Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History

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CHAPTER 6

THE EARLY KABBALAH

I

THE HISTORIANS OF Jewish thought who preceded Gershom Scholem were perplexed by finding a way to reconcile the appearance of the first schools of the kabbalah in the late twelfth century with the fact that the period was the one in which Jewish philosophy, and especially Jewish rationalistic philosophy, reached its peak? How can a historian accept the historical fact that the first Jewish scholars who dealt in kabbalistic, mythological symbolism, were contemporaries of Maimonides, the greatest Jewish philosopher of all time, and wrote the first kabbalistic treatises at the same time that Moses ben Maimon was writing his Guide to the Perplexed? How could two such extremes exist in the same cultural and historical circumstances?

Heinrich Graetz was especially concerned, for he viewed the kabbalah as inherently un-Jewish and polytheistic, the opposite of everything he regarded as meaningful and important in Jewish culture. The kabbalah represented everything that Judaism should not be, while Maimonidean philosophy

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was the culmination of the pure Jewish rationalistic monotheism, when the spirit of Judaism achieved at last its utmost purity. Naturally enough, Graetz and other Jewish rationalists in the nineteenth century had to explain the appearance of the kabbalah; they claimed it was the reemergence of ancient paganism and a reactionary response to the great achievements of Jewish philosophy. Under these circumstances, a serious, historically impartial investigation of the background and historical circumstances of the early circles of kabbalists in Europe was impossible.

Others, such as David Neumark in this century, believed that an element of irrationalism, mysticism, and mythology had always been present within Judaism, and that it emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in response to the atmosphere created by Jewish rationalism. But both he and Graetz could not view the kabbalah as an entity by itself. They believed that the appearance of the kabbalah could not be but a response to the greater, more important, and religiously perfect phenomenon of rationalistic philosophy.

Gershom Scholem did not reject the work of earlier historians completely, even though he rejected their attitude toward the kabbalah without reservation. He believed that there was in the early kabbalah an element of response and reaction to Jewish philosophy; there was in the kabbalah an element of reemergence of ancient mythological symbolism which used and transformed philosophical terminology into mystical symbols, as Neumark had explained.

Scholem found, in the various manuscripts that preserved the ancient traditions of the early kabbalists, that a mystical tradition developed in the twelfth century in the great centers
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of Jewish scholarship in southern France, in Languedoc. A story that the prophet Elijah had appeared and revealed great secrets to the heads of the academies was repeated so often that it could not be considered a legend and nothing else. The kabbalists preserved some kabbalistic ideas and quotations of these early mystics, quotes that philological analysis proved could have been uttered by the early rabbis of Provence. The important point was that these traditions did not speak about a messenger from afar (like the tale of Aaron of Baghdad found in Italy and Germany), nor about the revelation of an ancient book (like the Bahir), but about the revelation of the Holy Spirit and the prophet Elijah; that is, no foreign element seems to have been involved. The new ideas originated within these academies, by the rabbis who dealt mainly in halachah in the most traditional manner, and who served as leaders to the communities around them.

The first clear kabbalistic traditions reach us from Rabbi Abraham ben David, known by the acronym the Ravad, who was the greatest Talmudic authority in his time, the second half of the twelfth century, in southern France. The quotations that later kabbalists preserved from the Ravad deal with problems like the creation, the intentions in prayers, and other subjects, using kabbalistic symbolism in an elementary form, probably not yet systematized. The Ravad is especially known for his critique of Maimonides' code of law, the Mishneh Torah, and his opposing remarks are traditionally printed beside the Maimonidean text. Most of these remarks deal with purely halachic matters, but a few of them express ideological differences. The most important among them is the one opposing Maimonides' declaration that belief in a God who has
anthropomorphic characteristics is heresy. The Ravad wrote in response to Maimonides: "some great people, greater than you, believed in this fashion." (He was careful not to include himself among them.) This statement is not motivated necessarily by kabbalistic mythology; it could be just an acceptance of the fact that literal understanding of biblical and Talmudic anthropomorphism was widespread.

The earliest work of kabbalah whose author is known to us is the commentary on Sefer Yezirah by Rabbi Isaac Sagi Nahor ("the Blind"), who was the son of the Ravad and was accepted as the leader of the early kabbalists. He was also called "the Pious." His commentary on Sefer Yezirah is a mature, complicated, and profound work of kabbalah, which includes most of the basic kabbalistic symbolism concerning the process of creation. According to Rabbi Isaac and all other kabbalists, creation is first and foremost the process of the emanation of the ten divine powers or attributes, the ten sefirot. The names and symbols which describe the sefirot in this work are those which became most current in later kabbalah—unlike those of the book Bahir, which are, to some extent, unique to that early work.

Rabbi Isaac became the leader and the teacher of the next generation of kabbalists in Provence and, especially, in the small town of Gerona in Catalonia, not far from Barcelona. It seems that the kabbalists in northern Spain, which was a Christian country, saw themselves as the disciples of Rabbi Isaac, corresponded with him, listened to his advice, and followed his directions. Parts of this correspondence were discovered and published by Scholem, who analyzed them in great detail, for this is one of the very few sources for the
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history of the first stage of the development of the kabbalah. In Provence first, and then Gerona, the most important ideas of the kabbalah were formulated, its systems of symbols received shape, and its struggle to serve the religious needs of the Jewish people in the Middle Ages began. From these two centers came the messages that the kabbalah had for the Jewish intellectuals of that time, and for the whole people in centuries to come.

II

The early kabbalists in Provence and in northern Spain developed their mystical traditions in an environment in which Jewish philosophy reigned supreme. The intellectual language of Aristotelian philosophy and its terminology were commonly used, and Platonic and neo-Platonic ideas were current among Jewish thinkers. While the compilers of the book *Bahir* seem to have been almost completely free of such influences, the mystics in the kabbalistic schools of Europe could not avoid, and probably did not wish, to cut themselves away from their intellectual environment.

Since the first years of the thirteenth century the works of Maimonides aroused controversy within the Jewish world, especially in Provence. Criticism first arose over the attitude of Maimonides toward messianic redemption and, especially, the belief in the resurrection. The controversy spread quickly, especially after the Hebrew translations of the *Guide to the Perplexed* became known, and the whole scope of Maimonidean philosophy and its implications concerning Jewish be-
lies was made apparent. Between 1232 and 1235 a great controversy, which engulfed Jewish scholars from Spain, France, and Germany, raged. It became one of the most important historical events in the history of Jewish thought in the Middle Ages.

In that controversy some of the most prominent kabbalists of the period took part. One of them, Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, known as Nachmanides, the great commentator on the Torah, was the leader of northern Spanish Jewry at that time, and the leader of the Gerona circle of kabbalists. There is no doubt about his central place in the development of the kabbalah; his authority was so great that several kabbalistic works written by other mystics were attributed to him. Nachmanides had a most active role in the controversy. At its beginning he attempted to pacify the various factions and to minimize the differences. Soon, however, he came under attack by the rationalists, and had to join the opponents of Maimonides.

Scholem emphasized that the role of the kabbalah as such, and not only that of individual kabbalists who had other roles as well, in the controversy over the rationalistic philosophy of Maimonides should be thoroughly investigated. He felt strongly that the early kabbalists saw themselves as to some extent responsible for preventing Jewish rationalism from reaching the uppermost position intellectually and achieving a dominant place in Jewish culture.

While the involvement of the kabbalists in the controversy over Jewish rationalistic philosophy helps us understand the social and historical attitude of these mystics, their attitude toward philosophy as such, and their use of philosophical ideas
and terminology in the formulation of their mystical symbolism, has a bearing on the very content of their teachings.

A kabbalist who wrote toward the end of that century, Rabbi Moses of Burgos, said concerning the relationship between Jewish philosophy and kabbalah: "our feet stand where their heads are," meaning that the mystics begin where the philosophers end their deliberations. This dictum suggests that there is nothing wrong with philosophy itself; the problem is that the philosophers do not go far enough, or that they stop too soon. Kabbalists like Rabbi Moses of Burgos saw themselves as building a theology in nonphilosophical ways but for which philosophy might serve as a start or a basis.

It seems that while Rabbi Moses' dictum is a relatively late one, the attitude it reveals was familiar to the early kabbalists in Provence and Spain. Sections in the works of early kabbalists like Rabbi Azriel of Gerona could be read as philosophical treatises, especially as far as terminology was concerned. The very distinctive language of the Tibbonite translations of the major works of Jewish philosophy had enormous impact on kabbalistic literature, and the symbolism of the translations is often formulated in the same manner as the kabbalistic works.

It is not only kabbalistic language and terminology which reveals the impact of Jewish philosophy. The mystical symbols themselves reflect this impact, though it is important to note the differences as well as the similarities. In contrast to the book Bahir, the works of the kabbalists of Gerona may seem like a rejection of, or withdrawal from, the mythological and gnostic formulations of the book Bahir, and the
construction of a "philosophical" mysticism. Scholem showed in great detail in his study of the works of Rabbi Isaac the Blind, and particularly of the works of the Gerona circle, that the kabbalists indeed philosophized some of the ideas and symbols that they received in their mystical tradition, but they also introduced deep mystical layers into the rationalistic terminology used by them.

The most important field in which the mysticism and the philosophy of this period collided while using similar terminology was that of the character of the sefirot, the ten divine attributes in the kabbalistic system, and their hidden, sublime source in the Godhead, called by them en sof, "no end." The concept of en sof was regarded by the kabbalists as a divine realm beyond all description, which could not even be given a symbol based on any scriptural term, for it was not directly mentioned in the Bible. The appellation "no end" was regarded as an accidental term, which had no specific significance; it could as well have been called "no beginning" or "no color" or by any other negative. It was not a symbol nor a description of a characteristic; just a convenient word to refer to something which was far beyond any reference in human language.

This en sof is the supreme Godhead, the source of all existence, the beginning of the divine realm, the eternal divine power which was not changed by the creation and will never change; the source of the divine influence over the world, but which has no connection with the world and is not influenced by it in any way. A mystic may strive to uplift his soul to the divine hierarchy from one stage to another, but he can never form any mystical contact with the en sof, which cannot
be touched by anything out of Himself. He is not counted among the divine powers, and no mythological terminology, as found in the Babir, can ever apply to Him; indeed, it does not seem that the concept of en sof was known to the compilers of the book Babir.

The picture of the Godhead conveyed by en sof is reminiscent, to a very large extent, of the philosophical description of the Aristotelian primal cause, the "unmoved mover," the "thought which only thinks itself," and all the other terms used to describe the source of everything and the supreme divinity in medieval Aristotelian thought. There can be little doubt that the kabbalists in Europe used the philosophical concept in order to describe and characterize their supreme divine power.

To a lesser extent, the same could be said about the ten sefirot which emanate from the en sof according to these mystics. The concept "emanation" itself is an idea received by the mystics from philosophy, especially from neo-Platonic philosophy, which had a most profound impact on Jewish mysticism, as it had on Christian mysticism of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. The vision of the Godhead as an enormous source of light, spreading around Him diminishing circles of light each outside the other, is as central to the mystics as it was to the neo-Platonic philosophers.

The Jewish mystics in Provence and Gerona accepted this basic neo-Platonic picture, but introduced into it other elements, especially the element of dynamism. While the philosophers usually described a permanent, fixed structure of the descending steps from the hidden Godhead to the earthly realm, the mystics saw movement and change in the same
descent. The various emanated powers in the mystical structure could undergo processes of rising or falling, of diminishing and enlargement. They formed intense relationships between them of a mythological nature, and thereby a much more profound and variegated symbolism was created.

The structure of the ten sefirot themselves is also reminiscent of a philosophical system—the divine attributes. Some of the sefirot are called by the kabbalists by names which include ethical connotations, like Justice, Mercy, and Compassion, as we also find in the terminology of some philosophers, who defined the ethical maxims not as characteristics of the Godhead itself but as attributes of divine action in the lower realms. There is a close connection between these two systems, and there can hardly be any doubt that the formulation of the system of the ten sefirot and their relationship to their source, the en sof in the process of emanation all carry the signs of the great impact of Jewish philosophical formulations on the works of the early kabbalists.

It should be remembered, however, that while the way the sefirot are described by the kabbalists in Europe was influenced by philosophical terminology, the system of the sefirot is not dependent on that terminology. The sefirot as a system of symbols preceded this influence, as witnessed by their description in the book Bahir.

It would be a mistake then, as Scholem often stressed, to imagine that because the early kabbalah assumed a philosophical garb, and because some of its symbols revealed the impact of Jewish philosophy, the kabbalah was only a reaction to Jewish philosophy, and not an opposing alternative to it. The kabbalah probably existed in some way before the
mystics came into contact with the terminology of the philosophers. Although in Provence and Spain in the first half of the thirteenth century it assumed some characteristics of the culture of that time and place, it was not dependent on them. In the coming generations the kabbalah would revert to mythological symbolism, which was very far from the systems adopted for it by the Gerona kabbalists.

III

According to Scholem, a "symbol" in the context of the kabbalah is a term or a description that nothing further can be said about in human language. It is the maximum linguistic approximation to something which is actually and permanently beyond full expression by language. Symbols are terms used not to express what we know, but to indicate that we know little about the substance behind the symbol.20

The term "emanation" is a good example of the nature of the kabbalistic symbol. In Hebrew it is called azilut, and it is a medieval Hebrew term which evolved, most probably, under the impact of Jewish philosophy; Scholem found its first appearance in Hebrew in a poem by Rabbi Judah ha-Levi.21 Later it was extensively used by the Tibbonites in their translations of the masterpieces of Jewish philosophy into Hebrew, translations which were made for the sake of the Jewish scholars in Provence who were not familiar with the Arabic originals and who wanted to take part in the new rationalistic movement. The mystics used the term in the earliest treatises of European Jewish mysticism—it is found
even in the works of Ashkenazi mystics. A biblical connotation was coupled with it to justify its use in Hebrew contexts. It is probable that some mystics were unaware that it was a medieval term, introduced into Hebrew to translate a non-Hebrew concept. By the time the kabbalists of Gerona used it, it was a commonplace term in both mysticism and philosophy in Hebrew.

But the problem is: Does the term mean the same thing when used in a philosophical work and a mystical one? Or, in other words, what is the difference between a kabbalistic symbol and a philosophical term? According to Scholem, the difference lies in the fact that the philosopher uses the term to mean exactly what it says; he strives for accuracy and unambiguity, trying to formulate his system as clearly as possible, because his philosophical training requires that he prove logically all his conclusions, which cannot be done unless complete accuracy is achieved. For the philosopher, the terms he uses are vehicles for exact communication between him and the reader.

The mystic cannot use the term in the same way, because he deals with contents which are beyond logic, beyond language, beyond human experience; he deals with mysticism, a positive term which really conveys the unknown and the unknowable. Accuracy and clarity are out of the question; complete communication is absolutely impossible. If it were possible, the contents would not be "mystical" any more and could not convey truths which are far beyond human logic, which is the philosopher's vehicle. The mystic cannot communicate the truth which is in his heart and his vision. But he does write books, even quite lengthy ones. He does try to
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form some kind of communication with his fellow mystics, if not with his fellow men. He does that via symbolism.

The mystic uses the term "emanation" as a symbol, declaring, "The subject I am describing is beyond language, beyond human understanding and expression; yet the closest human word to the completely mysterious truth describing the relationship between two other such symbols—this sefirah and that sefirah—is the word 'emanation.'" No bigger mistake can be made than to understand that the relationship between the two sefirot is "really" one of emanation. If it were so, nothing would distinguish between the mystic and the philosopher. Yet the mystic begins where the philosopher's logic is exhausted.

The symbols cannot convey contents, that is, ideas, pictures or feelings in a complete form. They can only give the vaguest hint at the truth which is beyond them.²⁴ But these truths—the mystical ones hinted at by symbols—are so great, so profound, and represent such a high religious attainment, that even in this vague and remote form they are much more worthwhile, religiously and spiritually, according to the mystic, than the accurate, clear, but mundane and earthbound truths, of the philosopher. When the mystic, therefore, uses the term azilut he does not and cannot obey the philosophical chain of reasoning, of logical examination and proof. He just gives a hint, which cannot be scrutinized nor criticized. He knows that this term is the closest possible approximation found in human language to a divine truth which, in any other way, is completely beyond human reach.

This is the source of the great freedom that mysticism allows its believers. They can never be taken to account, their
ideas analyzed and accepted or rejected. The mystic can always claim, when criticized, that he "never meant it this way," with pure heart and clear conscience, because he really never meant the symbol to be taken literally, as if it really represented divine truth. That truth is completely beyond communication, and no one can expect the mystic to write it and convey it to the logical human mind. Therefore he can say whatever he feels, being certain that terms like "heresy" do not apply to him, for he has experienced divine truth and tried to convey it, however incompletely, by using human words as symbols.

This is also the source of the deep gulf that separates mystics from nonmystics in a religious community. The mystic believes that God cannot express anything which is untrue, and the truth cannot be expressed in human language. Thus the words of divine revelation incorporated in the holy writ, be it the Bible, the Gospels or the Koran, cannot be understood literally because then they would be conveying only partial truth or even completely false messages. Their divine source proves that they are set in symbolic language, and in order to be understood they have to be read as such. The mystics could not reconcile themselves to the nonmystic's reliance on the literal meaning, while the nonmystics could hardly understand how the mystics discovered such unimaginable interpretations to seemingly simple biblical verses.

A case in point is the kabbalistic interpretation of the first chapter of the book of Genesis, the story of the creation. As this chapter presented the beginning of everything, the early kabbalists could not read it just as the story of the creation of heaven, earth, fauna, and flora. The first event in cosmic
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history is the emanation of the ten sefirot from the hidden Godhead, the en sof. These verses should be read, therefore, as the description of this process of emanation, although the source of the emanated divine attributes cannot be mentioned even in the symbolic language of the Bible. Rabbi Isaac the Blind and his followers, therefore, understood the first verse of the Bible as telling how the sefirot emerged from the en sof.25 “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” was read as “With the divine wisdom {reshit, ‘beginning,’ is a reference to this power, the second sefirah}, the Godhead, [unmentioned in the verse or anywhere in biblical symbolism], created the Divine Intelligence [binah, the third sefirah, also called elohim, ‘God’] and the divine magnificence [tiferet, the sixth sefirah, which is the central power in the structure of the divine world, and often represents the other five around it, also called ‘heaven’], and the divine kingdom [malchut, the shekhinah, the tenth sefirah, also called ‘earth’].” Thus this first verse tells of the emanation of the ten sefirot in a very brief form, not mentioning the hidden emanator, the en sof. Of course, this way of reading is completely foreign and unacceptable to anyone who cannot adopt his mind and feelings to the symbolical reading of the holy scriptures. For the mystic, however, reading the story of the creation as if a divine power toiled and brought forth the physical world is unacceptable and at least mundane if not completely sacrilegious. For the mystics, the holy scriptures are a divine dictionary of symbols. It is not the mystic who has to search through the whole human language to find the appropriate symbol which will express, in the maximal way possible, the hidden divine truths; God himself did it when he revealed his secrets in
human language to Moses on Mount Sinai, to the prophets, and to the writers who wrote under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Not the scriptures alone serve the mystic as a treasury of symbols. Creation as a whole, which was made by God, reflects inner divine truths in a symbolic way. Morning and evening, light and darkness, are nothing but earthly symbols of hidden divine processes, which can be understood by the mystic who is aware of their symbolic significance. The same is true about Man, his creation in "God's image" really means that his body and soul reflect in their structure hidden divine truths in a symbolic manner. The study of human psychology, therefore, like the study of physics or cosmology, is really the study of the divine symbolism which was used by the Creator when he transformed divine structures into forms in the physical world. Human history, the relationships between nations, natural upheavals and catastrophes, insofar as they are directed by God, are also symbolic reflections of mystical truth. Thus the mystic denies the veracity of all that is learned by the senses or the mind, all that is literal and apparent. He believes that all apparent phenomena are symbolical reflections of an unknown and unknowable divine truth, of which the earthly manifestations are remote symbols, understood only by those who reject the literal and the logical. "Where their heads are, there our feet stand" where the literal and physical understanding of nature, man, history, and the scriptures ends, there begins the symbolical understanding of the underlying secrets of the divine world.

Scholem always emphasized the difference between symbolism and allegory. Allegory, according to him, means two
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corresponding layers of truth, one revealed and the other hidden, but the revealed layer can be accurately used to reveal the hidden one. For instance, the presentation above of the kabbalistic interpretation of the first verse of Genesis was really allegorical: the verse says “earth” but means to say “the shekhinah,” and all one has to do is to translate from one set of words to another. But for the mystic, “shekhinah” is not a word corresponding to “earth;” it is a symbol which can be understood by the human mind only as a hint to something which is far beyond it. When one “translates” “earth” to “shekhinah” one does not explain or clarify anything; rather, one obscures and mystifies the verse, for nobody knows, or can ever know in a logical fashion, what the shekhinah really is. We can know many, even hundreds, of different symbols which refer to various aspects of this divine power and its characteristics and functions, but we can never know the shekhinah as it really is. Symbolism is the maximum we can know, and this maximum is extremely minimal.

In an allegory, the connection between one layer of meaning and the other one is artificial. On an allegorical level, the choice of “earth” to represent “shekhinah” is completely arbitrary because there is no underlying, inherent connection between the two. In mystical symbolism, the connection between the symbol, although it expresses only a very small part of its content and meaning, and the symbolized power is real and essential. “Earth” and “shekhinah” equally represent the hidden divine essence in a remote way, and they are part of that mysterious and hidden entity which is beyond man’s reach. This has been frequently described as the relationship between the revealed and hidden parts of an iceberg.

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The revealed part, the symbol, is really a part of the iceberg, but anyone mistaking it for the iceberg itself will be making a very great, indeed, a titanic mistake.

The study of kabbalistic works is therefore the study of the symbols the Jewish mystics used when they described the divine world in their intricate system of symbolism. Scholem did not see himself as studying the divine world of the kabbalists as it "really" was, and therefore the question "Are there really ten sefirot?" was for him completely irrelevant. He dealt with the symbols, their emergence and development, and especially with their historical impact, and not with the underlying content, which, according to kabbalists, cannot be approached by sensual and logical means anyway. This understanding of the nature of the kabbalistic symbol is necessary also to understand the kabbalist's standing within the framework of Jewish orthodoxy. Throughout history, the kabbalists were, with the notorious exception of the Sabbatian movement, preserving, traditional, and orthodox. They helped Judaism to survive in the hostile environment of the European Middle Ages and Eastern Europe of modern times.

One may rightfully ask how a movement which describes ten divine powers, and hence is clearly polytheistic, can be an orthodox power within a monotheistic religious group. The answer, of course, is the nature of symbolism. In the literal and physical world "ten" means much more than one, and therefore the clash between monotheism and polytheism. But when symbolism is introduced, why assume that in the mystical hidden realm "ten" is "more" than "one"? Such a claim can be put forward only by someone who pretends to know how much really is ten and how much is one; but as
the mystic cannot express the mystical content of these symbols, it is possible to claim that within the divine realm “ten” is the true essence of “one,” and that there is no contradiction between them, one being a specific aspect of the other. This is probably why, throughout history, there has been so little theological criticism of the kabbalah among Jewish intellectuals (except for a few bursts in thirteenth-century Spain and in Italy during and after the Renaissance period).

It is doubtful whether many of the Jewish nonmystics throughout the ages understood the intricacies of kabbalistic symbolism concerning the sefiroth and the Godhead, or accepted the kabbalistic way of interpreting scriptural verses. But another aspect of kabbalistic symbolism had a profound impact on Jewish religious thought and practice, and demonstrated the orthodox and constructive character of the kabbalah. This is the kabbalistic attitude toward the practical commandments of the Jewish religion, the deeds required of every Jew in his ethical behavior, his social and religious life—the mitsvot.

The Middle Ages found Judaism confused concerning the multitude of mitsvot that the Jew has to perform as commanded by the Torah, the Talmud, and the rabbinic interpretations of the ancient requirements. The culture of the Middle Ages, under the combined impact of Christian spiritualization of religious life, and neo-Platonic philosophy, which described matter and spirit as two opposing poles never to be reconciled, tended to identify religious life and getting closer to God as a process of increasing spiritualization. One's level of religious attainment was measured by one's purity of spiritual life and by one's distance from matter and everything
connected with the physical world. Judaism had to reconcile this otherworldly attitude with a religious practice which seemed to concentrate almost exclusively on the practical, physical performance of material deeds. Jewish religious law seemed to decide one's level of religious attainment solely on one's physical and bodily behavior, and not on any spiritual element.

All the Jewish theologies and ethical systems of the Middle Ages had to answer the question: How can Judaism claim to be a superior religion when its demands are addressed almost exclusively to the physical? Each system devised its own way to spiritualize religious life. Some, like Rabbi Bahya ibn Paqudah in eleventh-century Spain, did it by devising a whole system of spiritual commandments, which they claimed were much superior to the physical ones, founded on the demands of the Torah. Most philosophers chose to give spiritual meaning to physical deeds, thus demonstrating the belief in the unity of God and devotion to him; some even gave allegorical meanings to the 

mitsvot. Most Jewish philosophers tried to interpret in a rational manner the reasons for the commandments (ta'amey ha-mitsvot), emphasizing the social and religious spiritual needs for them.

The Ashkenazi Hasidim chose a more radical answer, but also a more conservative one. It is not the physical deed that has a religious meaning, but the spiritual effort involved in carrying it out. They did not see the mitsvot as supplementing human life and happiness, but rather as a trial put before Man by God to test his devotion to Him and his rejection of all worldly temptations and even his attachment to his own body. “Kiddush ha-shem,” the supreme sacrifice of life for the
sake of God's glory, was the purpose for all the mitsvot. Each commandment requires the sacrifice of a portion of Man's human desires for the sake of heaven. God does not judge a man according to the number of the commandments he has performed, but by the hardships, suffering, and sacrifices that he underwent in order to perform them. A commandment performed easily is worth much less than the same one performed while overcoming many difficulties. On the one hand, this system insists on the spiritual significance of religious practice, giving no intrinsic value to the mere physical performance. But on the other hand, this system does not allow a "spiritual religion" which neglects the actual commandments and concentrates instead on spiritual values, as most of the philosophical systems seemed to allow. If the actual performance of a commandment is the proof of one's successful negation of the physical world, and every failure in carrying it out proves that one has yielded to worldly temptations, then the only criterion of religious achievement remains the performance of the mitsvot. No spiritual substitute is possible; physical success is the only way for spiritual achievement.

The kabbalists chose a completely different answer. Historically speaking, it proved to be the most successful. It was adopted by all orthodox Jewish movements in early modern times, and survives today among the most orthodox Jewish groups.

The kabbalists interpreted the commandments as symbols. Every human deed has a counterpart in the divine world. Each human good deed contributes something to the process to which it is connected in the divine world, and each bad
deed is detrimental to that divine process. As it is impossible to know the actual mystical content of these processes, all man knows are the symbols. The content of the mitsvot, therefore, is purely spiritual; they involve divine powers and their dynamic life within the divine realm. The physical commandments, however, represent the earthly symbolic counterpart to these divine and completely hidden purposes. The building of a sukkah, a "tabernacle," certainly does not seem to be a spiritual deed, though its traditional meaning is the remembrance of the redemption from Egypt; one may claim that one has better ways to remember that event than spending a week in autumn in a loose hut in the yard. According to the kabbalists, the sukkah really symbolized something connected with the union between the sixth sefirah, tiferet, which is the male element in the divine realm, and the shekhinah, the female element. The form of the tabernacle is modeled, according to them, after the bridal canopy under which these divine powers are united. Mystical symbolism hints at the spiritual divine processes with which the commandments are connected; the understanding of these processes is impossible, because the mystical truth beyond the symbols is unknown and unknowable. Therefore, in order to participate in the mystical union in the divine realm a mystic can only adhere to the symbol and perform it as strictly as possible with maximum attention to the minutest detail. Not knowing its significance, one can never be sure whether a given detail is a crucial or secondary element in that mystical process. Thus, while physical deeds themselves may seem to lose their intrinsic importance, the religious message remains clear and unambiguous: Only by strict adherence to
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every physical element in the practical commandments of Jewish tradition can one achieve contact with the spiritual, divine content hiding behind them. The content, being mystical, can never be understood or approached in an intellectual manner, but only through the detailed observance of the commandments as such. Symbolism in this way created a unity between the spiritual and the physical, and strengthened the orthodox element in medieval Judaism.

The adherence to basic orthodoxy contributed to the fact that the kabbalah was almost never criticized in the Middle Ages, whereas Jewish philosophy came under most heavy attack. While the kabbalah was undoubtedly more radical in its ways of thought and concepts, as far as deeds were concerned it was above reproach. Indeed, it formulated a new system of *ta'amey ha-mitsvot* ("reasons for the commandments"), which gave new spiritual reasons for their observance. Judaism tended to leave alone any thinker who did not interfere with the practical behavior of Jews, although it attacked vehemently anyone attempting to change one of its practices. It may be said that while in Christian history heretics receive more attention than sinners, in Judaism they were little recognized; it was very easy to become a sinner. The kabbalists were neither: their symbolism protected them from heresy because they could claim that their expressions should never be taken literally; they were saved from sin by seeing the commandments as a set of symbols given to them by God in order to enable the mystics to come close to Him and to participate in and influence the inner dynamism of the divine realm.

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The early kabbalists in Spain and Provence concentrated their efforts on the development of kabbalistic symbolism concerning the secret of the creation and the divine process which governed it and the following stages of the development of the world. They did not dream as yet that their symbols would one day transform Judaism and that mass movements would emerge, preaching kabbalistic ideas to all Jews. It seems that from the beginning their orientation was toward small, closed circles and groups dealing with esoteric ideas for their own sake, practicing communion with God alone. They did not demand that the community as a whole follow them. Their insistent concentration on the “secret of the creation” (sod ma’aseh bereshit) resulted from the way they understood the process of mystical communion with God.

Rabbi Isaac the Blind, in his commentary on Sefer Yezirah, and the other early kabbalists who analyzed in great detail the process by which the first divine attributes emanated from the Godhead and assumed their personalistic character, were not only interested in an academic inquiry concerning the roots of all existence and the emergence of the world as we know it. They saw the process of emanation as the one which led down from the complete unity—a spiritual unity, which existed when all begin, when the different divine powers were still united within the Godhead—to the enormous plurality of the physical world, where nothing is identical with the other and nothing can be united with anything else. The soul of the mystic wishes to deny this plurality, to turn away from it, and to be part of the true divine unity. This unity is a
situation of the past, and therefore the past has to be sought and understood, and a way to return to it has to be found. For these kabbalists the *sod ma’aseh bereshit* was a divine ladder, leading down from the early unity within the Godhead to the plurality of the created world.²³

If the symbolism of the divine ladder could be unveiled before the eyes of the mystic, the mysteries involved in it would become embedded in his innermost soul, there would be a chance that the mystic could then try to use the ladder of descent in which the divine powers emanated stage by stage as a ladder to ascend and uplift his soul toward the sublime unity which always lies above, and before him (in the chronological sense because the earlier the time the closer he is to the complete original unity). “The secret of creation” is thus the means by which the mystic discusses the symbolism which represents not only the origin of the world, but also the target toward which the mystic tries to advance—an advance which is a retreat toward the past.²⁴

This mysticism of a retreat toward the unity with the Godhead which was in the beginning of all, and diminished during history, is not a national or community endeavor. It means that the mystic turns his back on contemporary history and has no interest in current affairs and in the advancement toward a better future. This is an individual path; there is nothing to preach to the masses, no message of salvation or redemption. This explains the surprising neglect of the messianic element in early kabbalistic works, from the *Bahir* through the kabbalists in Provence and Gerona. They repeated the traditional formula of messianic belief, but did not add anything to it and did not connect it with kabbalistic
symbolism. The symbolism of redemption was, for them, the story of the process of emanation in the beginning of all, the sod ma’aseh bereshit.

The early kabbalistic circles in medieval Europe were not interested in the world around them. As individuals, however, they could be leaders of communities and of academies and do their best to protect and enhance the interests of their fellow Jews. Thus, the Ravad at the end of the twelfth century and Nachmanides in the thirteenth century, were important leaders. Yet no element of leadership is apparent in their kabbalistic works. As mystics, they closed themselves in small groups, produced their obscure symbolism which could not be understood by anyone not initiated in one of these circles, and dealt with their individual kind of redemption and mystical unity which was completely separated from historical events around them.35

Their works do not reveal much interest in the more popular and practical side of religion. The problems of the commandments are not central in the Bahir; several of them are interpreted in it in a symbolical, mystical manner, but no clear message can be discerned.36 Rabbi Isaac the Blind and the kabbalistic works of the Gerona circle followed the same line; not much is found in them concerning everyday life, ethical behavior, and reasons for the ritualistic commandments, even though the basic attitude toward them as symbols of divine processes is clearly present. Only in the next generation, in the second half of the thirteenth century, did kabbalists begin to write specific works on these subjects.

Scholem showed that the concentration of the early kabbalists in closed esoteric circles was not achieved without opposition and internal strife. He discovered a letter by Rabbi
Isaac the Blind to the kabbalists in Gerona, a letter written in the manner of a Rabbi chastizing his disciples. In it he complained that in Gerona people were talking about the kabbalah and its secrets "in the streets and in the market-places," and that the symbols of the kabbalah were becoming public property. Rabbi Isaac admonished the recipients of the letter, saying that such wide knowledge of the secrets of the kabbalah must lead to misunderstanding and controversy, for these secrets cannot be correctly understood by the wide public. He opposed even the writing of kabbalistic books, and warned his disciples that if they believed that they could write books and keep them secret they were mistaken, for "there is no cupboard which can hide a book already written."

It seems that Rabbi Isaac the Blind directed his criticism especially against Rabbi Ezra and Rabbi Azriel, the founders of the kabbalistic center in Gerona, each of whom wrote several kabbalistic treatises, some of them of book length. The younger kabbalists there did not write treatises in the manner of their predecessors, let alone books, and their mystical teachings were incorporated in other works. The members of the kabbalistic center in Gerona seemed to accept the demand of Rabbi Isaac not to talk openly about the kabbalah and not to write kabbalistic works, thus strengthening the esoteric character of the early kabbalistic circles.

A demonstration of the esoteric character of the early Jewish mystics in medieval Europe is found in the works of a circle of mystics whom Scholem called "the Iyyun circle" after a central work of this school, Sefer ha-Iyyun (The Book of Contemplation). Scholem ascribed 32 treatises to this group, all of them brief works of a few pages each. Some of these, including the Sefer ha-Iyyun and the works closest to it in their
terminology and symbolism, do not use the usual kabbalistic system of ten sefirot; it seems that it was unknown to them. Instead, they use a symbolism of 13 divine midot, "attributes."\(^{40}\) They seem to rely very heavily on neo-Platonic ideas and terminology.\(^{41}\) Color symbolism is also very prominent in these works, as are mathematical and linguistic elements that follow the Sefer Yezirah but demonstrate a special tradition concerning its symbolical interpretation. All these treatises are either anonymous, or attributed to ancient writers, tannaim or gaonim, some to the ancient Hekhalot mystics with whom they seem to have had close spiritual ties, and some are attributed to completely fictional figures. There is nothing in these works which could be used to establish either the exact date or location of their composition. Scholem suggested that the members of the circle probably lived in southern France in the beginning of the thirteenth century. The vocabulary they used seems to support this suggestion. The almost exclusive subject of these works is the "secret of the creation," and their mysticism undoubtedly was connected with the symbolism representing that process. To this day, they remain esoteric and mysterious, an anonymous group of works created by an enthusiastic group of Jewish mystics who left their ideas to posterity in the literature of the kabbalah, but their personalities completely hidden and unknown.

V

From its earliest beginnings, Jewish mystics were especially interested in the nature of prayer. Hekhalot mysticism
concentrates to a very large extent on the *kedushah*, the third benediction among the 18, in which the verse from Isaiah 6:4 is recited, and an identification is created between the public praying in the synagogue and the angels praising God around his throne of glory.\(^4^2\) The *Hekhalot* hymns are very close to the *kedushah*, and they suggest that the mystical experience in the eyes of the ancient Jewish mystics in Eretz Israel and Babylonia was connected with prayer. The book *Bahir* discusses in relative detail the *kedushah* and the benediction of the priests,\(^4^3\) hinting at the profound symbolism concerning the divine world hidden within these prayers.

Some of the earliest traditions that we have from the first kabbalists deal with the secret of the intention in prayers. The Ravad himself divided the intention of the 18 benedictions between “the creator” (*yotzer bereshit*, the term used in the *Shiur Komah* for God), and the “prime cause” (*ilat ha-ilot*, the Hebrew term which translated the Aristotelian concept). His reasoning is not completely clear.\(^4^4\) It seems that he directed the part of his prayer which praises God toward the highest possible place in the Godhead, while addressing the other part, which deals with earthly requests, to a lower divine power, possibly the third *sefirah*, *binah*. Rabbi Jacob ha-Nazir, a contemporary of Rabbi Isaac the Blind, gave a detailed set of instructions concerning the exact *sefirot* to be aimed at during the reciting of the *shema* and the division of the 18 benedictions among the divine powers. He also insisted that there is a difference in the intentions according to the time of the prayer: in daytime prayers were directed toward the sixth power, *tiferet*, and at night, toward the third, *binah*.

Rabbi Azriel of Gerona was the first kabbalist to dedicate
a whole book to the subject of prayer. He described the symbolism behind almost every word in the prayers and the part of the divine realm to which they relate. In his commentary on the Talmudic *aggadot* Rabbi Azriel included a very profound commentary on the word *amen*. He proved that the various words in Hebrew which derive from that root include, in a symbolical manner, all aspects of the divine world. Therefore all the *sefirot* are incorporated and united within the *amen*; this is why the Talmud said that “One who says the *amen* after the benediction is greater than the one who says the benediction itself.”

Many other early kabbalists dealt with the problem of the intention of prayers, including Rabbi Asher ben David, the nephew of Rabbi Isaac the Blind, who was sent by Rabbi Isaac to Gerona to instruct the kabbalists there in the teachings of the school of kabbalists in Provence. Another writer on the subject from Gerona was Rabbi Jacob ben Sheshet, a relatively prolific writer, who dedicated an ethical work, *Faith and Reason* (*ha-Emunah veha-Bitahon*) to several subjects dealing with the spiritual observance of the Jewish traditional commandments and norms, including the prayers. This work became popular, and undoubtedly was instrumental in the spreading of kabbalistic ideas among nonmystics. Rabbi Jacob, however, did not write this work as a purely kabbalistic one; most of it is comprised of Talmudic and Midrashic sayings, homiletically interpreted by the author in a manner intended to instruct his contemporaries in traditional Jewish ethics. His kabbalistic views are expressed in a subdued manner, but they are still quite obvious to the trained reader.

All this activity concerning prayer did not go unnoticed
outside the circles of the kabbalists, for the subject concerned every Jew. The subject of the correct ways to pray, including spiritual intentions, was also a major subject in halachic works. Many books of religious law dedicated their first chapters to the prayers.

The kabbalists attracted not only interest but also some criticism. In a collection of documents by Rabbi Meir ben Shimeon of Narbonne, which the author called Milhemet Mitzvah, Scholem found and published a letter by this thirteenth-century author, attacking the kabbalists for their beliefs in general, and especially for their teachings concerning the prayers. He described them as polytheists, who “direct the day’s prayer to one God and the night’s to another God,” and to different powers on various days and religious festivals. He mentioned the book Bahir. There is no doubt that he was aware, at least in a general way, of the teachings of the early kabbalists, and viewed them as a harmful new phenomenon. It is not surprising that he attacked the kabbalists on the subject most directly concerned with everyday religious practice, not on the theoretical or theological innovations of the kabbalists.

Rabbi Meir’s description of the Jewish mystics as representing a mythological and polytheistic revival within Judaism was echoed throughout the ages, especially by nineteenth-century scholars. Yet the most striking point about this letter is its loneliness. During the next two centuries, as the kabbalah became more and more known among Jewish intellectuals, we hardly find even a second opposing voice to join that of Rabbi Meir. The esoteric circles of the kabbalists, their strict orthodoxy, their observance of Jewish traditional
commandments, and the prominence of great halachists among the teachers of kabbalah facilitated the acceptance of the kabbalah as one more feature or aspect of Jewish culture without arousing much controversy. It is doubtful whether all those who understood the kabbalah really believed it to be the true “secrets of the Torah” revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. Their doubts, however, did not bring them to active opposition, because it was difficult to show what harm was done by its teachings.

VI

Scholem saw the early kabbalah in Provence and Gerona in two different, but complementary, historical perspectives. On the one hand, these late twelfth- and thirteenth-century mystics were both the product of the culture around them and among those who helped to change it. These mystics were profoundly connected to the spiritual world of the early thirteenth century and the major developments within Judaism and around it at that time. The three main spiritual drives which Scholem discerned were: the Catharist heresy, the renewed gnostic revolution within European Christianity; the impact of neo-Platonism, both on Christians and Jews; the impact of Aristotelian philosophy and the threat that extreme rationalism presented to traditional religious beliefs and practices. The kabbalists probably were influenced by the first movement and completely absorbed the second. They fiercely opposed the third and offered a profound, traditional Jewish alternative to it.
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Many kabbalists wrote Jewish legal treatises, commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud, responses on halachic questions, and traditional ethical works based on Talmudic and Midrashic sayings. There was nothing revolutionary in their writings, neither in form nor in content. They did initiate new trends, but as Jewish intellectuals and social leaders, responding to the needs of the times, not as kabbalists. Most of them did not devote all their energies to mystical speculation, even though it was central to their spiritual and religious experience. The figure of the mystic who is nothing but a mystic at this period is an exception, not the rule.

These circles of mystics can be viewed, historically, in a much larger perspective. The appearance of the kabbalah in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe was nothing short of a major revolution. The mysticism of the Hekhalot and Merkabah literature, seemingly forgotten as a living force outside the schools of the Ashkenazi Hasidim, suddenly acquired a new vigor and became the inspiration, in a much changed form, for a new and dynamic system of symbols. Gnostic tendencies, either inherent in this literature or transmitted independently by other means, suddenly erupted within the major academies of Jewish law in southern Europe.

Scholem’s presentation of the development of the kabbalah has a linear element: from early Jewish mysticism in the East to the Jewish mystics in Provence, where the book Bahir first appeared; then the scholars, who had visions of Elijah’s appearance to them, developed the system of kabbalistic emanations on the basis of the Bahir. This was transmitted to the Gerona scholars, from whom the mystical system spread to other centers in Spain. Some enigmas still exist in this
picture, like the extent of the participation of the Ashkenazi Hasidim in the spread of Eastern esoteric gnostic material, and the contributions of the Iyyun circle and its place in the chain of development of Jewish mysticism in Europe. According to Scholem, there is one stream that leads from Hekhalot Zutarti to the Ba'hir, and from it to Rabbi Isaac the Blind's commentary on the Sefer Yezirah, from that to the works of Rabbi Azriel of Gerona and Nachmanides, and onwards to other mystical circles until the Zohar incorporated all of them and developed Jewish theosophy and mythological symbolism to a new level of richness, sophistication, and historical impact.50

NOTES


3. See above, ch. 4, pp. 94-95.


5. See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hikbot Yesodei ha-Torah 1:3.

7. Since he began to study kabbalah, Scholem paid particular attention to the quotations, scattered in many sources, from R. Isaac the Blind's books, and to traditions attributed to him. He published R. Isaac's "Commentary on *Sefer Yezirah*" as an appendix to his *Ha-Qabbalah be-Provans*, a book which is for the most part dedicated to an analysis of R. Isaac's views. He saw in R. Isaac the founder of systematic kabbalah, and in the study of his brief and cryptic sentences one of the most important tasks of the historian of Jewish mysticism. See G. Scholem, *Reshit ha-Qabbalah*, pp. 99-126; G. Scholem, *Ursprung*, pp. 219-272. Cf. also Ephraim Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, edited by Joseph Hacker (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1976), pp. 60-62. For an important study of the manuscripts of R. Isaac's commentary on *Sefer Yezirah*, see Chaim Wirszubski, "Prolegomena to the Textual Study of Isaac the Blind's Commentary on *Sefer Yezirah*" (Hebrew), *Tarbiẓ*, 27 (1958), pp. 257-64.

8. See G. Scholem, "A New Document concerning the Early History of the Kabbalah" (Hebrew), *Sefer Bialik* (Tel Aviv, 1934), pp. 141-62. In this paper, which still today serves as a foundation for the study of the early kabbalah, Scholem published a letter by R. Isaac the Blind to some kabbalists in Gerona, and some other documents. From Scholem's analysis it becomes evident that R. Isaac was asked by the Gerona kabbalists to visit them. Although R. Isaac declined, he sent his nephew, R. Asher ben David, to assist them in kabbalistic problems as well as to instruct them in the proper behavior for the kabbalist in nonkabbalistic society. The works of R. Asher ben David were published by M. Hasidah in *Ha-Segulah* (1934), and republished by me, with some additions and a bibliography of manuscripts containing these works by R. Elior, under the title *Qabbalat R. Asher ben David* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1980).

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10. The first opponent of Maimonides was R. Meir Abulafia. For a description of the man and his works, and the possibility of his kabbalistic background, see now Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

11. The attitude of the rabbis of Ashkenaz in this controversy was studied by E. E. Urbach, “The Participation of German and French Scholars in the Controversy about Maimonides and his Works” (Hebrew), *Zion*, 12 (1947), pp. 145–59.


13. Several works of the Gerona kabbalists, especially those of Jacob ben Sheshet, were attributed to Nachmanides. Cf. H. Chavel, *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1967). Chavel has included in these volumes works attributed to Nachmanides but which were written by other members of the Gerona circle of kabbalists. See E. Gottlieb’s review of this edition in his *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, pp. 516–35.


15. An analysis of Scholem’s views concerning the role of the kabbalists in this controversy as well as a presentation of new material on the subject are to be found in J. Dan, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, forthcoming).


17. Isaiah Tishby put forth the thesis that there is in the history of kabbalah a cycle leading from philosophical formulation of mysticism back
to mythological symbolism and then a return to the former. See his "Paths of Mythologization and Systematization in the Kabbalah" (Hebrew), Nativet E'Emunah u-Minhut (Ramat Gan, 1964), pp. 23–29.


24. Scholem often used the word "transparency" to describe the relationship between the symbol and the symbolized realm, i.e. the symbol makes the partition hiding the symbolized mystery somewhat more transparent, thus enabling the mystic to perceive some vague outlines of the hidden truth. See G. Scholem, Major Trends, pp. 26–27.

25. The interpretation of the first verse of Genesis was one of the most popular subjects in kabbalistic literature throughout the ages; there are hundreds of such exegetical commentaries. The example given above is only one amongst many, though it typifies the attitude of a whole circle. Even from the school of R. Isaac the Blind we have several treatises dealing with this subject besides his own detailed discussion in the commentary to Sefer Yezirah. Thus we have a brief discussion on creation by Asher ben David (see J. Dan, Qabbalat R. Asher ben David, pp. 52–55) and one quite similar by Joseph ben Samuel included in Jacob ben Sheshet, Meshiv Devarim Nekhobim, edited by G. Vajda with an introduction by E. Gottlieb (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1968), pp. 193–96. Concerning the whole subject, see E. Gottlieb, "Perushei Ma 'aseh Bereshit be-Reshit ha-Qabbalah," Studies in the Kabbala Literature, pp. 62–70.

26. It is not my intention to deal in this book with the intriguing
question of whether Scholem did or did not believe in any of the ideas of kabbalah, nor with the question whether he himself was mystically inclined or not. It seems that while everyone accepts that one can devote a lifetime of study to Plato without being a Platonist, one cannot study mysticism without being to some extent a mystic oneself. The scholar in the field of mysticism is expected to give an account for his choice of field of scholarship while his colleagues in other fields are not. Scholem's attitude was most complex and profound, but—it should be stated emphatically—his personal attitude did not influence the results of his philosophical investigations. As the notes to this volume illustrate, almost ever problem that Scholem wrote on was studied and restudied by other scholars in the last four decades, his conclusions tested by detailed and detached scholarly investigation.


29. See G. Scholem, Kabbalah, p. 36.

30. The material concerning the philosophers' attitudes toward the commandments was compiled and analyzed by Isaac Heinemann in Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot be-Sifrut Yisrael (Jerusalem, 1954), vol. 1.

31. Concerning the views of the Ashkenazi Hasidim on the spiritualization of the commandments, see J. Dan, Hebrew Ethical and Homiletical Literature, pp. 134–44.

32. A monumental study of the concept of mizvot in the kabbalah was published by Isaiah Tishby in vol. 2 of his Mishnat ha-Zohar (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1961). The focus of Tishby’s analyses is religious practices according to the Zohar as well as previous and subsequent kabbalistic views. It is interesting to note that Scholem did not dedicate a special study to this problem, notwithstanding the fact that discussions of this subject are found in many of his papers and books.


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and Religion presented to Gershom Scholem on his Seventieth Birthday, pp. 1–32.

35. This attitude may explain the low profile that the kabbalists kept—at least as kabbalists—in the Maimonidean controversy. It should be stressed, however, that main figures in the Gerona school devoted central works to the struggle with philosophy. One of Nachmanides' sermons is an attack on the Aristotelian conception of the beginning of the world. See J. Dan, Hebrew Ethical and Homiletical Literature, p. 159. Another important work is Jacob ben Sheshet’s Mesiv Devarim Nekhobim (see above, n. 25) which is a polemic directed against Samuel ibn Tibbon's treatise on creation, Ma'amar Yiqavu ha-Mayim. (Samuel ibn Tibbon is the celebrated translator of Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed into Hebrew from Arabic.) It is not accidental that these two polemical works deal with a refutation of the philosophical conceptions of creation, the isod ma ashe bereshit. Similarly, the kabbalists kept a low profile as kabbalists in their ethical works, but their emphasis on traditional, talmudic-midrashic ethics is both a polemic against and a suggestion of an alternative to philosophical, rationalistic ethics, which flourished at that time.


38. A list and analysis of the works of Ezra and Azriel, as well as a clarification of their mutual relationship, was presented by I. Tishby in the introduction to his edition of the Commentary on Talmudic Aggadoth by R. Azriel of Gerona, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Meqize Nirdamim, 1983). A large part of Scholem's Ha-Qabbalah be-Gerona is dedicated to an analysis of these central kabbalists from the Gerona circle. See also G. Scholem, Ursprung, pp. 324–420.

39. Scholem's list was printed as an appendix to Reshit ha-Qabbalah, pp. 255–62.

40. See G. Scholem, Kabbalah, pp. 95–96, and cf. J. Dan, Early Kabbalistic Circles, pp. 1–11.

41. Scholem cited the Iyyun circle as the clearest example of the impact of European neo-Platonism on the kabbalah. See his “The Traces of
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Gabirol in the Kabbalah" (Hebrew), Me'asef Sofre?Eretz Yisra’el (Tel Aviv, 1940), pp. 160–78.

42. This subject has not been studied yet in all its aspects. For references to scholarship on this theme, see above, ch. 2, n. 29.


46. Berakhot 45a.


50. The linear description of the development of kabbalah is opened to several questions which, in turn, raise the possibility of a different interpretation. For instance, it is not at all evident that the early kabbalists in Provence received all their symbols from the Bahir. Indeed, it is surprising how independent they are in their terminology vis-à-vis the Bahir: most of their symbols are not based on it! If from this we may infer that the Provençal kabbalists had another source for their symbols, then it will follow that the Bahir was not the only ancient presentation of a symbolism containing a doctrine of ten divine attributes. Analogously, the texts deriving from the Iyyun circle do not contain terminology dependent on the Bahir. This too seems to denote the existence of mystical systems which used other sources and developed outside, or alongside, this "linear" historical stream. If so, some of the more mystically oriented circles of Ashkenazi Hasidim should be viewed as independent mystical schools emerging without close contact with or direct influ-
ence from the mainstream of mystical development presented by Scholem. It seems that we have today a meaningful body of historical facts which suggest that at the turn of the thirteenth century nearly half a dozen independent schools of Jewish mystics were operative in Europe. The centrality of the Babir-Provence-Gerona line is a historical fact decided upon by later developments, but at the time there were many alternative routes to that line. From a historical point of view this picture raises with new force the question: Why did mysticism emerge exactly then? Why did Judaism flourish for such a long time without the symbolism of several divine emanations, and then suddenly, around the year 1200, a half a dozen schools begin to invent new mythologies to describe the Godhead? The study of this possibility, and the problems it raises, might add new insights into the nature of the relationship between Jewish religion and Jewish mysticism, as well as to the understanding of Jewish culture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For a more detailed discussion of the problem of the autonomy of these various circles, see J. Dan, *Early Kabbalistic Circles*. See also J. Dan, "The Emergence of Mystical Prayer," p. 115.