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11 Philosophy and kabbalah: 1200–1600

Philosophy and kabbalah were highly variegated programs for the interpretation of rabbinic Judaism. Although kabbalah was rooted in the esoteric traditions of late antiquity, it became a self-conscious program for the interpretation of Judaism at the end of the twelfth century, to counter Maimonidean intellectualism. Nonetheless, kabbalists addressed the theoretical issues of concern to the rationalist philosophers and theorized within the conceptual framework of contemporary philosophy. In the second half of the thirteenth century, two types of kabbalah were consolidated: theosophic kabbalah mythologized philosophical categories while articulating a comprehensive alternative to rationalist philosophy. Prophetic (or ecstatic) kabbalah, by contrast, developed a full-fledged intellectual mysticism on the basis of Maimonides' theory of knowledge and gave kabbalistic doctrines a philosophical reading. During the fourteenth century a few Jewish philosophers, especially those who cultivated the study of astrology and astral magic, viewed kabbalah and philosophy as compatible schemas that give different names to the same entities. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the philosophic reading of kabbalah was prevalent in Italy where kabbalah was viewed by Jews, and even by some Christian humanists, as ancient speculative lore necessary for intellectual perfection. In Spain and in the Spanish diaspora the mythical aspects of kabbalah were more prominent. While some kabbalists had a very negative view of philosophy, the dominant attitude toward kabbalah among Iberian philosophers was quite positive. They considered that kabbalah revealed knowledge that completes and perfects human reason and went on to recast medieval Aristotelianism in accord with the teachings of kabbalah. The absorption of kabbalah into philosophy,

on the one hand, and the dissolution of medieval Aristotelianism, on the other hand, led to the rise of kabbalah as the dominant Jewish theology in the seventeenth century. In Jewish intellectual history, kabbalah and philosophy were closely intertwined.

THE RISE AND SPREAD OF KABBALAH

Medieval Jewish rationalism emerged in the early tenth century as a reinterpretation of rabbinic theism. The personal, highly anthropomorphic and anthropopathic depictions of God in rabbinic midrash and in the esoteric, ecstatic literature of the *hekhalot* and *merkavah* literature were problematized by Islamic rationalism and by Karaite sectarianism. In particular, the detailed descriptions of God's body in the *Shiur Qomah* (Measure of the [Divine] Body) corpus, in which each limb of God was given fantastic measurements and linked to the primordial Torah, were regarded as an intellectual embarrassment. If rabbinic Judaism is true, as Jews claimed in their debates with Muslim and Christian theologians, then Jewish philosophers must explain away what they considered to be intellectually unacceptable. Saadya Gaon defended the rationality of Judaism by subjecting the main beliefs of rabbinic Judaism to a thorough philosophical analysis and by showing how they are compatible with philosophic knowledge. In the case of *Shiur Qomah*, for example, Saadya claimed that the text was not rabbinic and that the figure described is not God but a "Created Glory," namely, an entity created by God.

Following Saadya Gaon, Jewish philosophers during the eleventh century continued to intellectualize Judaism, believing that they in fact provided a deeper, more sophisticated justification for allegiance to the revealed tradition. Reason, the mark of being human, provided philosophers with a clear knowledge of truth, thereby enabling them to come closer to God. The philosophers conceptualized God in impersonal, abstract terms, privileged the intellect as the vehicle for interaction with God, and equated the worship of God with the knowledge of God. For the philosophers, the attainment of intellectual perfection through the study of philosophy was a religious obligation.

The intellectualization of rabbinic Judaism reached its zenith in Moses Maimonides. Yet, for Maimonides, philosophic truths were not identical with Neoplatonic metaphysics and cosmology, but with

the teachings of Aristotle, which Maimonides had absorbed primarily from the writings of al-Farabi. Maimonides' intellectualization of Judaism was problematic not merely because on crucial issues, such as the origin of the universe, Aristotle's philosophy conflicted with rabbinic beliefs, but because Maimonides posited Aristotelian philosophy as the inner, hidden meaning of divinely revealed Scripture. Moreover, in his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides made his philosophic rendering of rabbinic Judaism obligatory for all Jews. The rapid acceptance of Maimonides' code of Jewish law in Mediterranean communities entailed the dissemination of Maimonides' negative theology, his intellectualist conception of God, and his historical and anthropological rationalization of the commandments (*ta'amei ha-mitzvot*). Kabbalah emerged in the late twelfth century in Provence in order to curb the spread of Maimonides' intellectualist rendering of rabbinic Judaism.

That kabbalah emerged in Provence at that time was no accident. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Jewish community in Provence witnessed unusual creativity in Halakhah, midrash, and Aggadah, but after the destruction of Andalusian Jewry in 1148, Provençal Jewry was also exposed to Judeo-Arabic philosophy. Refugees from Andalusia, such as the Ibn Tibbon and Ibn Kimhi families, settled in Provence, translated philosophical texts into Hebrew, and promoted the philosophic curriculum. The first critique of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* came from R. Abraham ben David of Posquières (known as Rabad), who spoke as a defender of the received tradition, from which Maimonides allegedly deviated. R. Abraham ben David and members of his circle were Jewish mystics who regarded themselves as preservers of the received tradition (i.e. the literal meaning of kabbalah). They claimed to have received communications from the prophet Elijah – the symbol of the Jewish tradition – about the mysteries of God, prayers, and the meaning of Scripture.¹ These esoteric teachings were received and transmitted orally from master to disciple (allegedly going back to Sinai) and were to be divulged only to those who are religiously and intellectually fit to receive them. The historian can reconstruct this orally transmitted tradition only from references to it in later kabbalistic texts.

Provençal kabbalah had two main sources: the theological speculations of Hasidei Ashkenaz (German Pietists), which elaborated

the teachings of *hekhalot* and *merkavah* texts,² and *Sefer ha-Bahir* (*Book of Brightness*), a midrash ascribed to a second-century rabbi, R. Nehunya ben ha-Qanah, one of the heroes of rabbinic esotericism.³ Despite the differences between these two traditions, they both presented a view of God that differed markedly from Maimonides' God, or at least the revealed aspect of God, was no longer a simple unity, but a unity within a plurality of forces. This conception of a multi-layered deity (i.e. theosophy) had deep sexual overtones, elaborating the anthropomorphism of *Shiur Qomah* into a dynamic view of a bipolar sexual being. The interplay between the masculine and feminine aspects of the Godhead was said to be affected by extra-deical reality, especially by the deeds of Israel (i.e. theurgy). Their sins activate Evil whereas their observance of divine commandments empowers the forces of holiness. By the turn of the thirteenth century, then, what Maimonides rejected as unacceptable interpretation of Judaism asserted itself as the correct, esoteric meaning of the received tradition.

Both Maimonides and the kabbalists claimed to have fathomed the inner meaning of divine revelation, designated in rabbinic Judaism as *ma'aseh bereshit* (account of creation) and *ma'aseh merkavah* (account of the chariot). Maimonides perpetuated rabbinic esotericism when he couched his *Guide of the Perplexed* in a form of a personal letter to his beloved student, Joseph ben Judah ibn Sham'un. But Maimonides also departed from the rabbinic tradition when he identified *ma'aseh bereshit* and *ma'aseh merkavah* with the sciences of physics and metaphysics respectively. That meant that the esoteric meaning of the received tradition is identical with the truths of philosophy, and that, in principle, the hidden meaning of divine revelation was accessible to human reason. Any philosopher, Jew or non-Jew, could know it by virtue of natural human reason. By contrast, the kabbalists claimed that the esoteric dimension of rabbinic Judaism cannot be known except through divine revelation to those chosen by God, and that the philosophy of Aristotle, or any other non-Jew, has nothing to say about it. Moreover, the mysteries of God, the universe, and the holy life embedded in the revealed Torah were all disclosed through a unique medium: the Hebrew language.

Hebrew, the kabbalists maintained contrary to Maimonides, was not a product of human convention, but rather a unique language chosen by God to be the very medium of creation. This view was

articulated in the anonymous *Sefer Yetzira* (*The Book of Creation*), a composition from the early rabbinic period, although, ironically, it too manifested the impact of Hellenistic Neopythagoreanism and perhaps even of Indian philosophy.⁴ On the basis of *Sefer Yetzira* and further elaborations by the German pietists, kabbalists developed a linguistic theory according to which the Hebrew alphabet itself has a mystical import: the goal of religious life – clinging to God (*devequt*) – is to be attained through knowledge of the Tetragrammaton, the divine name whose endless permutations constitute the revealed Torah. Since the Torah is also the blueprint of the cosmos, knowledge of divine names was believed to empower the knower to master natural processes. Kabbalah was closely aligned with magic.

From Provence, kabbalah spread to Spain during the thirteenth century, where kabbalistic fraternities in various urban centers in Catalonia (e.g. Gerona, Barcelona) and in Castile (e.g. Toledo, Burgos, Soria, and Guadalajara) claimed to present “the kabbalah.” Kabbalistic speculations differed in accord with the personal orientation of a given kabbalist, the exposure to philosophy, and the geo-cultural context. Thus the kabbalists of Gerona – R. Ezra ben Solomon, R. Azriel, and R. Jacob ben Sheshet – revealed a Neoplatonic bent of mind and delved into the dialectics of singularity and multiplicity by articulating the theosophic meaning of the received tradition and its theurgic implications.⁵ The kabbalists active in Barcelona (such as R. Moses ben Nahman and his disciples R. Meir ibn Sahula, R. Isaac Todros, and R. Solomon ibn Adret) augmented theosophical speculations with the theory about recurrent cosmic cycles and developed the theurgic meaning of Jewish rituals.⁶ The kabbalists in Toledo and Burgos – R. Isaac and R. Jacob ha-Cohen and their disciple, R. Moses of Burgos, and Todros ben Joseph Abulafia – were deeply interested in the problem of evil, and their speculations suggested affinity with Gnostic dualism that flourished among Christian heretical movements in the early thirteenth century. Another kabbalistic circle – the anonymous author of *Sefer ha-Iyyun* (*The Book of Contemplation*) and its cognate literature – was primarily concerned with the mysticism of light, most likely under the influence of certain Ismaili or Sufi traditions.⁷ And finally there were kabbalists, such as Joseph Gikatilah, who elaborated mysticism of language on the basis of *hekhalot* and *merkavah* literature.

All these diverse theological interests were manifested in distinct literary genres. Spanish kabbalists composed commentaries on the Bible, commentaries on talmudic homilies, commentaries on ancient mystical texts of the *hekhalot* and *merkavah* corpus and *Sefer Yetzira*, lists of symbolic codes, systematic expositions of the commandments, speculations on the Hebrew alphabet and Torah cantillation, and a manual for the attainment of ecstatic and mystical experiences. By means of exegetical activity, Spanish kabbalah consolidated a distinctive worldview that elaborated and expanded the motifs and ideas of rabbinic Judaism. Undoubtedly, the kabbalistic hermeneutical activity was meant to rebut the philosophic readings of Scripture and Aggadah that proliferated during the thirteenth century as Maimonides’ hermeneutical principles were put into practice.

The kabbalists developed their response to Maimonidean rationalism while the Jewish community worldwide, especially in Provence and Spain, was engulfed in a heated debate about the legacy of Maimonides. The kabbalists tended to side with the anti-Maimonist camp, even though all kabbalists had deep respect for Maimonides, and some were intimately familiar with his *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the 1280s and 1290s, during the third phase of the Maimonidean controversy, two main types of Spanish kabbalah were consolidated: the theosophic kabbalah of *Sefer ha-Zohar* (*The Book of Splendor*), whose main author was Moses de Leon, and the prophetic (or ecstatic) kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia.

Modern scholarship has treated these two strands of kabbalah as two religious orientations:⁸ whereas the former delved into the inner life of the deity, the latter focused on the psychological processes within the human soul and its striving for intellectual perfection; whereas the former insisted on the human ability to affect God, the latter was interested in the mystical union of the human intellect and God; whereas the former elaborated the mythic, anthropomorphic, and ethnocentric dimensions of Judaism, the latter was more open to conversation with non-Jewish modes of thought, and made kabbalah amenable to philosophic exposition. Whereas the *Zohar* saw itself as an alternative to Maimonides’ philosophy, Abulafia developed his prophetic kabbalah on the basis of Maimonides’ philosophy and claimed to have accomplished its ideal. The distinction between theosophic and prophetic kabbalah, however, is useful so

long as it is not taken too rigidly,⁹ and it will structure my reconstruction of the interface between philosophy and kabbalah in the post-Maimonidean period.

THEOSOPHIC KABBALAH AS A RESPONSE TO MAIMONIDES

Sefer ha-Zohar began to circulate in Spain in the late 1280s and the person most responsible for it was R. Moses de Leon, the author of several Hebrew kabbalistic works. The *Zohar*, however, was most likely the product of a kabbalistic fraternity in Castile,¹⁰ and its originality lies not in the novelty of its doctrine (almost all of which could be traced to previous kabbalistic texts), but in its literary structure. The *Zohar* presented itself as an ancient, rabbinic midrash on the Pentateuch, authored by R. Simon bar Yohai, a rabbi of the second century, who is the main protagonist of the *Zohar*. Imitating the spoken speech of ancient rabbis, the *Zohar* is written in a peculiar Aramaic, even though it is studded with many idiosyncratic words and phrases that betray its medieval provenance. Although it is arranged in accordance with the sequence of the Torah's weekly portions, the *Zohar* is not a linear commentary on the Pentateuch, but a series of elaborate and intricate homilies that merely take their point of departure from the verses of the given Torah portion. With unparalleled spiritual energy, creative imagination, and subtle artistry, the *Zohar* interwove biblical, rabbinic, pietistic, philosophic, and kabbalistic motifs into a colorful fabric, which it presents as the true, hidden meaning of the divinely revealed, authoritative tradition. In other words, the *Zohar* saw itself as *the* authentic, inner, esoteric wisdom of Judaism (*hokhmat ha-nistar*). A comparison of theosophic kabbalah with Maimonides' philosophy will clarify how theosophic kabbalah responded to Maimonides' philosophy.

The Concealed and Revealed God

Maimonides insisted on the unbridgeable ontological gap between God and all other existents and, therefore, on the unknowability of God. Theosophic kabbalah struggled with the same theoretical problems but it was convinced that some positive knowledge of God was possible. With Maimonides, theosophic kabbalists held that the

essence of God is unknowable. This is the Eyn Sof (literally, "without limit" or "the infinite") that could not be defined, characterized, or comprehended conceptually. The Eyn Sof is Nothingness (*'ayin*), or better still, No-Thingness. The Eyn Sof is neither a this nor a that, neither a thing nor the opposite of any particular thing. The Eyn Sof, however, is not a static entity but a living reality that is the source of all existents (one of the meanings of *'ayin* in Hebrew is "spring," or "source"; many kabbalistic concepts developed on the basis of Hebrew wordplays). Whatever exists ultimately emanates from the Eyn Sof but the process of emanation (in Hebrew *atzilut*) begins not with spiritual extra-deical entities, such as the Separate Intellects of medieval Aristotelianism, but with the emanation of God's own powers, the ten *sefirot*.

The term *sefirot* originated in *Sefer Yetzira* where it referred to ten ideal numbers that functioned, along with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, as the "building blocks" of the universe. Jewish philosophers prior to Maimonides – Shabbtai Donnolo, Judah Barzilai of Barcelona, Dunash ibn Tamim, Solomon ibn Gabirol, Abraham ibn Ezra, and Judah Halevi commented on *Sefer Yetzira* – understood the term *sefirot* mathematically, and their commentaries focused on the cosmological implications of the ancient text.¹¹ In theosophic kabbalah, however, the term *sefirot* was associated either with the divine light (accordingly, the term was linked to the word *sappir*, namely, "sapphire"), or with the disclosure of God's personal character traits (in which case the term *sefirot* was linked to the word *le-sapper* [meaning, "to tell"]). The ten dynamic *sefirot* are the *deus revelatus* and the Eyn Sof is the *deus obsconditus*.

The ontological status of the *sefirot* and their relationship to the Eyn Sof was a hotly debated issue among the kabbalists, analogous to the philosophic debates about the relationship between God and the Separate Intellects. Generally speaking there were two main approaches to the ontological status of the *sefirot*: one viewed the *sefirot* as the essence of God (*'atzmut*) and the other regarded them as instruments of God's activity (*kelim*).¹² The former and dominant position of theosophic kabbalah was represented in the *Zohar* and it manifested the mythical and pantheistic tendencies of kabbalah. The ten *sefirot* were viewed as a dynamic reality, each with its own distinctive characteristics, whose constant interaction was affected by non-divine reality, especially by the deeds of human beings. The

dynamism of the sefirotic world was expressed in organic symbolism, mainly the symbolism of the inverted tree and the symbolism of the primordial human (*adam qadmon*).¹³ Kabbalistic theosophy is mainly the hermeneutical development of sefirotic symbolism on the basis of Scripture and rabbinic Aggadot.¹⁴ Kabbalistic symbolism provided the infrastructure, so to speak, of Jewish ritual life. Each prescribed act was linked symbolically to a particular *sefirah*, so that the performance of the act with the proper intention was understood to sanctify the religious practitioner and facilitate attachment with God.¹⁵ Kabbalistic symbolic hermeneutics was intended to counter the rationalization of the *mitzvot* by the philosophers.

By contrast, the view that the *sefirot* are the instruments of divine activity was articulated by kabbalists who had a more philosophic frame of mind, and who, therefore, were more reticent about the pantheistic and mythical implications of kabbalistic theosophy. The *sefirot* were understood either as divine attributes of action, as did R. Menahem Rencanati,¹⁶ or identified with the Separate Intellects, as did Abraham Abulafia, to whom we shall return below. This approach went hand in hand with the demythologization of kabbalistic readings of rabbinic Aggadot carried out by the anonymous *Sefer Ma'arekhet Elohut* (*The Constellation of the Godhead*), a kabbalistic text from the fourteenth century. The instrumentalist interpretation made possible the attempts to coordinate the kabbalistic and philosophic schemas.

The confidence of the theosophic kabbalists that some positive knowledge of God was possible was rooted in their understanding of Torah. For theosophic kabbalists, the Torah is not a divine law simply because it could be demonstrated that the Torah secures the well being of the body and soul on account of the intellectual perfection of its recipient, the prophet Moses. Nor is the Torah divine because it is a perfect expression of philosophic-scientific truths in human language. Rather, the Torah is a symbolic revelation of God's inner life whose surface, literal meaning pertains to the mundane world (i.e. to the world of nature and of human history), but whose inner, esoteric meaning pertains to the infinite processes within the Godhead.¹⁷ For the kabbalists, then, creation and revelation were two sides of the same process: God's self-disclosure. While the exoteric aspect of the Torah pertains to events in the physical world and in human history, the esoteric meaning of these events points to events

within the Godhead. If Maimonides identified the mysteries of the Torah with the laws that govern the universe, theosophic kabbalists equated them with events within the Godhead, which Maimonides claimed are, in principle, beyond the ken of human knowledge. Kabbalistic theosophy, then, viewed itself to be epistemically superior to rationalist philosophy because it pertained to God and not just to the world created by God.

From the One to the Many: The Great Chain of Being

The Jewish tradition affirms the belief that God created the world, although the precise meaning of the creative act remains open to interpretation. In the twelfth century thinkers such as Solomon ibn Gabirol explained the creative act within the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation in an attempt to clarify the relationship between matter and form and between divine wisdom and will. The theosophic kabbalists, especially the kabbalists of Gerona, struggled with the same problem when they delved into the process by which the *sefirot* came into being out of the singularity of the Eyn Sof without disturbing its unity and simplicity.¹⁸ The kabbalists designated the *sefirot's* coming into being as "emanation," in contradistinction with the "creation" of everything else. This was no more than a semantic difference to differentiate between the unity of the Godhead and the multiplicity of extra-deical reality. On the basis of Neoplatonic metaphysics, the theosophic kabbalists envisioned all existents as part of a hierarchical Great Chain of Being that emanates from the divine source. All levels of reality are linked to each other, but the lower a thing is on the ontological ladder, the more remote it is from the divine source, and, therefore, the more corporeal.

The cosmology of theosophic kabbalah blended medieval Neoplatonized Aristotelianism with the language and imagery of *hekhalot* and *merkavah* literature. By the fourteenth century, kabbalists spoke of four distinct cosmic realms: the realm of the *sefirot* (*atzilut*), the realm of the Separate Intellects (*beriah*), the realm of the celestial bodies (*yetzira*), and the terrestrial, sublunar world (*asiyah*). With Maimonides and his followers, kabbalists identified the ten Separate Intellects, the souls and movers of the celestial spheres, with the angels of the Jewish tradition. But unlike the philosophers, the kabbalists personified the Separate Intellects in accord with Jewish

angelology and gave them a distinct identity. Similarly, the kabbalists depicted the celestial spheres not only in accord with medieval astronomy and astrology, but also in line with the descriptions of the heavens in ancient rabbinic sources. Finally, kabbalists gave the main focus of medieval cosmology and epistemology – the Active Intellect – a new meaning when they incorporated it into the sefirotic doctrine. Some kabbalists, such as Jacob ben Sheshet, identified it with the second *sefirah*, *hokhmah* (wisdom),¹⁹ thereby regarding the intellect as the abstract paradigm of all existence. Other kabbalists identified the Active Intellect either with the tenth *sefirah*, *malkhut* or with the angelic being Metatron of ancient Jewish esotericism.²⁰ How a given kabbalist interpreted the Active Intellect depended on the philosophic sources (Aristotelian or Neoplatonic) at the disposal of the kabbalist and on his general orientation. Be this as it may, kabbalistic speculations about the structure of the universe were embedded in the prevalent cosmological theories.

The terrestrial, sublunar realm too was arranged hierarchically. Made of various blends of four elements (air, water, earth, and fire), the various beings in the terrestrial world (minerals, plants, and animals) also formed a hierarchy whose zenith was the human being. For the theosophic kabbalists, nature could be known not through empirical observation, but through the proper decoding of the sefirotic symbolism, since the *sefirot* constitute the paradigm of all things. In other words, nature mirrors the essence of God. The best way to fathom God and nature is to understand the human being, the microcosmic reflection of the macrocosm. Therefore, theosophic kabbalah could be said to be simultaneously anthropocentric and theocentric.

Humans are particularly susceptible to one aspect of reality – the existence of evil. Here, too, theosophic kabbalists addressed a philosophical question while giving it a mythical answer. Whereas Maimonides denied the metaphysical reality of evil, theosophic kabbalah, especially the kabbalists of Castile and the *Zohar*, reified evil into a full-fledged realm – the *sitrah ahrah* (the “Other Side”). They went on to describe its population, an assortment of demons ruled by Samael and his female consort Lilith, and detail their mischievous activities in accordance with ancient and medieval Jewish demonology and folklore.²¹ The kabbalists were fully aware that a stark dualism of good and evil challenges Jewish monotheism and made efforts to

tone it down by saying that the *sitrah ahrah* lacks vitality and depends on the “negative energy” of external sources. This is provided by human sins that empower Evil, on the one hand, while diminishing the powers of the Good, on the other hand. The paradigmatic sin was Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden.

The Fall of Adam was not an epistemic change from theoretical to practical reasoning, as Maimonides had explained, but the activation of the roots of evil that existed potentially in the deity itself. The first sin was interpreted either as isolation of the masculine and feminine aspects of the divine, and hence the introduction of fragmentation into the divine unity, or as an unbalanced relationship between lovingkindness (the fourth *sefirah*, *hesed*) and judgment (the fifth *sefirah*, *gevurah*) within the deity. The result was the reification of the *sitrah ahrah* into a separate domain. In the corporeal world, humans are the main battleground between the forces of Good and Evil, and the responsibility for overpowering evil lies with humans. The task is enormous but not futile, since for kabbalists the revealed Torah itself is the antidote against evil. In the drama between good and evil, Israel played the leading role.

Israel and the Holy Life: From the Many to the One

As much as kabbalistic cosmology reflected the philosophic assumptions of the day, so kabbalistic anthropology and psychology were inseparable from prevalent theories, even though the kabbalists developed their views in response to Maimonidean philosophy. Like the philosophers, the kabbalists understood the human mental-physical complex as a composition of a corporeal body and an incorporeal soul. In theosophic kabbalah as well as in medieval philosophy the term “soul” is ambiguous. It is used to refer both to the soul in contradistinction to the body, as well as to the highest functions of the human soul, the cognitive/spiritual power by which humans can interact with God, as opposed to the lower functions of the soul which are related more closely to the corporeal body. The highest function of the soul captures what is most distinctive about humans. The main difference between Maimonides and the *Zohar* on this score is that when the latter speaks of the human soul it has in mind the soul of one group of people – Israel. For kabbalists, the souls of non-Jews originate from the realm of the Separate Intellects, whereas the souls

of Israel are divine particles that originate from the sefirotic realm as a result of the reproductive processes within the Godhead.

The *Zohar* elaborates the myth of the soul in a manner that resembles the narrative in Plato's *Republic* (614c–620d), even though the description moves within the motifs of rabbinic midrash and Jewish esotericism. Contrary to Maimonides who, along with Aristotle, defined the soul as the form of the body, in theosophic kabbalah the soul is an incorporeal, eternal substance that preexists the body and that is, in principle, capable of surviving the death of the body, provided the embodied person manages his or her affairs correctly throughout life. In great detail and with considerable psychological insight, the *Zohar* depicts the coming to be of the soul in terms of conception, impregnation, and birth, and its sad departure from the supernal world as it descends into the human body. The various functions of the soul – the nutritive, appetitive, and rational – are referred to as *nefesh*, *ruah*, and *neshamah* respectively and are correlated with specific *sefirot*. In this way the human being is indeed a reflection of the primordial man.

While the soul resides in the body it is influenced by its own innate proclivity to sin, and therefore the soul's task is to control the corporeal body. If the body has the upper hand over the holy soul, the person is doomed to fall prey to the forces of evil, but if the body is properly managed by the soul, through the performance of the *mitzvot*, the commandments, the human being cannot only suppress the proclivities of the body but also perfect the soul. The purification of the soul through the performance of the commandments is the primary, and most difficult, task of human life. Human life is thus viewed as an arduous, intentional attempt to attain perfection, very much as Maimonides and his followers maintained. But, unlike them, the vehicle for religious perfection was to be found not in intellectual cognition, through the study of philosophy and its related sciences, but in the very performance of the holy sacraments of the Torah. The holiness of the soul could be protected and enhanced through the performance of the commandments, the prescriptions that God gave to Israel, the chosen people.

The difference between theosophic kabbalah and Maimonidean philosophy is most evident in regard to the rationale of the commandments (*ta'amei ha-mitzvot*). Maimonides believed that the specific reasons for the commandments could be known rationally in

reference to the particular state of intellectual development of Israel at a given time in history. The theosophic kabbalists, by contrast, viewed the commandments as mysteries whose meaning could be reduced to a rational explanation. How the *mitzvot* are to be performed and how they sanctify Israel by linking the religious practitioner to God could be known only through received tradition. Moreover, the primary purpose of the commandments is not the betterment of human social order, as the philosophers held, but the restoration of the imbalance within the Godhead. This metaphysical imbalance is manifested historically in the exile of the Jewish people and their subordination to the gentiles. Therefore, when Israel performs the commandments correctly, linking each one to the sefirotic world, Israel could correct the imbalance in the life of the individual, the community, the cosmos, and the Godhead. According to kabbalah, then, the observance of God's prescribed commandments is a redemptive activity.

Kabbalistic eschatology manifests similarity to and differences from the Maimonidean approach. Maimonides naturalized the messianic age and diminished the apocalyptic elements of rabbinic speculations about the end of time. Maimonides, instead, focused on the world-to-come that he interpreted to mean a perfect cognitive state that consists in immortal life by the perfected intellect. In principle, those who live in the parameters of the divine law and devote their lives to the cultivation of philosophy have a chance of experiencing the immortality of the intellect. Like Maimonides, the theosophic kabbalists were interested in the salvation of the individual soul and believed that it could be achieved by those who possess the knowledge of kabbalah. But if Maimonides, in principle, could not provide a description of the bliss of immortal life, the *Zohar* was replete with descriptions of the blissful, postmortem world, presumably encountered by the author (or his protagonist) through ecstatic, mystical experiences. Likewise, whereas in most of the *Zohar* there is little overt interest in messianism, in the most obtuse sections of the *Zohar*, as Yehuda Liebes has shown,²² R. Shimon bar Yohai is depicted as a mystic whose religious perfection at the moment of death heralds the coming of the messianic age. The messianic import of the *Zohar* was fully understood by an anonymous author who imitated the style of the *Zohar* in two compositions *Tiqquney Zohar* (*The Elaborations of the Zohar*) and the *Ra'aya Mehmna*

(*The Faithful Shepherd*), even though his own views about the *sefirot* varied markedly from the *Zohar's*. The imitation was sufficiently successful that these texts were considered part of the Zoharic anthology and were printed together.

Soon after its circulation, the *Zohar* itself quickly attracted the respect of other kabbalists, who composed dictionaries to it, imitated its style, and attempted to fathom its meaning. While the *Zohar* was gaining acceptance among a small group of kabbalists, the kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia, by contrast, was rejected as non-authoritative. The halakhic leader of Aragonese Jewry, R. Solomon ben Adret (known as Rashba), who was himself a theosophic kabbalist and a student of R. Moses ben Nahman, banned the study of Abulafia's work. Not coincidentally, this is the same person who in 1305 imposed a ban on the study of philosophy for students under twenty-five years of age, and who opposed the use of astral magic for medical purposes. The opposition to Abulafia and the reservations about philosophy were closely related, since Abulafia developed his own interpretation of kabbalah on the basis of Maimonides' philosophy, thereby deviating from what Rashba considered the authentic, esoteric tradition.

PHILOSOPHIC APPROACHES TO KABBALAH

Abraham Abulafia's Prophetic Kabbalah

Abraham Abulafia's "prophetic kabbalah" was a creative blend of ancient Jewish esotericism, German Pietism, theosophic kabbalah, and Maimonides' rationalist philosophy. For Abulafia, kabbalah meant first and foremost an uninterrupted transmission of the innermost truths of Judaism from ancient times.²³ Along with Maimonides he believed that the Jews on account of their exile have forgotten these ancient truths and therefore their redemption tarries. Therefore, to bring about redemption, it was necessary to disclose the hidden truths of the Torah so as to enlighten the Jewish people, an urgency shared by rationalist philosophers and theosophic kabbalists as well. Abulafia understood mystical enlightenment precisely as did Maimonides: it is a state of cognitive perfection in which the human intellect unites with the Active Intellect and receives from it divine overflow. This was intellectual mysticism par excellence, which the

prophet Moses has attained, and apparently Abulafia believed that he too had reached the exalted state, thus giving his opponents good reason to suspect him.

Within the received tradition, Abulafia distinguished between two sets of teachings: the kabbalah of the *sefirot* and the kabbalah of divine names. In several works Abulafia spoke quite harshly and critically against those who believed that the *sefirot* are hypostatic potencies that do not compromise the unity of God.²⁴ Abulafia adhered to the philosophic conception of divine simplicity and regarded the theosophic position as tantamount to heresy and analogous to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Nonetheless, Abulafia studied the works of the theosophic kabbalists "and in some cases appropriated their symbolism and mode of disclosure."²⁵ But if the *sefirot* are not the essence of God, what are they? Abulafia held that the *sefirot* are identical with the Separate Intellects and contain the ideal, intelligible forms. The ten *sefirot* are the "conduits that channel the divine overflow and thus act as the forces that unify God's energy in the universe."²⁶ In accord with the cosmological doctrine of Maimonides, in which a lower intellect contains the knowledge of the intellect above it, Abulafia could reasonably claim that the Active Intellect contains all ten *sefirot* (similarly, the theosophic kabbalists held that *malkhut*, the last, tenth *sefirah*, contains all the *sefirot* above it). Accordingly, Abulafia found the word *kol* (meaning "all") the most appropriate symbol of the Active Intellect, the Intellect in charge of all processes in the sublunar world and the source of all knowledge. This identification would play a role in the attempts to coordinate philosophy and kabbalah during the fourteenth century.

The identification of the *sefirot* with the Separate Intellects, all contained within the Active Intellect, was the key to Abulafia's anthropocentric interpretation of the doctrine, on the one hand, and to his intellectual mysticism, on the other hand. For the Aristotelian philosophers, the Separate Intellects were the rational souls of the living, celestial bodies. They presumably explained the perfect circular motion of celestial spheres as well as motion and change in the terrestrial, sublunar world. Abulafia took this cosmological doctrine and gave it an anthropological or psychological interpretation.²⁷ For Abulafia, the *sefirot* are internal states of human experiences, they are part of the human psyche, since the human is a microcosm of

the macrocosm. Knowledge of the *sefirot* is a form of self-knowledge, a process that requires the acquisition of moral and intellectual virtues and that culminates in the conjunction between the human intellect and the Active Intellect. This cognitive union is prophecy, a reception of divine efflux from God through the Active Intellect, precisely as Maimonides and his Muslim sources explained. The kabbalah of the *sefirot*, anthropologically or psychologically interpreted, is thus the highest example of the philosophic maxim "Know Thyself."

The main obstacle to self-knowledge is the corporeal body itself, especially the power of imagination. However, the Jewish tradition itself, according to Abulafia, also reveals the way to break through human embodiment and to free oneself from the errors of human imagination. This is the highest form of kabbalah, "the path of the [divine] names" (*derekh ha-shemot*), which is religiously superior to knowledge of the *sefirot*. Building on the linguistic theory of *Sefer Yetzira* and the mystical practices of the German Pietists, Abulafia articulated exegetical, meditative and contemplative techniques that purportedly result in a mystical union with God. However, with the theosophic kabbalists Abulafia rooted the mystical path in the Hebrew language itself, which he regarded as the "mother of all languages" because it is "in accord with nature."²⁸ God chose Hebrew to be the language for the creation of the universe because of the unique, perfect properties of Hebrew.

To know how Hebrew serves as the medium of creation the practitioner of kabbalah had to break down the sacred language into its atomic components – the Hebrew letters – and recombine their numerical value according to a particular code, a code that Abulafia derived from the principles of Maimonides' philosophy. This contemplative human activity, one can surmise, was probably one of the reasons why Ibn Adret opposed Abulafia's kabbalah, because Abulafia gave the human exegete an activist role in the exegetical process. For Abulafia, however, there was no contradiction between reception of tradition and the creative, intellectual activity. In fact, the contemplative activity of letter combination (in Hebrew, *harkavah*) was the deepest meaning of *ma'aseh merkavah*, as far as Abulafia was concerned. Abulafia was deeply convinced that his letter combination as well as the visualization of letters was the practice that broke through the limits of human embodiment and

brought about the liberation of the rational soul from the shackles of the body. Abulafia defined this cognitive state as prophecy.

Abulafia's kabbalah was not merely a theoretical endeavor but a full-fledged, experiential program to achieve paranormal psychic states that culminate in a mystical union with the Active Intellect. As a result, the human intellect attains immortality, precisely as Maimonides taught. In addition to the performance of the commandments and rigorous learning of philosophy and its sciences, Abulafia's program included seclusion, breathing, physical postures, recitation of the divine names, visualization of letters, and letter combination.²⁹ Most of these techniques were developed on the basis of existing Jewish practices, but some have analogues in other mystical systems, mainly Sufism, and perhaps were influenced by the contact Abulafia had with Sufis during his travels in Palestine and in the Balkans.

Following Maimonides, Abulafia understood prophecy as a mystical union between the human intellect and the Active Intellect. At that moment of union the intellectually perfect human receives the "Word of God" that contains the ten *sefirot*, which are, in turn, contained in the Active Intellect.³⁰ Knowledge of the Active Intellect thus amounts to knowledge of the mysteries of the Torah, the primordial paradigm that God consulted in the creation of the world. It follows that the prophet, who is the intellectually perfect man, also possesses the knowledge of the created world. Though Abulafia himself was not interested in the operation of the natural world, his philosophy could lead one to a keen interest in nature as well as to the desire to manipulate nature, that is to engage in magic. This was made clear during the fourteenth century among philosophers who engaged in astrology and in astral magic and who interpreted the Torah as a scientific-astrological text, even though they developed their views independently of Abulafia.

Since Abulafia believed that he actually attained ultimate cognitive perfection and possessed the inner meaning of the Torah, it is no surprise that he viewed himself both as a prophet (along the lines of Maimonides' theory of prophecy) and as a messiah (also in accord with Maimonides' naturalist and intellectualist understanding of messianism). In Sicily during the early 1290s Abulafia was actively engaged in messianic propaganda. With Maimonides, however, he interpreted redemption in radical spiritual terms: he shifted

redemption from the historical to the psychological realm, minimized the catastrophic elements of popular Jewish eschatology, and did not advocate the departure of the Jews from the diaspora. Although his messianism was highly individual, his political activism was rebuffed by the papal authority.³¹ While Ibn Adret's opposition to Abulafia limited the dissemination of his works in Spain, Abulafia's works were preserved in Sicily and southern Italy and would be the main source for knowledge of kabbalah during the fifteenth century. Moreover, Abulafia's notion that the *sefirot* are identical with the Separate Intellect became the basis of attempts to coordinate philosophy and kabbalah in Spain and Provence during the fourteenth century. These attempts were fused with a renewed interest in the philosophy of Abraham ibn Ezra and the cultivation of astrology and astral magic.

Coordinating Philosophy and Kabbalah

During the fourteenth century, Jewish philosophy in Spain and Provence was dominated by the legacy of Maimonides; all Jewish philosophers saw themselves as interpreters of Maimonides. However, by this time Aristotle's philosophy was better understood, because Aristotle was now studied through the commentaries of Averroes. Averroes' metaphysics differed from Maimonides' in that Averroes explicitly identified God with the First Intellect and thus softened the radical Otherness of God. In the *Long Commentary on Metaphysics* and in the *Tahafut al-Tahafut* (*The Incoherence of the Incoherence*) Averroes explained that each of the Separate Intellects cognizes God and that by thinking himself God thinks all existents in the most perfect and noblest way. God could thus be viewed as the principle and cause of the hierarchy of existents and the intelligible order of the universe.

The Averroean position became the standard exposition of Aristotle in the fourteenth century and it facilitated the attempts to coordinate kabbalah and philosophy. If the Active Intellect is the intelligible order of the universe (*siddur ha-nimtza'ot*), knowledge of the Active Intellect, namely, scientific knowledge, consisted of knowledge of the sublunar world. Hence it was appropriate to speak about the Active Intellect as the "All," the abstract paradigm of the sublunar world. This understanding of the word "All," however,

could be found already in the twelfth century in the writings of Abraham ibn Ezra, the biblical exegete, grammarian, Neoplatonic philosopher, mathematician, astronomer, astrologer, and poet.³² His terse and cryptic commentaries on the Torah became the focus of intense scrutiny during the fourteenth century by Jewish philosophers who considered him a superb metaphysician. Thirty supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra's biblical commentaries were composed in the fourteenth century,³³ illustrating how Ibn Ezra's religious naturalism and interest in astrology is compatible with Averroes' philosophy.³⁴

One cryptic comment in Ibn Ezra's biblical commentary became crucial to the attempts to read kabbalah into Aristotelian philosophy. In his commentary on Numbers 20:8 Ibn Ezra said: "Know that when the 'part' knows the All [*kol*], it conjoins with the All, and through the All it creates signs and wonders." This comment, cited as a support of the notion of conjunction between the human intellect and the Active Intellect, enables the human to know the natural order and to manipulate it. If humans can know the pattern of the sublunar world, as it is known to the Active Intellect, humans can know how nature works and they can intervene or manipulate natural processes by virtue of the spiritual power they possess. This view went hand in hand with Ibn Ezra's claim that the intellectually perfect man, that is the prophet, can perform miracles as much as it was in accord with Ibn Ezra's keen interest in astrology.³⁵ Unlike Maimonides, who rejected the scientific validity of astrology,³⁶ Ibn Ezra saw it as a valid science that has practical benefits if the spiritual efflux that originates from the celestial sphere can be harnessed. One way to harness the spiritual energy of the stars was to create icons that presumably captured the energy and applied it to healing afflicted people. This practice became disputed in the last phase of the Maimonidean controversy, and Abba Mari, who asked Ibn Adret to place philosophy and science under a ban, agitated primarily against the use of astral magic in medicine.³⁷

Among the Jewish philosophers who composed supercommentaries on Abraham ibn Ezra the attitude toward kabbalah was not uniform. Some of them – such as Solomon al-Kostantini, Samuel ibn Zarza, and Shem Tov ibn Shaprut – were either indifferent to kabbalah or even opposed it. Al-Kostantini, for example, regarded kabbalah as a form of fideism antithetical to rational

inquiry. Likewise, Ibn Zarza rarely mentioned kabbalists and definitely did not take their teachings seriously.³⁸ But others – such as Joseph ibn Waqar, Moses Narboni, and Samuel ibn Motot (or ibn Matut), who were influenced by Judah ben Nissim ibn Malka,³⁹ were much more open to kabbalah and attempted to reconcile philosophy and kabbalah within a hierarchy of being and a hierarchy of knowledge. Thus, according to Ibn Waqar, astrology pertains to the events in the sublunar world, philosophy (i.e. physics and metaphysics) provides information about the supralunar world of the Separate Intellects, and kabbalah consists of gnosis of the divine world that could not be known without divine assistance.⁴⁰

A typical example of someone who attempts to fit kabbalistic terminology into the philosophic schema is Moses ben Joshua Narboni (d. 1362). He illustrates how an Aristotelian philosopher, steeped in Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle, could coordinate philosophy and kabbalah on the basis of the cryptic comments of Abraham ibn Ezra.⁴¹ Narboni wrote a commentary on Averroes' *Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction between the Human and the Divine Intellect*, in which he detailed the theory that intellectual perfection is possible in this life. This is precisely the view of Abulafia, except that Narboni proceeded to prove it within the contours of Averroes' theory of knowledge.⁴² Narboni's optimism about the capacity of the human intellect is also evident in his commentary on Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, a philosophical novel that illustrated how intellectual perfection could be attained even by a person who grows up in total isolation from human society or by a person who lives in an imperfect political regime. In that commentary Narboni coordinated the ten *sefirot* and the ten Separate Intellects, following Ibn Waqar, even though the details of Narboni are quite idiosyncratic.⁴³ The *sefirot* are correlated to the celestial spheres as follows: the first *sefirah*, *keter*, is correlated to the all-encompassing, starless sphere; the second *sefirah*, *hokhmah*, is correlated with the sphere of the fixed stars; and the third *sefirah*, *binah*, is correlated with Saturn. It is not clear whether *keter* is identified with Eyn Sof or not, but since at one point Narboni does refer to God as *keter* it stands to reason that he was a consistent Averroean and understood God (or Eyn Sof) to be identical with the First Intellect, and hence the First Mover. The lower seven *sefirot* do not correspond exactly to the terminology of theosophic kabbalah, but it is obvious that they are based on

some version of it. The fourth *sefirah*, *hesed*, is also called *tiferet* and corresponds to Jupiter; *netzah* corresponds to Mars; *hod* to the sun; *malkhut* to Venus; and *me'on zedek* to Mercury. *Yesod* corresponds to the moon, and the tenth *sefirah* is called *kallah* or *kneset Israel*, the collective symbol of Israel, which Narboni identifies with the Active Intellect, the intelligible order of the sublunar world. This correlation of the Separate Intellect with the *sefirot* indicates that for Narboni philosophy and kabbalah were two systems that had different names for the same spiritual entities.

Similarly Narboni advanced a philosophical reading of the *Shiur Qomah*, grafting Averroean metaphysics onto Ibn Ezra's comment about *Shiur Qomah* in Exodus 22:13 and in *Yesod Mora*. According to Narboni, *Shiur Qomah* is but a figurative expression for Averroes' idea that God is the "Form of the World," in which all things exist in a perfect and noble way. In other words, whereas the theosophic kabbalists understood the *Shiur Qomah* to refer to the sefirotic structure within the Godhead, Narboni understood it to refer to the intelligible order of the world that includes both corporeal and spiritual dimensions. Since most philosophers agreed that the human being is a microcosm of the macrocosm, the anthropomorphism of the *Shiur Qomah* was not problematic theologically. The human being is but a prism in which the structure of reality is reflected. For Narboni, kabbalah and philosophy were parallel speculative systems that gave different names to the same cosmic or metaphysical entities.

The return to pre-Maimonidean philosophers involved not only Abraham ibn Ezra but also Judah Halevi, whose *Kuzari* included a long discussion of *Sefer Yetzira*. In Provence at the turn of the fifteenth century a group of scholars – Isaac de Lates, Prat Maimon (Solomon ben Menahem), and his students Jacob Farisol, Nethanel Kaspi, and Solomon ben Judah of Lunel – composed commentaries on Halevi's *Kuzari* and advanced a new Jewish theology that was deeply steeped in astrology. The Provençal scholars were all admirers of Levi ben Abraham of Villefranche, the cause célèbre of the final phase of the Maimonidean controversy. That scholar advocated the scientific validity of astrology, the effectiveness of drawing spiritual energy for human needs, and the permissibility of astral magic on halakhic grounds. For him, the stars do influence human physical well being as manifested in human health and sickness, and they even

determine the forms for corporeal things. Hence the use of talismans and other icons of the stars to draw spiritual energy downward is beneficial and halakhically permissible.⁴⁴

Following Levi ben Abraham, Prat Maimon, for example, regarded the spiritual energy of the sun to be the source of religious and intellectual virtues, including the attainment of prophecy. To absorb the spiritual energy, proper preparation is necessary; a special place and an icon should be used for the purpose of attaining prophetic overflow. Thus the sacrifices of ancient Israel were explained as mediums that enabled Israel's priests to focus their imagination as they engaged in the prognostication of the future, in their attempts to draw spiritual energy from the supernal world for the benefit of Israel. This view was shared by Moses Narboni and Nissim of Marseilles as well as by Prat Maimon and his student Nethanel Kaspi. The latter two scholars regarded the ancient Temple as an elaborate talisman to draw the heavenly energy to earth, and they believed that certain locations were more apt to receive the supernal overflow than others. This notion, however, was not endorsed by Levi ben Abraham, for whom the Temple was not a talisman, but strictly a symbol of eternal truths about the heavenly spheres that should be contemplated rather than used for any benefit.

Interpreting the biblical past in light of astrology and astrological magic was just another expression of the rationalist assumption that Scripture is a scientific text, an assumption that was shared both by followers of Maimonides and by Abulafia. Since Scripture is necessarily true and astrology is a true science, the Torah must be read in light of the science of astrology. Writing super-commentaries on Abraham ibn Ezra's biblical commentaries was the most effective way to prove that congruence. Out of this astrological reading of the Torah a full-fledged astral theology emerged, whose main tenets are the following themes: the Torah was given at Sinai on the basis of astrological calculations; biblical events reflect the influences of the stars, and biblical personalities and rabbinic sages were expert astrologers; prophecy is predicated on knowledge of astrology; miracles are understood to be the results of the prophet's intellectual perfection. Further, Moses was able to overcome the Egyptian magicians, because he was a superior astrologer. His intellectual perfection included the knowledge of astrology, culminating in the conjunction between his intellect and the Active Intellect. He was a practicing

magician who correctly understood the causal link between earthly and celestial powers. The knowledge of astrology enables the intellectually perfect to extricate themselves from astral causality. Moreover, the uniqueness of the people of Israel is explained by its ability to transcend the impact of astral causality through mastery of the astrological sciences. Most importantly, the commandments themselves function as tools in the manipulation of astral forces. The commandments either manifest the influence of a given celestial body or are given as techniques to draw spiritual energy from the celestial spheres into the corporeal world. In this regard the commandments mitigate the destructive forces of the corporeal world that are regulated by the celestial bodies. Observance of the commandments thus has an instrumental value, for the more consistently one performs them, the more one can extricate oneself from the impact of the stars.

In short, by the turn of the fifteenth century philosopher-scientists proposed a strictly naturalistic interpretation for the Torah on the basis of astral determinism. Given this theology, it is easy to understand how philosopher-scientists could also be interested in kabbalah not only as a speculative system, but also as a praxis that included use of talismans, amulets, incantations, and divinations. The best example of such a thinker is Yohanan Alemanno in Italy.

Intellectual Perfection, Kabbalah, and Magic

The philosophic approach to kabbalah was most characteristic of Jewish intellectual activity in Italy during the late fifteenth century and throughout the sixteenth century. The best example is Yohanan Alemanno, who fused Halakhah, biblical exegesis, philosophy, science, kabbalah, and magic into a coherent system, illustrating the Renaissance ideal of comprehensive learning. Alemanno was a student of Judah ben Yehiel Messer Leon, an outstanding Aristotelian Jewish philosopher, whose philosophic and medical expertise was recognized by Christian society. He was awarded a medical degree by Emperor Frederick III in the 1450s, along with the unusual privilege to grant degrees to Jewish students. Alemanno received the honorary degree from his Jewish teacher, though Alemanno's own social standing derived not from it but from the patronage of the wealthiest Jewish banker in Florence, R. Yehiel Nissim of Pisa.

Alemanno also departed from his revered teacher in regard to the study of kabbalah.

In the 1470s kabbalah was beginning to attract the interest of Christian humanists, who revived the Platonic tradition in their search for the ancient *prisca theologica* that they believed culminated in the truths of Christianity. Because Christian humanists maintained that kabbalah was part of this knowledge, they treated kabbalah with deep respect, regarded it as the only true insight of Judaism, and had kabbalistic texts translated into Latin. Flavius Mithridates, the most prolific translator of kabbalistic texts into Latin, also added his own forgeries of kabbalistic texts and finally converted to Christianity. The translated texts included primarily the works of Abulafia and of the Italian kabbalist R. Menahem Rencanati.⁴⁵ The *Zohar*, by contrast, was relatively unknown in Italy until the last decade of the fifteenth century, when copies of it were brought to Italy with refugees of the expulsion.⁴⁶ Judah Messer Leon was very concerned about the interest of non-Jews in kabbalah and their missionizing successes, and attempted to ban the study of kabbalah in Italy, but to no avail. Judah Messer Leon's own son, David, and the father's best students, Yohanan Alemanno and Abraham de Balmes, were all interested in kabbalah and studied it despite their master's disapproval.

In Italy, kabbalah was viewed as a type of speculative lore. It was studied auto-didactically from extant texts without the supervision of authoritative mentors. The absence of authoritative traditions, and the limited knowledge of the *Zohar*, facilitated a degree of hermeneutical freedom that was not common in Spain. A scholar interested in kabbalah could rely on his own intellectual powers in the interpretation of kabbalistic texts and articulate his own peculiar reading of kabbalah on the basis of his philosophic knowledge, precisely as Abraham Abulafia had done. This, in turn, further enhanced the image of kabbalah as an ancient, theoretical science with a universal appeal, rather than as a set of practices for the proper observance of Jewish law. It is no surprise that in Italy Christian humanists could view kabbalah as an integral part of universal, ancient wisdom and would desire to learn it from Jewish masters. Yohanan Alemanno and David Messer Leon are examples of philosophic approaches to kabbalah common among Jewish intellectuals in Italy. About the *sefirot*, however, there was no agreement among them.

Whereas Alemanno held that the *sefirot* were the instruments of divine activity, David Messer Leon viewed them as the essence of God that exists in God in the most perfect manner, as Thomas Aquinas understood divine perfections.⁴⁷ During the sixteenth century Alemanno's fusion of philosophy, kabbalah, and magic prevailed in Italy, whereas David Messer Leon fled Italy to the Ottoman Empire in 1494. Although his view of the *sefirot* as the essence of God was in accord with the prevalent Zoharic position, his philosophic exposition of the doctrine was rejected by Iberian kabbalists.

Alemanno mastered the entire scope of Jewish biblical, halakhic, and philosophic learning. In addition he also studied alchemy, astrology, astral medicine, physiognomy, dream interpretation, and talismanic magic from a vast array of sources including the recently published Hermetic corpus, the works of Arabic Neoplatonic philosophers (e.g. Batalyawsi), the Jewish Neoplatonic philosophers (e.g. Ibn Ezra, Ibn Zarza, Ibn Motot), medieval magical and astrological manuals (e.g. the *Ghayat al-Hakim* and *Book of the Palm-Date*), and kabbalah. From these highly diverse sources, Alemanno developed an organic view of nature in which there is no meaningful distinction between the animate and the inanimate, and in which bodies exert influences on each other through sympathies and antipathies. Projecting mind into nature, Alemanno endowed all existing things with spirit, which served as the locus and carrier of active life and perception. In this organically ordered universe the spiritual could penetrate the physical or, more precisely, a spiritual energy assumed material forms.

Alemanno's interest in the manipulation of nature was related to the views of his fourteenth-century philosophic sources and Abulafia's mysticism of language. For Alemanno (who was an ardent student of Abulafia's writings), the mastery of nature and the mystical union with God were possible through the manipulation of the Hebrew letters, the "building blocks" of the universe. Whoever breaks the limits of human embodiment through various contemplative and meditative techniques and proper exegesis of the exoteric Torah can "tap into" the spiritual energy of the Godhead and channel the divine efflux into the corporeal world, either into his own body or into material objects. Through self-spiritualization, the magician-philosopher may control natural substances, prognosticate future events, heal the physically and mentally afflicted, attain a

temporary union with God in this life, and enjoy the bliss of immortality in the afterlife. The prototype of the perfect man was King Solomon. To his *Commentary on Song of Songs*, entitled *Heshek Shlomo (The Desire of Solomon)*, which Alemanno had composed in 1488 for his student Pico della Mirandola, Alemanno appended a biography of King Solomon, entitled *Shir ha-Ma'alot (The Song of Solomon's Virtues)*.⁴⁸

King Solomon was the highest example of the Renaissance magus: a person who acquired all the virtues and apprehended all the arts and the sciences that Alemanno presented in an architectonic order. Like Abulafia, Alemanno composed his book as a practical manual for religio-intellectual perfection to be attained *in this life*, culminating in the conjunction of the human intellect with God, or, more precisely, with *tiferet*, the sixth *sefirah* and center of the serifotic realm. Presumably the one who follows the detailed recipe for perfection provided by Alemanno would experience perfection in this life, as did Solomon. The perfect man, as Idel has put it, is "an accomplished philosopher, a magician and theurgian, and finally a mystic."⁴⁹ Alemanno's view that the perfect man was indeed an intermediary between the corporeal and the spiritual levels of reality became a prominent theme of Renaissance philosophy when it was adopted by his disciple, Pico della Mirandola. And Alemanno's linguistic approach to nature would influence Pico's nephew, Alberto Pio, as well as Yohannes Reuchlin.

Whereas Christian humanists were impressed by Alemanno, his fusion of philosophy and kabbalah raised the ire of his own Jewish contemporaries. Aristotelian philosophers, such as Elijah del Medigo, found it intellectually unacceptable, and the recent refugees from Spain who accepted the authority of the *Zohar* and its theosophic-theurgic doctrines did not regard Alemanno's fusion of philosophy and kabbalah as authoritative. In the first half of the sixteenth century, Jewish intellectuals such as Jacob Mantino, Obadia Sforno, Moses Provenzano, and Azariah Figo continued to perpetuate the Aristotelian tradition in Italy's universities and were instrumental in the printing of Averroes' commentaries on the Aristotelian corpus. Yet, the involvement of Jewish scholars with Renaissance Aristotelianism was overshadowed by the popularity of Platonism, which also found a responsive chord among Jewish thinkers. For example, Judah Moscato composed a commentary on Yehuda Halevi's

Kuzari, entitled *Qol Yehudah (The Voice of Judah)* that treated the long discourse on *Sefer Yetzira* in light of the non-Aristotelian philosophies of nature prevalent in the sixteenth century. Displaying an impressive command of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophy, kabbalah, Renaissance humanism, and Hermeticism, Moscato posed a hierarchical relationship between human knowledge and divinely revealed knowledge.⁵⁰ All branches of natural philosophy are now deemed to be but finite, imperfect approximations of the infinite, divine wisdom revealed in the Torah and interpreted by the authoritative tradition. The same mindset is evident also in Abraham Yagel, who followed in the footsteps of Alemanno. Going beyond the parameters of Aristotle's natural philosophy, he was immersed in the new scientific discoveries in astronomy, human physiology, botany, zoology, and mineralogy, while also wishing to capture the occult powers of nature through the study of kabbalah, alchemy, astrology, and magic.⁵¹

KABBALAH AS AUTHORITATIVE JEWISH THEOLOGY

Whereas in Italy the fusion of philosophy and kabbalah reflected the distinctive intellectual climate of the Renaissance, in Spain the interplay of the two programs was shaped by the tragic events of 1391. The year-long persecution destroyed thousands of Jewish communities and brought about the unprecedented event of collective apostasy to Christianity. These events led the Jewish intelligentsia to a thorough self-examination of their cultural orientation. Since philosophy was the hallmark of Judeo-Hispanic culture, philosophy, the philosophic *paideia*, and the philosophers were all placed on the defensive as the cause of the failure of Jews to uphold the ancestral faith. These accusations were advanced by moralists such as Solomon Al'ami, who railed against the moral breakdown of Hispano-Jewish society in general, as well as by Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov, a trained philosopher who despaired of Jewish Aristotelianism and was to embrace kabbalah as the correct interpretation of rabbinic Judaism. His *Sefer ha-Emunot (Book of Beliefs)* is a summary of kabbalistic teachings that were culled from extant texts rather than from a living teacher. The influence of kabbalah on philosophy was also evident in the case of Hasdai Crescas (d. 1410/11), the most severe critic of Maimonidean philosophy. Crescas' own analysis of divine attributes as essential

attributes was directly indebted to the kabbalistic doctrine of *sefirot* and the kabbalistic conception of infinity.⁵²

Despite growing skepticism about philosophy, educated Jews continued to cultivate the study of philosophy and regard it as necessary for the attainment of religious perfection. Furthermore, philosophy entered the curriculum of certain yeshivot in Castile and helped to shape halakhic discourse. Aristotelian logic was employed to understand God's revealed word with scientific precision. It is very plausible that the penetration of philosophy into the very heart of rabbinic training in academies of higher Jewish learning prompted the demonization of philosophy by a group of anonymous kabbalists in Castile who composed *Sefer ha-Meshiv* (*The Book of the Answering Angel*).⁵³ They regarded philosophy not only as alien to Judaism, but also as inherently evil, a manifestation of the *sitrah ahras*. According to *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, the mysteries of the infinite Torah could not be known through the inquiries of the philosophers and their astrological manipulations, but from direct revelations by an angelic being. Using specific techniques for conjuring angels or through methods of dream interpretation, these anonymous kabbalists claimed to have disclosed the eschatological meaning of Scripture, promising imminent redemption.

Among the intellectual elite in Iberian Jewry there was no sharp dichotomy between philosophy and kabbalah. The same scholars who preserved the Aristotelian tradition also had a positive attitude toward kabbalah and regarded the *Zohar* as an authentic, ancient midrash. Kabbalah was now regarded an integral part of the authoritative, revealed tradition that transcends the limits of natural human reason. In fact, the philosophers themselves accentuated the inability of philosophy alone to bring about human salvation, a view that was developed in the context of the intense polemics with Christianity. As Jewish philosophers became more familiar with Christian Scholasticism, they realized that Christianity could no longer be dismissed as intellectually inferior to Judaism. Under the influence of Scholasticism, Jewish thinkers adopted the formal distinction between philosophy and theology as articulated by Thomas Aquinas.

During the second half of the fifteenth century Jewish philosophers differentiated between rationalist, empirical philosophy (*derekh ha-haqirah*; *derekh ha-hipus*) and traditional, received faith (*derekh ha-emunah ve-ha-qabbalah*), which parallels the distinction

between philosophy (or natural theology) and theology (or sacred doctrine) respectively. Philosophy and theology differed from each other in terms of origin, scope, and aim. Whereas philosophy consists of truths that natural human reason can demonstrate without divine assistance, theology contains true propositions that exceed the ken of natural human reason. Whereas philosophy proceeds from knowledge of the effect to knowledge of the cause, theology proceeds from knowledge of the cause to knowledge of the effects. Whereas philosophy encompasses knowledge extracted from sensible, created things, theology contains revealed knowledge about the supernatural realm of divine things. Whereas philosophy is prone to errors, mistakes, and uncertainty, theology is certain, reliable, and complete. Whereas philosophical wisdom is a cognitive activity of the intellect, theology involves the assent of the will through faith. Whereas philosophy alone falls short of securing personal immortality and can at best guarantee earthly happiness, the sacred doctrines of theology are salvific, securing transcendent happiness in the world to come.

The distinction between "the path of investigation" and "the path of faith" paralleled the distinction between the natural and supernatural orders of reality. According to Isaac Abravanel, Abraham Bibago, Abraham Shalom, and Isaac Arama, Israel (both collectively and individually) belongs simultaneously to the natural and supernatural orders. As created human beings, the affairs of Israel fall under the laws of nature, whose regularity and stability manifest God's wisdom and general, providential care for the created universe. On this level, all events can be known scientifically, especially by employing the science of astrology. Yet Israel also benefits from special, direct, and particular providence that transcends natural determinism and is not transparent to human reason. God's revelation at Sinai was a miraculous event, expressing God's free will and divine intervention in nature. As such the revelation from God was not predicated on perfection of the natural human intellect and therefore encompassed all of Israel, regardless of its degree of intellectual perfection. With the giving of the Torah, Israel was governed directly by the will of God. Israel's affairs therefore manifested the believers' faith in God and willingness to observe the Torah's commandments.

Within this schema Jewish philosophers viewed the specific doctrines of kabbalah as an integral part of Jewish sacred doctrine, or theology, even though their knowledge of kabbalah was quite limited.

The gradual acceptance of kabbalah as authoritative interpretation went hand in hand with the gradual veneration of the *Zohar* among Sephardic intellectuals and the portrayal of R. Shimon bar Yohai, the presumed author of the *Zohar*, as an example of the perfect human being. The antiquity of the *Zohar* was cited as evidence for the antiquity and authority of kabbalah, for example by Judah Abravanel, himself an Aristotelian thinker who was also fully immersed in Renaissance humanism.⁵⁴

The expulsion from Spain and the horrendous suffering it inflicted on Iberian Jews further contributed to the gradual acceptance of kabbalah as the authoritative interpretation of the revealed tradition. After the expulsion there was both growing opposition to philosophy and even a renewal of the debate about Maimonides, as well as the consolidation and systematization of five centuries of philosophical activity. Criticism of philosophy was voiced by Joseph Ya'abetz, one of the exiles, who found his way to Italy. Ya'abetz was schooled in Aristotelianism and continued to reflect on Judaism in the framework of Maimonidean rationalism. But Ya'abetz opposed a certain (possible) interpretation of Maimonides according to which philosophy alone is salvific and the Torah is but the socio-political context in which one could attain philosophical perfection. Instead, Ya'abetz highlighted the qualitative difference between philosophic, discursive knowledge and prophetic knowledge, and demanded the subordination of philosophy to the revealed tradition. So long as philosophy was properly employed to articulate the meaning of divine revealed propositions, it was permissible for Jews to engage in philosophy. This view was common even among Sephardic exiles, who expressly asserted the superiority of kabbalah over philosophy and who were creative kabbalists, such as Solomon Alkabetz and Moses Cordovero.

Whether or not the expulsion from Spain was the direct cause of the proliferation of kabbalah in the sixteenth century is still debated. Idel has argued that there was no causal connection between the expulsion and the rise of sixteenth-century messianism or the dissemination of kabbalah. Other factors, such as the impulse to preserve kabbalistic oral traditions and the encounter between the Sephardic kabbalists and kabbalists in Italy and in Greece, were no less important. However, it seems that expulsion itself did inspire the need for consolidation and systematization of kabbalistic traditions, giving

rise to systematic "summa kabbalistica," so to speak, by Meir ibn Gabbai and by Moses Cordovero. Although both presenters of kabbalah were steeped in philosophy, their consolidation of kabbalah actually elaborated the mythical dimensions of the received tradition. The very exposure of Sephardic kabbalists to other forms of kabbalah itself necessitated rethinking and reformulating kabbalah.

One feature of the postexpulsion period was the rise of the *Zohar* as a canonic, sacred text in certain Jewish communities.⁵⁵ An important impetus to the dissemination of kabbalah in the sixteenth century was the printing of the *Zohar* in Italy by two Christian publishing houses in Mantua and in Cremona (1558 and 1559). Although this event was accompanied by a heated public controversy about the propriety of publicizing secret, oral traditions, there was no doubt that the interest of Christian scholars in the *Zohar* and its publication, five years after the burning of the Talmud, added to its prestige. In some communities, especially in North Africa, the *Zohar* was also regarded as a holy book that had to be treated as a sacred object because it contains occult powers that can heal or bring other concrete benefits. And in Safed the study of the *Zohar* was the main activity of the kabbalistic fraternity that modeled itself after the kabbalistic fraternity depicted in the *Zohar*. Under the leadership of Isaac Luria, the kabbalists of Safed elaborated the mythical and anthropomorphic aspects of Zoharic theosophy and its concomitant sacramental understanding of Jewish rituals. In Safed, the *Zohar* was also regarded as an authoritative source in terms of Jewish law, and several rituals entered Jewish practice solely on the authority of the *Zohar* when Joseph Karo codified them into his code of Jewish law, the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Prepared Table*).⁵⁶

The acceptance of the *Zohar* as a canonic text influenced Jewish philosophy in the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth century. The Sephardic exiles recovered from their trauma by devoting their energies to consolidating their Judeo-Hispanic cultural legacy, including philosophy. The exiles and their descendants composed philosophical encyclopaedias and digests, continued to comment on Aristotle, and treated Maimonides with utmost respect. However, especially in Salonica, philosophic knowledge was viewed as the handmaiden of the hermeneutics of sacred texts. Creatively weaving philosophy with midrash and kabbalah, thinkers such as Meir Arama, Joseph Taitatzak, Meir Aderbi, Isaac Arroyo, Moses Almosnino, and Moses

Alsheikh elaborated their exegetical and homiletical activities in their pursuit of holiness.⁵⁷

The impact of kabbalah on philosophy is most evident in the conception of Torah. Philosophers identified the Torah with the essence of God, and accordingly viewed the revealed Torah as the manifestation of the transcendent, supernal, primordial Torah, which they then identified with the infinite wisdom of God. Under the influence of kabbalah, those who cultivated philosophy now asserted that the Torah comprised the name of God. Still loyal to an Aristotelian hierarchical cosmology, the philosophers located the supernal Torah above the realm of immaterial beings that are not governed by the laws of motion and temporal change. Identified with God's wisdom, the supernal Torah is the intelligible order of the universe, the paradigm that God consulted when he brought the universe into existence. By cleaving to the revealed Torah (through Torah study and the performance of the commandments), the religious devotee could attain a spiritual perfection, overcome the limits of human corporeality and particularity, and enjoy the spiritual reward of the world to come, a mystical union with God.

This view led to paradoxical results. On the one hand, the autonomy of philosophy was curtailed as the philosopher became primarily an interpreter of sacred texts, whose infinite meaning was never fully exhausted. On the other hand, philosophical vocabulary and reasoning became more widely known among the educated classes, and philosophical esotericism reached its end. Philosophy was now viewed as a useful method for the exposition of the exoteric meaning of the sacred tradition; the esoteric dimension was reserved to kabbalah. The fact that the very people who studied philosophy also recognized the limitations of philosophy and subordinated it to kabbalah went hand in hand with the gradual dissolution of Aristotelianism. With the rise of new observational data and new physical theories, the Neoplatonized Aristotelianism that characterized Jewish rationalism reached an end by the turn of the seventeenth century.

The interface between philosophy and kabbalah continued in the early seventeenth century, especially among former *conversos*. For Abraham Cohen Herrera, for example, the elaborate myths of Lurianic kabbalah were totally compatible with Renaissance Platonism, even though kabbalah was not reducible to Platonism.⁵⁸

Exposed to Lurianic kabbalah through the teachings of Israel Sarug, Herrera diminished the messianic orientation of Luria as he interprets the stark anthropomorphism of Lurianic kabbalah philosophically. By the mid-seventeenth century, however, Spinoza, the child of former *conversos*, dealt the most serious blow to the interface between philosophy and kabbalah, when he debunked the foundational Jewish belief that the Torah teaches scientific truths in the language of humans. Viewing the Torah only as a political-moral text, Spinoza regarded it as the product of prophetic imagination rather than as a revelation from God, thus undermining the entire medieval exegetical endeavor, shared by both philosophers and kabbalists. Spinoza paved the path for modern Jewish secularism, for which science is the exclusive domain of truth.

CONCLUSION

The interplay of philosophy and kabbalah characterized Jewish thought in the post-Maimonidean era. Although kabbalah emerged to curb Maimonideanism, rationalist philosophy and kabbalah had much in common. Both were theoretical inquiries about God, the origin and structure of the universe, and the place of humans in the order of things. Both wrestled with the same questions within the same conceptual framework of medieval Neoplatonized Aristotelianism. As metaphysicians, both groups of thinkers dealt with the paradoxes of singularity and multiplicity and approached them either ontologically and cosmologically or psychologically and epistemologically. Because both philosophers and kabbalists presupposed the existence of non-corporeal reality, they were deeply aware of the inherent limitations of the embodied human mind and maintained that humans require divine assistance in the form of revelation in order to know that which is beyond the ken of natural human reason. The disputed questions between philosophers and kabbalists, and within each camp, pertained to the boundary of human knowledge, the nature of revelatory experience, and the precise meaning of the received tradition.

As Jewish theologians who lived within the strictures of Halakhah, philosophers and kabbalists took for granted that Scripture was divinely revealed, and their primary intellectual task was hermeneutical – to penetrate the deep, hidden meaning of the

sacred text. Both philosophy and kabbalah were esoteric endeavors whose privileged knowledge was accessible only to the select few who were intellectually and spiritually suitable. The difference between them concerned the precise content of the esoteric meaning of the revealed tradition and the proper way of transmitting it. As esoteric and elitist programs, both philosophy and kabbalah were determined to protect their privileged knowledge from misinterpretation or misapplication. Hence they employed complex rhetorical devices to conceal the very secrets they set out to reveal. Finally, both programs regarded their privileged knowledge to be the exclusive path toward religious perfection, culminating in the bliss of immortality in the afterlife. Thus both philosophy and kabbalah contributed to the interiorization of Jewish religious life by shifting the focus of Jewish messianism from collective, political redemption to personal salvation of the individual soul.

NOTES

1. See G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. A. Arkush, ed. R. J. Z. Werblowsky (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 199–364.
2. On the esoteric doctrines of German Pietism and their impact on Provençal kabbalah, see E. Wolfson, *Through the Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 188–269.
3. On *Sefer ha-Bahir*, see Scholem, *Origins*, 35–198; E. Wolfson, “The Tree that is All: Jewish-Christian Roots of a Kabbalistic Symbol in *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” *Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993), 31–76.
4. On *Sefer Yetzira*'s conception of language, see M. Idel, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Tradition on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 9–26. On the possible Indian sources, see Y. Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetzira* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Schocken Books, 2000). Liebes proposes Northern Mesopotamia as the possible location for the composition of this text, which he dates to the first century BCE, while the Jerusalem Temple was still in existence. Even if such early dating is accepted for the composition of the text, the edited version of the text is no earlier than the eighth century.
5. See M. Idel, “Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. L. E. Goodman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 319–51; Scholem, *Origins*, 365–475.

6. See M. Idel, “‘We have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This,’” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in his Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 51–73.
7. See M. Verman, *The Books of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
8. See G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941); M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); H. Tirosh-Rothschild, “Continuity and Revision in the Study of Kabbalah,” *AJS Review* 16 (1991), 161–92.
9. See E. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia – Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000); E. Wolfson, “Letter Symbolism and Merkavah Imagery,” in *Alei Shefer: Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Dr. Alexander Safran*, ed. M. Hallamish (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990), 195–236. Wolfson has shown that Abulafia's linguistic mysticism was shared by the *Zohar*, and, conversely, that Abulafia did not reject the kabbalistic doctrine of *sefirot* but only a certain interpretation of it. By the same token, Abulafia's kabbalah is not devoid of ethnocentrism, as much as the *Zohar* manifests strong ecstatic and mystical impulses.
10. Y. Liebes, “How was the *Zohar* Written?,” in his *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. A. Schwartz, S. Nakache, and P. Peli (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 85–138.
11. See R. Jospe, “Early Philosophical Commentaries on the *Sefer Yezirah*: Some Comments,” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 149 (1990), 369–415; E. Wolfson, “The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo, with Special Emphasis on the Doctrine of *Sefirot* in *Sefer Hakhmoni*,” *Jewish History* 6 (1992), 281–316; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 135.
12. See M. Idel, “Between the Views of *Sefirot* as Essence and Instruments in the Renaissance Period” [Hebrew], *Italia* 3 (1982), 89–111.
13. See G. Scholem, “The Meaning of Torah in Jewish Mysticism,” in his *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 32–86.
14. The most detailed exposition of kabbalistic symbolism is I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, 3 vols., trans. D. Goldstein (London: Littman Library, 1989).
15. See D. Matt, “The Mystic and the Mizvot,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. A. Green (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 367–404.
16. See M. Idel, *R. Menahem Rencanati the Kabbalist* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Schocken Books, 1998), 175–231.

17. See M. Idel, "The Infinities of Torah," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. G. Hartman and S. Budik (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 141-57.
18. Isaac ibn Latif is an example of a thirteenth-century thinker who attempted to coordinate the Neoplatonic metaphysics of Gabirol with the doctrine of *sefirot* espoused by the kabbalists of Gerona. See S. O. Heller Wilensky, "Isaac ibn Latif: Philosopher or Kabbalist," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 185-223.
19. See Yaacov ben Sheshet, *Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhohim*, ed. G. Vajda and E. Gottlieb (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1968), 101.
20. Wolfson, "Letter Symbolism," 196-7 n. 5.
21. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, II: 447-546.
22. See Y. Liebes, "The Messiah of the Zohar," in his *Studies in the Zohar*, 1-84.
23. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 53
24. *Ibid.*, 102.
25. *Ibid.*, 116.
26. *Ibid.*, 139.
27. See M. Idel, "Abraham Abulafia and Unio Mystica," in his *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 1-31.
28. M. Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. M. Kallus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 15.
29. See M. Idel, "Hitbodedut as Concentration in Ecstatic Kabbalah," in *Jewish Spirituality*, 405-38.
30. See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 141; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 33-5.
31. For a full discussion of Abulafia's messianic activities, see M. Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 58-100.
32. See E. Wolfson, "God, the Demiurge and the Intellect: On the Usage of the Word Kol in Abraham ibn Ezra," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 149 (1990), 77-111.
33. See D. Schwartz, "Concerning the Philosophical Super-Commentaries on R. Abraham ibn Ezra's Commentaries" [Hebrew] 'Alei Sefer 18 (1995-96), 71-114; U. Simon, "Interpreting the Interpreter: Supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra's Commentaries," in *Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath*, ed. I. Twersky and J. Harris (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 86-128.

34. For a detailed exposition of Ibn Ezra's use of astrology, see S. Sela, *Astrology and Biblical Exegesis in Abraham ibn Ezra's Jewish Thought* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999). On the application of Ibn Ezra's astrological doctrines during the fourteenth century, see D. Schwartz, *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999).
35. This view is discussed in detail by H. Kreisel, "Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 75 (2) (1984), 99-133.
36. See Y. Langermann, "Maimonides' Repudiation of Astrology," *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1992), 123-58.
37. See D. Schwartz, "The Debate on Astral Magic in Provence in the Fourteenth Century" [Hebrew], *Zion* 58(2) (1993), 141-74.
38. See D. Schwartz, "Astrology and Astral Magic in *Megaleh Amoqut* by R. Solomon al-Constantini" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 15 (1993), 40-41.
39. See M. Idel, "The Beginnings of the Kabbalah in North Africa? The Forgotten Document of R. Yehuda ben Nissim ibn Malka" [Hebrew], *Pe'amim* 43 (1990), 8-12; C. Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 259-62.
40. See G. Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen-Age* (Paris and La Haye: Mouton, 1962), 115-297, 385-91; G. Scholem, "Joseph ibn Waqar's Arabic Work on Kabbalah and Philosophy," *Kiryat Sepher* 20 (1943), 153-62.
41. See A. Altmann, "Moses Narboni's 'Epistle on Shiur Qoma'," in Altmann (ed.), *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 180-209. This essay was incorporated into Altmann, "Moses Narboni's 'Epistle on Shiur Qoma': A Critical Edition of the Hebrew Text with an Introduction and an Annotated English Translation," in his *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Plainview, N.Y.: Libraries Press, 1975), 225-88. The citations are from the earlier publication.
42. See A. Ivry, "Moses of Narbonne 'Treatise on the Perfection of the Soul': A Methodological and Conceptual Analysis," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 57 (1966), 271-97; K. Bland (ed. and trans.), *The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect by Ibn Rushd with the Commentary of Moses Narboni* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1982), 1-19.
43. The relevant text was published by M. Hayoun, "Moïse de Narbonne: Sur les sefirot, les sphères, et les intellects séparés. Edition critique d'un passage de son commentaire sur le Hayy ibn Yaqzan," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 76 (1985), 97-147; Altmann, "Moses Narboni," 199-200.
44. See Schwartz, *Astral Magic*, 237-62.

45. On the translations by Flavius Mithridates, see C. Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 69–76 and *passim*.
46. See M. Idel, "Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah Between 1560–1660," in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. D. B. Ruderman (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 345–72; M. Idel "Encounters between Spanish and Italian Kabbalists in the Generation of the Expulsion," in *Crisis and Creativity in the Sephardic World 1391–1648*, ed. B. Gampel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 189–222.
47. See H. Tirosh-Rothschild, "Sefirot as the Essence of God in the Writings of R. David Messer Leon," *AJS Review* 7–8 (1982), 409–25.
48. See A. Lesley, "'The Song of Solomon's Ascents' by Yohanan Alemanno: Love and Human Perfection according to a Jewish Colleague of Giovanni Pico," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1976.
49. See M. Idel, "The Anthropology of Yohanan Alemanno: Sources and Influences," *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 7/1 (1990), 103. For a fuller treatment of Alemanno's kabbalah, see M. Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of Kabbalah in the Renaissance," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. B. Cooperman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 186–242.
50. See H. Tirosh-Samuelson, "Theology of Nature in Sixteenth-Century Italian Jewish Philosophy," *Science in Context* 10 (1997), 529–70.
51. See D. Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).
52. See W. Harvey, "Kabbalistic Elements in *Or Adonai* by R. Hasdai Crescas" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 2 (1) (1982–83), 75–109.
53. See M. Idel, "Inquiries in the Doctrine of *Sefer Ha-Meshiv*" [Hebrew], *Sefunot* 17 (1983), 185–266.
54. See M. Idel, "Kabbalah and Philosophy in R. Isaac and Judah Abravanel" [Hebrew], in *The Philosophy of Leone Ebreo: Four Lectures*, ed. M. Dorman and Z. Levy (Haifa: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad, 1985), 73–112.
55. On the rise of the *Zohar* to a canonic, authoritative, and holy text, see B. Huss, "*Sefer ha-Zohar* as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text: Changing Perspectives of the Book of Splendor between the Thirteenth and Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1998), 257–307.
56. On the *Zohar* as a source of Jewish normative rituals, see J. Katz, *Halakha and Kabbalah: Studies in the History of Jewish Religion, its*

- Various Faces and Social Relevance* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), 52–69, 102–24.
57. For a fuller treatment of these thinkers, see H. Tirosh-Rothschild, "Jewish Philosophy on the Eve of Modernity," in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. D. H. Frank and O. Leaman (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 529–49.
 58. A. Altmann, "Lurianic Kabbalah in a Platonic Key: Abraham Cohen Herrera's *Puerta del Cielo*," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 53 (1982), 326.