirot*. It represents the immanence and flow of the divine power into the creation; it is identified with the *Shekhinah*.

mashiah Messiah; literally, anointed one. In the late Second Temple period (third century BCE to first century CE), the messiah is the future redeemer who brings the prophesy from God and can save humanity. In its generic sense, the term was first applied to the biblical prophets, who were anointed with oil at the time of their selection. This anointing was symbolic of their being “anointed” or imbued with the holy spirit, the *ruah ha-kodesh*, which enabled them to teach, guide, and redeem the ancient Israelites. Eventually during the Second Temple period, two other figures became associated with the role of the messiah, in addition to the prophets – the king and the high priest – both of whom were literally anointed with oil at the time of their selection.

mekubalim Kabbalists; literally “those who had received the teachings,” initiates. The kabbalists referred to themselves with this term.

memra Aramaic form of the Hebrew *ma’amar*. See *ma’amar*.

merkavah Chariot. The term is used to describe the inner journey of many mystics between the first and eighth centuries CE (approximately). They wrote of the meditator’s descent (sometimes ascent) in the chariot of his body to the highest spiritual realm, the seventh of seven heavens, where he sees God (or sometimes the angel Metatron) sitting on the divine throne. The metaphor of the chariot may be based on the mystical vision of the prophet Ezekiel (1:10). Like Ezekiel, the meditator travels to spiritual realms on a chariot made of the other-worldly sounds, colors, and lights of angels and other spiritual beings. At the highest level, the *merkavah* is transformed into the divine throne itself, symbolizing that the human body, which is the vehicle for the spiritual journey, is also the throne of God – a graphic illustration of the principle that God resides within the individual human being. *Ma’aseh merkavah* is a body of esoteric

literature that refers to this inner journey taken by numerous legendary mystics, based on Ezekiel's vision. The scholar Rachel Elior links it with the mystical tradition of the priesthood of the Jerusalem Temple concerning heavenly patterns of holy time and holy place. In addition to its meaning of chariot, in modern Hebrew the term *merkavah* carries the meaning of combination or assembly of separate elements; thus the merkavah practice was not only a description of the inner journey itself, but a clue to the method used by the mystics to gain their experiences – by combining and recombining the words and letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

messiah. See *mashiah*.

midot Qualities; a term used in early Kabbalah for the qualities of God from which the creation emanated; later, the term *sefirot* was used more commonly. In their meditations, the early kabbalists often tried to unite with specific *midot*.

Midrash The Midrash is the earliest literary form of supplementary Torah and uses the method of deductive reasoning to interpret the Bible. Literally, the word *midrash* means interpretation. Written by anonymous rabbis and collected in the early second century, it follows the order of the chapters of the Bible, and includes both *halakhah* (the legal parts of the text) and *aggadah* or *haggadah* (the nonlegal parts – legends and anecdotes which reveal moral or spiritual principles). It became a model for many works of Jewish mysticism in later centuries.

Mishnah See Talmud.

mitnagdim Opponents; those orthodox Jews in Eastern Europe who were opposed to the teachings of Hasidism. At times they persecuted some of the hasidic *rebbe*s by fomenting disturbances, even denouncing them to the Russian government.

mohin de gadlut, mohin de katnut See *gadlut de mohin*.

nefesh Soul. *Nefesh* generally means soul, but is often used to refer to the level of the passions or sensory vitality – the energy that gives life to the body – which is the lowest level of the soul in

Kabbalah. In Genesis, we read that after each day of the creation, God restored himself (*va-yinafash*), from the same root as *nefesh*. Sometimes a differentiation is made between the animal soul (*nefesh behemit*), referring to the pull of the senses away from spiritual influence, and the divine soul (*nefesh elohit*), which pulls a person towards the divine, away from the physical. Some kabbalist mystics viewed the soul as having three levels: *nefesh* (sensory energy), *ruah* (spirit, breath), and *neshamah* (spiritual or divine soul). Other kabbalists and *hasidim* divided it into five levels, with *nefesh* as the lowest. They are: *nefesh*, *ruah*, *neshamah*, *hayah* (vitality), and *yehidah* (union). The term *nefesh* is used inclusively for all levels of the soul, as ultimately all the levels are considered to be aspects or levels of one spiritual entity. It is also taught that the higher levels of the soul are activated only through the efforts of the individual to improve himself or herself spiritually. In the divisions of the realms of creation (*olamot*), *nefesh* corresponds to the lowest – the physical realm of *assiyah* (actualization, making).

neshamah Soul; from the verb “to breathe”; considered by kabbalists the third level of the soul, the level that pulls a person towards an expression of his divine identity. In Genesis it says that God blew his soul into Adam, implying that the human soul is an extension of God’s “breathing,” as it were. See also *nefesh*.

netsah Victory, eternity; the seventh of the ten *sefirot*.

nezirim (s. *nazir*) A person dedicated to God and living as a renunciate; a biblical term often rendered into English as *nazarite*. The term was also used for the medieval kabbalists who lived ascetic lives and were referred to as *perushim* (s. *parush*, meaning separated, dedicated), a name given in the time of the Mishnah to scholars who devoted themselves exclusively to the study of Torah.

notarikon A technique for finding hidden meanings in the Torah or in other sacred texts, in which a word is disassembled into its component letters. Each letter is considered as an initial letter of another word, and thus the true meaning of the original word is revealed in the phrase created by the combination of words.

olam (s), olamot (p) World, realm. Mystically, the term is used for the four realms or worlds in the kabbalistic system of the graduated realms of creation. From the highest downwards, they are: the spiritual level of emanation (*atsilut*), which is a direct outpouring of the divine reality without any coverings of matter; next is the causal or archetypal level of creation (*briah*), from where the “idea” of all creation arises subtly in the “mind” of God; below *briah* is the level of “formation” (*yetsirah*), where the “blueprint” of the physical creation takes further shape – it is sometimes called the astral level; and finally, below *yetsirah*, is the physical realm of “making” (*assiyah*) – where matter is dominant and spirit is largely concealed. It is also thought that the word *olam* is related to the root of *le-ha'alim*, “to conceal,” because each level of matter exists only by virtue of the increasing concealment of God’s infinite light.

olam ha-ba The world to come. In rabbinic literature the term means life after death, and mystically may refer to the *heikhalot*, the palaces or realms that one enters during mystic transport. Some scholars have translated the Hebrew phrase *olam ha-ba* as “the world that is coming,” meaning that it is continually coming; it always exists as it is eternity. It is the realm of spirit, from where the divine essence or life energy continually flows into the material plane.

pardes Orchard, plantation, or garden. *Pardes* is the origin of the word “paradise,” as the first translation of the Torah into Greek translated the Hebrew *gan eden* (garden of eden) as *paradeisos*. In Jewish mystical literature it represents a level of consciousness which one can enter through meditation or mystic transport, reaching a deeper understanding of the secrets of Torah and achieving the level of the holy spirit. The Talmud (*Hagigah* 14b) tells of “four scholars who entered the *pardes*” and what befell them. This passage is a seminal statement of the mystic journey of four leading rabbis. The word is also used as an acronym for the four levels on which one can read and interpret the Torah – from the literal to the esoteric (PRDS).

partsuf (s), partsufim (p) Face, configuration. A term created by the kabbalist Isaac Luria for integrated groupings or configurations of the ten *sefirot*. The concept of the *sefirot* portrays an orderly flow of light from the primal source into the creation in successive stages. The *partsufim* are groupings of the ten *sefirot* into five configurations or pairs. When the *partsufim* are in balance, they interrelate and energize each other so that the divine force flows between them harmoniously. At the time the primal light became dispersed into the creation, through the process Luria called *shevirat ha-kelim* (the breaking of the vessels), the harmonious flow of energy among the *partsufim* was interrupted, and thus the divine realms went into a state of imbalance. Luria taught that through *tikun* (repair, perfection) the balance could be reestablished and harmony in the divine realms restored. The *partsufim* are generally described as follows:

Arieh Anpin (the Patient One) or *Atik Yamin* (the Ancient of Days) represents the configuration of divine energy at the spiritual level of emanation, above the level of creation. He is patient and “long-suffering” because he is beyond phenomena, beyond change. He is eternal. He corresponds to the highest sefirah of *keter* (crown) and is often used as a synonym for God.

Below the Godhead, *Abba* (the Father) and *Imma* (the Mother) represent the first separation of the divine power into the potential for positive and negative polarities, the duality that characterizes all creation. Originally, the positive and negative were in constant union, within the Godhead, with the divine energies flowing without interruption between them. Among the *sefirot*, they are represented by *hokhmah* (wisdom) and *binah* (understanding).

Below them, *Tse'ir Anpin* (the Impatient One, the Male) and *Nukva* (the Female) represent the same polarization of the male and female energies as the Father and the Mother, but vibrating at a lower intensity, where the polarity, the duality, becomes manifested. *Tse'ir Anpin* contains of all the *sefirot* below *binah* with the exception of *malkut*. *Nukva* corresponds to *malkut*, which represents the immanence and flow of the divine power into the creation; it is identical to the *Shekhinah*. According to

Luria, the Impatient One and the Female, when in harmonious union before the “breaking of the vessels,” had faced each other in eternal union, but now their backs are to each other.

An aspect of the teaching of the *partsufim* is that, while at the highest level, in the realm of *atsilut* (emanation), the *sefirot* are unique and distinct – pure emanations of the essence of each quality – at the lower realms, where matter has become mixed with spirit, each of the *sefirot* embodies aspects of the other nine sefirot. Thus the concept of *partsufim* describes the flow of the divine power *within* each sefirah as well as *between* the sefirot.

parush (s), perushim (p) See *nezirim*.

Pirkei Avot *Ethics of the Fathers*; a section of the Mishnah which presents the sayings of the early sages.

prophetic Kabbalah The name given by the medieval kabbalist Abraham Abulafia to his system of Kabbalah, which was a technique designed to bring about an ecstatic experience of union with the divine reality. It involved the repetition of names and letters, various bodily movements, and so forth. Modern scholars call his method “ecstatic Kabbalah.”

pseudepigrapha Religious texts written in contemporary times but attributed to ancient respected sages or rabbis.

rebbe Rabbi, master; an affectionate term used in Hasidism for the spiritual master or *tsadik*.

reshimu Trace. Kabbalist Isaac Luria taught that at the time of creation, when the undifferentiated primal divine light of the *Ayn-Sof* withdrew into itself, thus creating a void or vacuum (*tehiru*), a trace or beam of that light (*reshimu*) was left in the void, almost like the thin coating or film that is left after one pours oil from a bottle. It is from that trace or beam of light that the *sefirot* were created. See also *shevirat ha-kelim*.

ro'eh (spelled with the letter *'ayin*) Shepherd; a biblical term used for the prophet or spiritual master. Many of the prophets of the Bible were shepherds. Metaphorically, God was called a

shepherd; Moses was referred to as the “faithful shepherd.” It is related to the Hebrew word for friend.

ro’eh (spelled with the letter *aleph*) Seer, from the verb “to see.”

A term used in the Bible and later periods for the prophet or spiritually evolved person, referring to his ability to see into the future and past, and even to past incarnations of individual souls.

ruah Spirit, wind, breath; a term used in the Bible and throughout Jewish history to refer to the divine power or inspiration (*ruah ha-kodesh* – the holy spirit), as well as to the human soul or spirit. The prophets of the Bible received their inspiration through their experience of the *ruah ha-kodesh*. Similarly, there are records of medieval and later mystics experiencing the holy spirit. The term was also used for the human soul: Kabbalists divided the concept of soul into several levels, with *ruah* considered the second level, above *nefesh*, and below *nes•hamah*. In the system of *olamot* (realms, worlds), it corresponds with the astral realm of *yetsirah* (formation). See also *olam*.

Sanhedrin The rabbinic court established during rabbinic times in the town of Yavneh after the Second Temple was destroyed in the year 70 CE. It was later moved to a town called Usha in 138, after the Bar Kokhba rebellion failed. There the rabbis continued working on the codification of Jewish law, the Mishnah, eventually moving their school to Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The Mishnah was completed in 215. The word *Sanhedrin* is of Greek origin.

sefirah (s), sefirot (p) Emanation, stage in the process of creation. The term was first used by the author of the *Sefer yetsirah* in the first century CE for the ten primordial or ideal “numbers” (from the Hebrew root *safor*, to numerate), which were the building blocks of creation. In kabbalistic literature from the twelfth century onwards, it was used in a much wider sense to convey the sense of the creation having taken place through ten successive stages or levels of emanation that emerged from *Ayn-Sof*, the primal light or being of God. All ten *sefirot* are conceived as a dynamic unity in which the activity of God reveals itself. See

also the names of the individual *sefirot*: *keter*, *hokhmah*, *binah*, *hesed* (*gedulah*), *din* (*gevurah*), *netsah*, *hod*, *tiferet*, *yesod*, *malkut*.

Shekhinah Indwelling divine presence; the power of the divine as manifested or immanent in the creation. The term *Shekhinah* has been used throughout Jewish spiritual history in various ways, all related to the idea that the transcendent God of the Bible who was often considered to be remote and unapproachable, has a manifest and approachable aspect. In rabbinic times the *Shekhinah* was considered to be synonymous with God, sometimes characterized as the manifested divine power or “holy name.” The *Shekhinah* serves as a bridge between the transcendent, concealed God and the individual human being. It is sometimes identified with the *kavod*, a biblical term meaning “glory,” which the mystics understood as a specific reference to the visual manifestation of God’s divine power and presence in the creation. In some instances, the *Shekhinah* (like the *kavod*) is a divine power that has two aspects – an “inner” which does not manifest and an “outer” which does manifest.

From medieval times the *Shekhinah* was portrayed as a feminine entity, originally an aspect of the divine Godhead but who became separated at the time of creation. At the cosmic level, the alienation of male and female energies indicates the state of duality in which the creation exists. It is the duty of mankind to heal that duality and bring those energies into harmony. To the kabbalists the *Shekhinah* was symbolized as the bride or princess, synonymous with *malkut* (kingship, royal dominion), the last of the ten *sefirot*, whose male lover is the prince/bridegroom *sefirah* of *tiferet* (beauty) – the *sefirah* that represents the transcendent God YHWH. Her exile in the creation also symbolically represents the exile of the Jewish people in the diaspora. She is dependent upon the religious observances and meditative exercises referred to as *tikun olam* (repair of the cosmos) in order to be returned to her state of unity with the divine, to a reversal of her banishment in exile and a return to God’s favor.

In some of the mystical writings, the *Shekhinah* appears at different places and times to protect and sustain the exiled souls

who call upon her. In other references her exile implies that she is darkened and corrupted by the crudeness of the material world. In the Safed kabbalist interpretation, the ritual of welcoming the Sabbath was created as a symbolic ceremony where God, as the bridegroom, welcomes his bride, the *Shekhinah*, into his home, symbolizing the return of the exiled Israel (also the soul) to God, thus creating harmony at many levels, not the least of which is the harmony in the divine spheres.

shevirat ha-kelim Shattering of the vessels; a concept created by kabbalist Isaac Luria to explain how the primal divine light became channeled into the material world at the time of creation – in a sense, how the undifferentiated spiritual energy and light became differentiated into its component qualities, isolated from the whole, and obscured by the coverings of the material world. According to Luria, the first step in the process of creation was *tsimtsum* (withdrawal) in which the Lord withdrew, or contracted into his infinite self, in order to leave a void (*tehiru*) absent of himself in which the creation could take place. A trace or beam of the infinite light (*reshimu*) was left in the void, from which the *sefirot* were emanated.

According to Luria's teachings, there was a continuous expanding movement of the light flowing out of the *Ayn-Sof*, alternating with its inward flow back to its source. The *sefirot*, or *midot*, the divine qualities which represent limited aspects of the light, became channels or vessels through which the light radiated outward from the center and also tried to return. The vessels could not contain the intensity of the light, and were shattered. When the vessels shattered, sparks (*nitsotsot*) of the primal light adhered to the shards (*kelipot*) of the vessels, thus becoming separated from their source and trapped in the physical plane. Luria termed it a divine catastrophe, as the shards became the source of evil and negativity in the world. Light and darkness intermingled. Although the process is described in physical terms, Luria himself taught that he did not mean for this process to be taken literally, but rather metaphorically or symbolically.

Shiur Komah Literally, the measure of the stature (of God). A concept describing God as a divine body of gargantuan proportions who is seated on the throne of God in heaven. The term refers to an early anonymous mystical text, attributed to Rabbi Akiva, in which the description of the body of the *Shiur Komah* is based on a mystical interpretation of several verses from the scroll of the Song of Songs of the Bible. The *Shiur Komah* uses the exaggeration of physical size into absurdity to convey that God – who fills the entire creation but who is infinite – can be understood through the concept of an archetype of the human form with gigantic proportions. He is also identified with the primal Adam, the Adam Kadmon, who is the macrocosm that contains the entire creation within him in potential.

sod ha-elohut Secret of divinity; mystery of God. A reference to the vision of God on his throne, a personal revelation of the divine, during mystic transport. The term was used by several mystics – notably Shabatai Tsevi – to refer to their own personal experience of God which they could not share with others.

ta'amei ha-mitsvot The word *ta'am* has two meanings: “taste” and “reason.” Therefore, *ta'amei ha-mitsvot* means both the reasons for the religious commandments and the taste (essential experience) of the commandments. *Ta'amei ha-mitsvot* was a popular preoccupation with the kabbalists of the thirteenth century and they wrote many tracts on this subject. The reasons for the commandments that they proposed were mystical and symbolic, designed to create a strong and incontrovertible foundation for the perpetuation of the religious tradition. In a play on words, the kabbalists taught that the mystical reason (*ta'am*) for performing a *mitsvah* is its taste (*ta'am*), knowledge of which may be gained by reading the biblical text carefully. By performing the *mitsvah*, the devotee could gain a taste of the divine sweetness and essence inherent in it. This was based on the phrase in Psalms: “O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy is the man who trusts in him” (34:9).

Talmud The Talmud is a collection of discussions of the rabbis in the early centuries of the first millennium. It comprises two parts – the Mishnah and Gemara. The Mishnah (from the word *shanah*, meaning to repeat or study), is an orderly arrangement of the laws derived from the Bible, organized in sixty-three tracts according to six broad subjects covering agriculture, civil and criminal law, marriage, the Temple rites of worship, issues of purity, and so forth. Written mostly at Yavneh by the rabbis called the *tanna'im* (repeaters, teachers), the Mishnah was completed in the year 215 CE.

The Gemara (from the Aramaic *gemar*, meaning study or teaching), was written by the subsequent generations of rabbis called the *amora'im* (interpreters), and is the most comprehensive supplement to the Mishnah and organized accordingly. Produced in two versions – the Jerusalem or Palestinian (completed in the early fifth century) and the more-lengthy Babylonian (completed about a century later), it presents detailed discussions concerning all the legal issues which were of interest to the two sister academies of rabbis in Palestine and Babylonia. Together, the Mishnah and Gemara are referred to as the Talmud. In addition to the legal orientation of the Talmud, there are anecdotes about the rabbis which give hints to their spiritual and mystical activities and teachings.

tehiru Vacuum or void. See *shevirat ha-kelim*.

tiferet Beauty. Among the ten *sefirot*, it is the sixth, and represents the harmonious integration of the sefirah of *netsah* (victory, eternity, endurance) and *hod* (splendor). *Tiferet* is also identified with the level of the divine called YHWH, and it is he who is the husband of the *Shekhinah* which is represented by the *sefirah* of *malkut*, the lowest of the ten *sefirot*. From *tiferet*, the divine power flows to *yesod*, the ninth *sefirah*, thence downward to *malkut*, and through her into the creation. See also *partzufim*.

tikun (s), tikunim (p) Perfection, repair, restoration. A kabbalistic concept originating with Isaac Luria that explains the process

by which the divine light, which has been scattered in the material creation owing to its adherence to the *kelipot* (the shards of matter), may return to its source in the primal light and being of God. *Tikun* explains how the divine qualities or aspects (the *sefirot*), which are out of balance and antagonistic to one another, may be restored to a state of harmony, and how the *Shekhinah* (the divine indwelling presence) may unite with the Lord. *Tikun* is achieved, according to the teachings of Luria, by certain *tikunim* – meditational practices involving “unifications” of divine names and focused performance of rituals and recitation of prayers. See also *yihudim*.

tikun olam Restoration of the world; repair of the cosmos. Luria taught that the world is in a state of disharmony due to disharmony in the divine realm, where the natural flow of the divine power from its source in God through the ten *sefirot* and into the creation has been interrupted. The restoration of their harmonious energy flow is the goal of *tikun olam*. This is done by “raising” the holy sparks of the divine light which are now trapped in the creation. Luria based this on the principle that all things and actions in the world, no matter how seemingly trivial, are saturated with holy sparks, which are yearning to return to the state of unity from which they fell at the time of creation. Thus it is obligatory for the pious to recite specific prayers and perform rituals and meditation exercises that would not only absolve them of their own sins, but which would free the sparks from the *kelipot*, the shells or layers of materiality, and help them return to their source in the divine.

On another level, the efforts to repair or mend the disharmony and polarization in the upper realms can be understood as an externalization of the need for the individual soul to rise above the state of spiritual disharmony and alienation in which human beings live, to union with the divine being, which is above duality and exists in pure self-contained oneness. Luria also understood the fall or sin of Adam, the first man, which resulted in his banishment from the Garden of Eden, as a metaphor for

the disruption in the flow of the divine energy and the fall of the sparks of the divine light into the creation. Every mystic, therefore, has the duty of raising the sparks and reversing the sin of Adam.

Luria's teachings spread quickly and influenced many European Jewish scholars and mystics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In contemporary times, *tikun olam* has become the underlying rationale for many movements within the Jewish spiritual renewal movement in Western countries – as Jews have adopted activist approaches to environmental problems and social and political issues based on the assumption that the world can be repaired through their actions.

Torah Literally, teaching, revelation. Strictly speaking the term refers only to the Hebrew scriptures called the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), but often it is used for the entire *Tanakh* (Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Writings). Christians generally refer to this collection as the Old Testament. The term Oral Torah is used for the later texts, such as the Talmud. Mystically, Torah can be understood as the true inner teaching of God's word or name. It is believed by kabbalists and other mystics that the written Torah (the Pentateuch) is the actual name of God, metaphorically the "divine body" of God. The orthodox Jewish community believes that the entire Torah was revealed by God to Moses at Mount Sinai.

It is generally accepted by scholars that the Pentateuch as we know it today was actually written by at least four authors between the ninth and sixth centuries BCE, drawing on still older documents and even older oral traditions. It was probably edited together and combined into one scroll in the fifth or fourth century BCE, at a time when the Israelites had experienced exile and potential fragmentation as a people and were in need of a sense of identity with a strong religious and national focus. The Greek names for each book are commonly used in all English translations of the Bible, and so they are used here. See also the introductory section of this book, "Classic Texts of Judaism."

tsadik (s), tsadikim (p) From the noun *tsedek* (virtue, righteousness), a *tsadik* is someone virtuous in the religious and moral sense. Mystically the term refers to the “holy man,” saint, spiritual master, or mystic adept who is wholly devoted to God. The term *tsadik* became one of the most important terms for the spiritual master in Judaism. In the Bible, Noah is called a *tsadik*. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the term *moreh ha-tsedek* (teacher of virtue) was used for the spiritual master. Most important, in Hasidism starting in the eighteenth century, the term was used for the spiritual master who is the guide and support for his followers; he was also called the *rebbe*, an affectionate term for the rabbi or leader of the congregation. The *tsadik* was often defined as someone who had overcome his negative inclination (*yetser ha-ra*) and was only influenced by the spiritual or good inclination. There are many other instances of the righteous and virtuous being called *tsadikim*.

tsedek Virtue, righteousness, piety; a quality of God which human beings should emulate. Often the term is used to designate righteousness in the sense of justice, but it also has a larger meaning of virtue and goodness at all levels. *Tsedek* can also mean salvation, deliverance, or victory.

tsemakh Plant, growth, branch. The biblical prophet Zechariah used the term for the messiah who is God’s servant, a branch or organic extension of God. If God is the tree, then the branch grows from it. The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah had also called the future king the branch and the rod.

tseruf Smelting or merging; the term was used by kabbalist Abraham Abulafia for his practice of letter manipulation, in which he combined letters, vowels, and words of the Hebrew alphabet in several ways: by writing them down, by speaking or singing, and mentally through concentration. Some of his techniques were influenced by similar practices among the Hasidei Ashkenaz (Hasidim of Germany) and other early kabbalists.

tsimtsum Contraction, withdrawal; a concept taught by Isaac Luria to describe the contraction and limitation of the divine

infinite primal light of *Ayn-Sof* into itself, creating a void (*tehiru*) into which the cosmos (materiality) could exist. A ray of light remained in the vacuum (called *reshimu* or trace), and it is from this light that the *sefirot* were emanated – the *sefirot* acting as limiting factors or channels for the light to descend in an orderly way into the creation. Since the primal light is everywhere and in everything, the idea of contraction is a way for the human mind to understand how the infinite divine light or power, which is perfect, could produce imperfection or limitation. The kabbalists taught that the infinite withdrew into itself – meaning that it limited its infinite power somehow, beyond our understanding. Another way of saying this is that with *tsimtsum*, God expelled from himself even the potential for negativity, thus creating the potential for the duality of positive and negative, good and evil. At the highest level, all is oneness. Only when the creation process begins does the undifferentiated primal light divide into the duality of positive-negative, masculine-feminine forces.

yesh Substance, being. Mystics have used the term *yesh* to describe the realm of physical existence. *Yesh* was counterbalanced by *ayin* (nothingness), the spiritual reality. The creation process described by the symbolism of *Ayn-Sof* (the infinite) and the emanation of the *sefirot* actually describes the flow of divine energy from the realm of pure spirituality, the infinite nothing, into physical substance. In meditation, the mystic rises from *yesh* to *ayin*, as his soul, imprisoned in *yesh*, experiences its oneness with *ayin*. The highest *sefirah* of *keter*, being the first hint of expression of *Ayn-Sof*, was often identified with *ayin*.

yesod Foundation. The ninth of the ten *sefirot*, *yesod* is the channel for the divine power to flow from its source in God, downward through the higher *sefirot*, into *malkut* (kingship, dominion), the tenth *sefirah*, which is the portal to the physical plane. The term *yesod* was also used as a metaphor for the *tsadik*, the spiritual master. Interpreting the biblical book of Proverbs 10:25, “*tsadik yesod olam*” (the *tsadik* is the foundation or cornerstone of the world), the rabbis from the first century onwards extracted the

meaning that just as *yesod* is the channel through which the divine abundance flows to the earth, so the *tsadik* is the channel through which the divine grace, the spiritual knowledge, comes into the world. He is the pillar, the axis, or sacred center of the universe.

yetser ha-ra Negative inclination; inclination towards evil; lower tendencies; animal nature. It is believed that human beings have two tendencies: *yetser ha-ra*, which pulls us either towards the material, negative side of life, and *yetser ha-tov*, which pulls us towards the higher, more spiritual side of life. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady taught that the *tsadik* is born with a special soul and that the ordinary man cannot aspire to this level. The ordinary person is generally governed by his animal nature, the *yetser ha-ra*, which drives him into the hands of his passions. Only the true *tsadik*, he taught, can overcome his animal nature completely.

yetser ha-tov Positive tendency; inclination towards good. See *yetser ha-ra*.

yetsirah Formation; the third world or realm (*olam*) below the highest realm of *atsilut* (emanation) and the second of *briah*. In the Zohar, *yetsirah* is called the abode of the angels, led by Metatron, the chief archangel. It probably corresponds to the astral realm in more modern terminology, and is the level directly above the physical world. Each realm mirrors the one above it, but at a lower vibratory level. The *Sefer yetsirah* (Book of Formation) is one of the earliest and most important works of Jewish mysticism. Only 2,000 words in all, it was probably written in the first century CE by an anonymous Jewish mystic who wanted to present an abstract mystical alternative to the Genesis story of creation. Thus he wrote of the creation and its elements as taking place through numbers, letters, sound, and light. *Sefer yetsirah* contributed to the development of a mystical vocabulary that would have a profound impact on later generations. The term *sefirot* (numerals, spheres, qualities) in all its meanings became the cornerstone of kabbalistic symbolism. The teachings

of later mystics were often presented in the form of commentaries on the *Sefer yetzirah*. Some scholars date its composition as late as the ninth century as they see the influence of Muslim Sufi teachings.

yihud (s) Union; in Hasidism, the state of mystic union, of the soul merging or uniting with God, transcending all duality of the creation.

yihudim (p) Unifications; exercises taught by Safed kabbalist Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century to mend or repair the disharmony he believed ruled the cosmos, especially the divine realms. These were contemplative ritualistic acts of devotion; many were meditative exercises based on repetition and contemplation of combinations of sacred words or names in order to “unify” the name of God and “bind” the individual soul to the upper spiritual realms. The purpose of the *yihudim* was to bring about the *tikun olam*, the repair of the cosmos. In later periods, there is evidence of *yihudim* being used as charms by the *ba’alei shem* (masters of the name) who wandered from village to village, attempting to control demonic forces and bring about positive influences in people’s lives. Other *yihudim* practiced by the followers of Luria in Safed involved lying on the graves of deceased holy men in order to unite with their souls.

zohar Literally, radiance, shining, in the sense of an inner light radiating to the surface. The term *zohar* is also used for a specific quality of the inner light experienced in meditation. The Zohar is also the title of a multivolume work of Jewish mysticism written by a mystic fellowship under the leadership of the thirteenth-century Spanish rabbi, Moses de León, although it was traditionally believed to have been written in the second century by Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai. It takes shape as a narrative about the wanderings of a group of rabbis who are disciples of Rabbi Simeon and their discussions and homilies about all matters of spirituality – the nature of God, the creation process, the soul, the spiritual journey, their love for their master and each other, and so forth. It is thought that although these narratives center around a group

of rabbis of antiquity, it was a metaphor for the spiritual lives of the contemporary fellowship. The Zohar's stories are structured around interpretations of sections of the Bible, interwoven with deep insights and accounts of spiritual experience couched in symbolic terms. Much of the symbolism and terminology that would become the language of Kabbalah is introduced and explicated here. There is a sense of lyrical interplay and joy that comes from the shared spiritual quest of the fellowship. The Zohar remains the key text of Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism as a whole.

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