

# Medieval Jewish Mysticism

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Jewish life in the Middle Ages was at once tumultuous and creative. While it might be tempting to imagine medieval Jews as an isolated minority functioning in an autonomous sphere that interacted with non-Jewish culture only through oppression or violence, such a picture fails to represent the wide range of medieval Jewish experience. While political insecurity was a constant feature of medieval Jewish life, there were many periods of relative security during which Jews engaged in a shared culture and fruitful interchange with non-Jews. In addition to advances in the study of Jewish law and biblical exegesis, medieval Jews also developed new intellectual and literary pursuits such as philosophy, poetry, and scientific writing. One of the most influential kinds of Jewish literature to emerge from the Middle Ages is Kabbalah, often referred to as Jewish mysticism. While the category of mysticism, connoting a type of discourse regarding an experience of the divine, is often associated with Kabbalah, “esotericism” or the notion of a secret tradition stemming from revelation, is also essential for understanding kabbalistic texts. The term “Kabbalah” literally means “tradition” and refers to knowledge that is received through a mode of transmission, be it oral or written, that extends over time. Starting in the late twelfth century in southern France we begin to find texts that lay claim to such a tradition of esoteric knowledge or “Kabbalah” regarding the mysteries of the inner life of God, the process of creation, the nature of the human soul, the secret meaning of the Hebrew Bible, the cultivation of mystical experience with God, and the true inner purpose and meaning of the performance of Jewish law and ritual.

## Main Ideas

Medieval Kabbalah is a complex phenomenon, encompassing a wide range of ideas and texts from different historical periods and geographical locations. While a discussion of the general themes and central symbols and concepts found in kabbalistic texts from the Middle Ages serves as a useful point of departure for further study, it is important to bear in mind that kabbalists are far from uniform, and their books bear witness to a multifaceted domain of Jewish literature. Nonetheless, a number of important ideas stand out as significant for understanding medieval kabbalistic texts. Kabbalists, for example, tend to be particularly fascinated with the mysteries of the inner life of the divine. Scholars typically refer to religious discourse reflecting upon the secret inner life of God as “theosophy.” Without shying away from the kinds of contradictions that would offend the rational sensibilities of philosophers, many kabbalists embrace the paradoxical notion of a dynamic and multifaceted Godhead or divine realm in which the unity of God encompasses ten emanations referred to as the ten “sefirot.” The symbolic system of the ten sefirot is the most prominent theosophic system found in medieval kabbalistic texts – so much so that some scholars have tended to regard the discussion of the sefirot as the hallmark of medieval Kabbalah. These entities are understood as ten facets of the divine self that emerge from the most recondite aspect of God, referred to by kabbalists as *ein sof* – the “endless” or infinite divine essence. The ten sefirot reflect a dynamic transcendent realm beyond the physical plane that serves as the connection between the transcendence of *ein sof* and the physical cosmos. The sefirot have primary names, with many secondary names also associated with them. The most common primary names of the ten sefirot, starting from the top of the structure closest to *ein sof*, are: *keter* (crown), *hokhma* (wisdom), *bina* (understanding), *hesed* (righteousness), *din* (judgment), *tifferet* (beauty), *netzach* (eternity), *hod* (glory), *yesod* (foundation), *malkhut* (kingdom). The final *sefirah* is also commonly referred to as *shekhinah* or the “divine presence.”

The ten sefirot are regarded in medieval kabbalistic texts as reflections of the inner realm of the divine, which is also considered to be one with the name of God, the tetragrammaton (YHWH), spelled with the letters *yod*, *he*, *vav*, and *he* in Hebrew. The name of God is more than an indicative sign that points to something beyond itself. In kabbalistic thinking, the divine name embodies the divine self and serves as a paradoxical manifestation of God. Medieval kabbalists often employ various versions of the phrase, “He is his name, and his name is he,” in discussions of the relationship between God and his name. The sefirot, God, and the divine name are understood to be one entity, leading to an understanding of the words of the Torah as a text woven of many different divine names or cognomina, with inner and outer aspects that hint at the mysterious connections between God and the world. Rabbi Todros ben Joseph Abulafia (1220–1298), a kabbalist from Castile, articulates this idea in the following manner: “See and understand that he is his name and his name

is he . . . and the name of the Holy One, blessed be he, is the twenty two letters of the written Torah.”<sup>1</sup> Or, as Joseph Gikatilla, also a kabbalist from late thirteenth-century Castile, puts it:

Know, dear one of my soul, that due to the great concealment of the Lord, may he be blessed, and his exaltedness beyond all thought, there is no manner by which to gain knowledge of the pathway by which his powers flow into all created beings, due to the depth of the wonders of his truth and the concealment of his great name. He therefore emanated from the truth of his name other cognomina which are like entryways by which humans may grasp the working of the greatness and power of our Creator, may he be blessed. Those cognomina cleave to his name like a shell cleaves to a nut – just as the shell is exposed on the outside, while the nut remains concealed within, so too the Name of God is concealed and hidden within all of the cognomina, while the cognomina surround it and are visible.<sup>2</sup>

God’s proper name YHWH, which encompasses the mysteries of the ten sefirot, is related to other names or “cognomina,” which in turn serve as a kind of shell that encases the essential name of God, and also serve as indicators of the mysterious connections of divine power to the world. This idea serves as the basis for an approach to the Torah as a text woven of divine names, as Gikatilla argues elsewhere, “the entire Torah [is] woven from the cognomina, and the cognomina from the names, and all the holy names depend on the Name YHWH and all are united within it. The entire Torah is woven from the Name YHWH and therefore the Torah of YHWH is called perfect (Psalm 19:8).”<sup>3</sup> For many kabbalists, this leads to a tendency to read the Torah “theosophically,” that is, as a text filled with allusions to divine names and the realm of the ten sefirot. Many influential kabbalistic texts, most notably the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (Book of Splendor), are written as commentaries on the Torah, spinning out voluminous kabbalistic mysteries from the text based on the assumption that the Torah conceals within it the mysteries of the Godhead, and that the Kabbalah contains the keys to unlock that hidden level of meaning.

Another important feature of medieval Kabbalah is “theurgy,” which refers to the notion that human actions can influence the divine realm. The kabbalistic theosophy of the ten sefirot is not a static picture of the inner reaches of God, but rather a dynamic system of interacting divine attributes. The sefirot are assigned various names, as well as gender designations. The sefirot are thus multifaceted entities that relate to one another in a manner analogous to the parts of a living organism. According to many kabbalists, when Jews perform the commandments of Jewish law, they cause the sefirot to unite with one another, connecting the secret channels between them and thereby facilitating the drawing down of divine “light,” or “blessing,” into the world. Conversely, when Jews transgress the mandates of Jewish law, they cause disunity within the Godhead and interrupt the flow of divine energy into the world, strengthening the forces of evil and impurity. According to

this kabbalistic worldview, Judaism is envisioned as the essential mechanism for maintaining the harmony and unity of the cosmos, thereby bringing divine light and energy, often referred to as *shefa* or “overflow,” into the world and thus maintaining the being of the cosmos itself. Through the performance of Jewish religious praxis, as the kabbalists imagine it, the very being of the cosmos itself is sustained. As Moses de Leon puts it, “when a man endeavors below to arrange his worship and perform the commandments, [he] sustains the worlds and stands them in their order.”<sup>4</sup>

As was mentioned above, esotericism, or secrecy, is an important category for understanding medieval Kabbalah. The knowledge of the ten sefirot, their order, and their unique names is regarded by the kabbalists as a secret matter normally inaccessible to human reason. As Nahmanides, a towering rabbinic figure in the mid-thirteenth century and an advocate of Kabbalah, put it in his famous commentary on the Torah, the secrets of the Kabbalah are passed on “from the mouth of a wise kabbalist to the ear of an understanding kabbalist.”<sup>5</sup> Most kabbalists discuss both oral and written sources for their kabbalistic traditions. The main point is that such knowledge is not acquired through rational speculation or logical reasoning. Kabbalah, as most kabbalists understand it, is based on heavenly revelation, and as such is accessible exclusively to those who are privy to the kabbalistic chain of transmission. Medieval kabbalists describe the origins of kabbalistic ideas and symbolism in a variety of different ways, in some cases ascribing their doctrines to revelations from the prophet Elijah, in others to the revelation on Mount Sinai, while still others ascribe their traditions to teachings revealed by angels to biblical figures. David ben Yehudah he-Hasid describes the chain of kabbalistic transmission in the following way:

The teachers of the Patriarchs were knowledgeable angels sent from the Holy King, may his name be exalted, in order to instruct and educate them in the paths of the primordial wisdom. This is what the masters of the Kabbalah, may their memories be blessed, say: the teacher of Adam was *Razi’el*, the teacher of Shem was *Yofi’el*, the teacher of Abraham was *Tzadki’el*, the teacher of Isaac was *Rapha’el*, the teacher of Jacob was *Peli’el*, the teacher of Joseph was *Gavri’el*, the teacher of Moses was *Metatron*, the teacher of Elijah was *Malti’el*. Each one of these angels would transmit Kabbalah to his student in a book or orally in order to teach him and make known to him future events.<sup>6</sup>

Judaism, according to the kabbalists, contains at its core an ancient secret doctrine consisting of the theosophic system of the Kabbalah. Those who, like the kabbalists, have access to such secret theosophic knowledge are envisioned according to this model as uniquely empowered to impact the divine and cosmic realms through the practice of Judaism.

In addition to the interest in theosophy and theurgy, which serve to reformulate traditional Jewish observance as a powerful mechanism for maintaining the unity of

the Godhead and the fabric of the being of the cosmos, some kabbalists place particular attention on the cultivation of mystical techniques for attaining unusual states of consciousness in order to attain prophetic insight, as well as ecstatic self-annihilation in God. Abraham Abulafia was famous, and in some cases controversial, for his public advocacy of this kind of kabbalistic activity starting in the late thirteenth century. He describes many kinds of techniques for attaining ecstasy and prophetic insight, often involving the recitation of divine names, the permutation of Hebrew letters, and regulated breathing. Abulafia describes the cultivation of experience through the manipulation of Hebrew letters in the following manner:

And begin to combine small letters with great ones, to reverse them and to permute them rapidly, until your heart shall be warmed through their combinations and rejoice in their movements and in what you bring about through their permutations; and when you feel thusly that your heart is already greatly heated through the combinations . . . then you are ready to receive the emanated influx.<sup>7</sup>

Abulafia and his students developed a complex discourse emphasizing such practices, often of a linguistic nature, designed to enable a unitive experience with God. Medieval Kabbalah can thus be appreciated as a complex phenomenon encompassing a wide range of ideas and ways of engaging with the mysteries of the divine realm.

## Brief Historical Outline<sup>8</sup>

### Ancient sources

Kabbalists in the Middle Ages drew their inspiration and ideas from a rich range of sources. Images from the Hebrew Bible depicting prophetic inspiration or heavenly revelation, such as the revelation at Mount Sinai and Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot, receive particular attention. Kabbalists also draw upon many passages in rabbinic literature that address esoteric themes. For example, medieval kabbalists often understand their doctrine as the fuller articulation of the secret matters mentioned in the Mishnah, "forbidden sexual relations may not be expounded before three [or more] people, nor the account of creation [*ma'aseh bereishit*] before two [or more], nor the account of the Chariot [*ma'aseh merkavah*] before one, unless he is a sage who understands through his own knowledge."<sup>9</sup> Such comments serve to ground kabbalistic claims to an ancient, esoteric tradition within Judaism. The library of the medieval kabbalists also entailed many lesser known sources from antiquity, such as a group of Jewish mystical texts commonly referred to as the *Heikhalot* literature from the first centuries of the Common Era. These texts

discuss the means of entering the divine “palaces” (*heikhalot*) or chambers that surround the divine throne or chariot (*merkavah*). These visions are reported in the names of famous personalities from the rabbinic schools, such as Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. Another important text that informs medieval Kabbalah is *Sefer Yetsirah* (The Book of Creation), composed some time between the second and seventh centuries CE. This text is a short treatise of fewer than two thousand words that discusses the creation of the universe by means of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the ten “ineffable sefirot.” It is unclear what the ten sefirot exactly are in this context, but they seem to be entities in the divine realm that are incomprehensible by the human mind, yet nonetheless represent the mysterious nature of God and serve as his tools in the creative process. The focus on the symbolism of the ten sefirot and the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in *Sefer Yetsirah* had a major impact on medieval Kabbalah.

### Hasidei Ashkenaz

A significant development in the promulgation of mystical and esoteric ideas in the Jewish communities of western Christendom was the emergence of a group in the Rhineland known as the Hasidei Ashkenaz (German Pietists). This movement, which was active from roughly 1250 to 1350, had a profound impact on the kabbalistic circles in Spain in the latter part of the thirteenth century. Its three main figures came from the Kalonymide family, starting with Samuel the Hasid (mid-twelfth century), the son of Rabbi Kalonymus of Speyer; Judah the Hasid of Worms (d. 1217); and Eleazar ben Yehudah of Worms, who died between 1223 and 1232. While little of the literary activity of Samuel the Hasid remains, many associate the *Sefer Hasidim* (Book of the Pious) with the teachings of Judah the Hasid. Eleazar of Worms composed numerous works – some of considerable length – that have survived and serve as the most important evidence of this group’s mystical, theological, and theosophical speculations.

The Hasidei Ashkenaz placed particular emphasis on ascetic renunciation and ethical discipline. Fasts, abstinence, physical pain and discomfort, and even martyrdom, were all regarded as vehicles to enable mystical illumination, especially in the form of visualizing the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence). According to the Hasidei Ashkenaz, God’s essence is unknowable, yet he fills all reality and suffuses all being. By practicing ascetic renunciation and contemplating the traditional teachings of the divine mysteries regarding creation, revelation, and the meaning of the Torah, members of this school believed that they could attain the pure love of God in an encounter that was often described in ways that indicate a strong influence from the *Heikhalot* and *Merkavah* literature, as well as the *Sefer Yetsirah*. Many scholars believe that the tribulations of the Crusades and the ascetic practices of the surrounding Christian monastic communities had an impact on the particular form of religious and mystical piety of the Hasidei Ashkenaz.

### Kabbalah in Provence and the *Sefer ha-Bahir*

In the 1180s a text emerged in the Provence region of southern France that has come to serve as a defining moment in the history of Jewish mysticism and esotericism. This text, known as the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (The Book of Brightness), is written in the style of an ancient rabbinic midrash. The book has a complex origin and contains at least some elements that are believed to reflect ancient Near Eastern Jewish traditions. Determining exactly what proportion of the *Sefer ha-Bahir* derives from ancient tradition and what was the innovation of authors living in twelfth-century Europe remains an open question in the scholarship. The most significant feature of the *Sefer ha-Bahir* is its focus on the ten sefirot as the ten luminous emanations of God that symbolically reveal the realm of inner divine life. By representing the secret inner life of God as an erotically charged symbolic system of ten gendered divine emanations, it took a decisive step that permanently changed the history of Jewish mysticism.

In the late twelfth century we also find traditions that associate esoteric speculation with a number of important rabbis in southern France. Abraham ben Isaac of Narbonne (1110–1179), Abraham ben David of Posquières (1125–1198), also known as Rabad, and Jacob Nazir of Lunel (d. late twelfth century) are known to have endorsed kabbalistic and mystical teachings, though little more than a few scattered hints to that effect have been preserved in their own writings. Isaac the Blind (d. c. 1235), son of Abraham ben David, lived in Narbonne and was the first major rabbi in Europe to specialize in Kabbalah. Most of his teachings were disseminated orally to his students, and only one text, a commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah*, is regarded as his own composition. This commentary is a notoriously difficult text that discusses the sefirot mentioned in *Sefer Yetsirah* in a theosophical manner. One important contribution found in Isaac the Blind's commentary is the development of the idea that the sefirot emanate from an absolutely unknowable aspect of God known as *ein sof*, or "without end."

### Kabbalah in Girona

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Kabbalah spread to Spain when the students of Isaac the Blind moved to Girona, in the region of Catalonia. Here for the first time books were composed on Kabbalah that were designed to bring these ideas to a wider audience. Some of the most important individuals from this period are Judah ibn Yakar (Nahmanides' teacher), Ezra ben Shlomo (d. 1238 or 1245), Azriel of Girona (early thirteenth century), Moses ben Nahman, also known as Nahmanides (1194–1270), Abraham ben Isaac Gerundi (mid-thirteenth century), Asher ben David (first half of the thirteenth century), and Jacob ben Sheshet (mid-thirteenth century). In an intriguing letter sent to his students in Girona, Isaac the

Blind urges them to stop composing books on Kabbalah, for fear that these texts could “fall into the hands of fools or scoffers.”<sup>10</sup> Despite Rabbi Isaac’s criticism of the literary activities of some of the Girona kabbalists, treatises on Kabbalah continued to circulate and soon spread to other communities in Spain. Moreover, the influence of a prominent rabbi such as Nahmanides openly endorsing Kabbalah (he included numerous kabbalistic allusions in his popular commentary on the Torah) was undoubtedly essential for the legitimization of Kabbalah in the Spanish Jewish communities of Catalonia, Aragon, and Castile.

### Kabbalah in Castile

In the middle of the thirteenth century, Kabbalah spread to Jewish communities living in the cities and towns of Castile. Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen (mid-thirteenth century) and Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen (mid-thirteenth century) became known for their teaching regarding a demonic realm within God from which evil originates. This evil is composed of a set of “sefirot of impurity” that parallel the pure sefirot of God. Their pupils, Moses of Burgos (d. c. 1300), as well as Todros Abulafia, were significant rabbinic and political leaders of the Castilian Jewish community who wrote important works of Kabbalah. Moses of Burgos was the teacher of Isaac ibn Sahula (b. 1244), author of the famous poetic fable *Meshal ha-Kadmoni* (1281), as well as a kabbalistic commentary on the Song of Songs. Also active in Castile at this time was Isaac ibn Latif (c. 1210–1280), whose writings strike a very delicate balance between kabbalistic symbolism and philosophical speculation.

From the 1270s through the 1290s a number of important and lengthy kabbalistic books were written by Joseph Gikatilla (1248–1325) and Moses de Leon (1240–1305). These two figures were among the most prolific of the medieval kabbalists, and many of their compositions, such as Gikatilla’s *Sha’are Orah* (Gates of Light), went on to become seminal works in the history of Kabbalah. This period of remarkable kabbalistic literary productivity took place during the controversy over the study of Aristotelian philosophy, especially as it took shape in the philosophical works of Moses Maimonides, and the pronounced increase in Christian anti-Jewish proselytizing in Western Europe. Both of these may have been a factor in the development of Kabbalah during this decisive moment in its history.

### Abraham Abulafia

Abraham Abulafia, mentioned above, was born in Spain in 1240 and died some time after 1292. He propounded a kind of Kabbalah that, in addition to many of the typical theosophical motifs, focused on meditative techniques and recitation of divine names, letter permutation, numerical symbolism of Hebrew letters (*gematria*), and acrostics, designed to bring one to a state of ecstatic union with



God and to attain prophetic illumination. The goal of this mystical and prophetic experience was to untie the “knots” binding the soul to the body and the world. According to his own testimony, Abulafia wrote 26 books of prophecy based on his mystical experiences. Abulafia traveled widely and may have had messianic pretensions. He attempted to have an audience with Pope Nicholas III in 1280, possibly in order to declare himself the messiah. In the 1280s Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret of Barcelona (c. 1235–1310) led an attack against him and had Abulafia and his works banned because of his claims that his writings were on a par with those of the biblical prophets. Abulafia was a prolific writer who, in addition to his prophetic works – of which only one, *Sefer ha-Ot*, has survived – wrote many books on topics such as Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*, commentaries on *Sefer Yetsirah*, and descriptions of meditative techniques.

### The Zohar

During the late 1200s a kabbalistic commentary on the Torah that would go on to have a monumental and transformative impact on Judaism and the West began to circulate in Castile. The commentary is comprised of many texts composed over a period of at least a decade, written in Aramaic in the name of important rabbis from the time of the Mishnah, in the second century CE. The most prominent personality mentioned in this collection of Kabbalistic writings is Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, this collection of texts came to be known by a number of names, but the one that stood the test of time was *Sefer ha-Zohar* (The Book of Splendor).

A careful reading of the text of the Zoharic literature – which, in its printed form, is almost two thousand pages in length – reveals a pronounced influence of *Heikhalot* and *Merkavah* imagery, the writings of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, the kabbalists of Provence, Girona, and Castile, as well as some important medieval Jewish thinkers and philosophers such as Judah Ha-Levi and Moses Maimonides. The text also contains a number of foreign words of Spanish origin. This has led scholars to conclude that most if not all of the Zohar was composed in Castile toward the end of the thirteenth century. It is only in the later 1290s and early 1300s that we find citations from the Zoharic corpus with any consistency. The earliest citation is in Isaac ibn Sahula’s *Meshal ha-Kadmoni* and is taken from a part of the Zohar called the *Midrash ha-Ne’elam*.

The question of the origin and authorship of the Zohar has been the subject of scholarly debate. Gershom Scholem argued that the main body of the Zohar was written by Moses de Leon.<sup>11</sup> This position has been revised by Yehuda Liebes, who argued that the Zohar is in fact the product of a group of Spanish kabbalists from the late thirteenth century, of which Moses de Leon was a prominent member but which also likely included Joseph Gikatilla, Todros Abulafia, Isaac ibn Sahula, Joseph of Hamadan, David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, Yoseph Shalom Ashkenazi, and Bahya ben Asher.<sup>12</sup>

The Zohar represents in many ways the culmination of a century of tremendous kabbalistic creativity that began in Provence in the late twelfth century and ended in Castile in the early fourteenth century. The long and rambling poetic discourses found in Zoharic texts engage with everything from the emergence of the ten sefirot from the inner reaches of God and *ein sof* to the mysteries of creation, the process of revelation, the mystical meaning of the *mitzvot* (commandments) and meditations on the gendered and highly erotic interactions of the sefirot expressed in particular as the desire of the *Shekhinah*, the tenth and lowest of the ten sefirot, to return to her male counterpart and be reassimilated into God, in keeping with trends in Kabbalah from earlier in the thirteenth century. The Zohar argues that it is by means of the actions of Jews in the physical world – especially though the performance of commandments and the study of Torah – that the sefirot can be unified and the upper and lower realms perfected. These ideas are delivered in a highly cryptic style that presumes familiarity with many of the main principles of Kabbalah as well as biblical and rabbinic literature. The Zohar encodes its kabbalistic message in a complex set of symbols that are in turn understood to be only the uncovering of mysteries contained within the words and even the letters of the Torah.

#### Fourteenth to sixteenth centuries: from the Spanish expulsion to the Safed community

By the fourteenth century, Kabbalah had begun to spread throughout Western Europe, north Africa, and the Middle East. Treatises such as the anonymous *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, along with the commentary on the Torah by Bahya ben Asher and the *drashot* (sermons) of Joshua ibn Shu'aib, served to spread Kabbalah to wider audiences. Shem Tov ben Abraham ibn Gaon of Soria (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) and Elhanan ben Abraham ibn Eskira (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) became important kabbalists in Palestine, along with Isaac ben Samuel of Acre (late thirteenth–mid-fourteenth century),<sup>13</sup> whose *Me'irat Einaim* became a seminal exposition of the kabbalistic meaning behind the hints and allusions to secret teachings in the works of Nahmanides. Kabbalah began to spread to Italy in the early fourteenth century through the works of Menahem Recanati, who wrote a popular kabbalistic commentary on the Torah and a book on the mystical meaning of the commandments. Menahem Ziyioni of Cologne and Avigdor Kara became important kabbalistic authorities in Germany, while Isaiah ben Joseph of Tabriz spread Kabbalah to Persia and Nathan ben Moses Kilkis wrote his *Even Sappir* in Constantinople. Two important works written some time in the second half of the fourteenth century, *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*, a commentary on the first section of the Torah, and *Sefer ha-Kanah*, concerning the kabbalistic meaning of the commandments, argue that both the philosophical and literalist interpretations of Judaism are misguided and that only according to the Kabbalah can Jewish law and tradition be

properly understood. A similar sentiment is expressed in fifteenth-century Castile in the writings of Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov, who attacked the philosophical teachings of Maimonides and blamed them for the growing trend of Jewish conversion to Christianity.

Kabbalistic literary activity began to decline in Spain during the fifteenth century leading up to the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. Though there were important kabbalists such as Joseph Alcastiel, Judah Hayat, Joshua ben Samuel ibn Nehmias, and Shalom ben Saadiah ibn Saytun still living in Spain during the mid to late fifteenth century, many began to migrate even before the expulsion.

The exile of the Spanish Jewish community facilitated the spread of Kabbalah to many centers around the Mediterranean. In Italy there were active schools of kabbalists in the late fifteenth century, including Reuben Zarfati, Jonathan Alemanno, and Judah Messer Leon, who undoubtedly had an impact on the development of Christian Kabbalah by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. In north Africa during the late fifteenth and early to mid-sixteenth centuries, Abraham Sabba, Joseph Alashkar, Mordecai Buzaglo, and Shimon ibn Lavi were active teachers and writers.

With the rise of Isaac Luria and the Safed school of Kabbalah in the mid-sixteenth century, the era of medieval Kabbalah is brought to an end. However, it was an era that bore witness to the fundamental reconceptualization of Judaism in the minds of many Jews. Rabbinic Judaism tended to focus on law and ritual obligation, regarding the function of the law as the fulfillment of divine will on the part of Jews as stipulated in the covenantal relationship. While medieval Kabbalah has many important precursors in the rabbinic literature, its focus and way of conceiving of the place of Jews in the world departs in significant ways from how non-kabbalistic Jews in the Middle Ages tended to understand the rabbinic tradition. For Kabbalists, the essence of Judaism is its secret traditions and teachings regarding the mysteries of God in their relation to the Torah and commandments. Judaism becomes, in the minds of the kabbalists, a form of theurgic praxis that maintains the unity of the divine and the continued sustenance of the cosmos. To practice Judaism, according to the kabbalists, is more than the fulfillment of a covenantal obligation with God – it is a way to participate in the mysteries of the inner divine life, and to maintain connection of the universe to God. By imagining Judaism in this way, medieval kabbalists constructed a conception of Jewishness that led to a paradigm shift in the way that many Jews understood their religion, starting in the Middle Ages, and continuing into the present.

## Notes

- 1 Todoros Abulafia, *Otzar ha-Kavod ha-Shalem*, as cited in Alexander Altmann, *The Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot* attributed to Isaac ibn Farhi and its author. *Kiryat Sefer*, 40 (1964–1965), p. 267 (Hebrew).

- 2 R. Joseph Gikatilla's *Commentary to Ezekiel's Chariot*, ed. Asi Farber-Ginat (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1998), p. 45 (Hebrew).
- 3 *Sha'arei Orah*, ed. Joseph ben Shlomo, 2 vols (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1981), vol. 1, p. 48.
- 4 Moses de Leon, *The Book of the Pomegranate*, ed. Elliot Wolfson (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 111.
- 5 *Peirush al ha-torah le-rabeinu moshe ben nahman*, ed. Charles Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1984), p. 7.
- 6 David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, in his commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*, 21.
- 7 *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, MS Oxford 1582, fol. 52a, cited in Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 39.
- 8 Portions of this historical survey have been adapted from Hartley Lachter "Reading mysteries: the origins of scholarship on Jewish mysticism," which appeared in *Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah: New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 2011). For more comprehensive historical surveys of Kabbalah, to which the following is indebted, see Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978), pp. 8–86; *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1954); "The historical development of Jewish mysticism," in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays*, ed. Avraham Shapira, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), pp. 121–154.
- 9 Mishnah Ḥagigah 2:1.
- 10 Cited in Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, trans. Allan Arkush (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 394.
- 11 See, for example, Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), p. 159.
- 12 See Yehuda Liebes, "How the Zohar was written," in *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. A. Schwartz, S. Nakache, and P. Peli (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 85–138. For more on the complexity of the development of Zoharic literature, see Ronit Meroz, "Zoharic narratives and their adaptations," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin*, 3 (2000), pp. 3–63. Daniel Abrams has recently argued that the history of the texts of Zoharic literature is far too complex, both in terms of its redaction and the process of its composition, for this collection to be regarded as a "book." See *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2011).
- 13 See Eitan Fishbane, *As Light before Dawn: The Inner World of a Medieval Kabbalist* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

### Further reading

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