The Essential Agus

Katz, Steven T.

Published by NYU Press

Katz, Steven T.
The Essential Agus: The Writings of Jacob B. Agus.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/15755.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15755

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=494282
IT WAS in the eighties of the thirteenth century that the classic text of Qabbalistic literature, the Zohar, appeared. The scholar, Rabbi Moses de Leon, is now presumed to have written the major portion of the Zohar, which is not really one systematic work, but a collection of many books and brochures, varying in clarity and emphasis and held together by an inner unity of theme and ideology. This vast compendium of esoteric lore is a pseudo-epigraphic composition, attributed by its editor to Rabbi Simon Bar Yohai and a coterie of his “illuminated” disciples. This second-century Palestinian rabbi was believed to have spent thirteen years in a cave, studying the hidden mysteries of Torah, with the direct aid of the “spirit of holiness.” What more natural than to ascribe to him the authorship of a book which is replete with visions and revelations!

Soon after its appearance, the authenticity of the Zohar was questioned, by mystics no less than by their opponents. Rabbi Isaac of Akko reported the testimony of de Leon’s widow to the effect that her husband was the ghost writer of the Zohar, in all its complex subdivisions. But this testimony was ignored and later controverted with the utmost vehemence. So congruous was the comforting message of the Zohar with the overriding needs of the contemporary Jewish consciousness that all critical objections were set aside. Fundamentally, the Zoharic mentality was “true” to the increasing impetus of the dogmatic and romantic phases of contemporary Judaism; ergo, it had to be an
authentic revelation. For two centuries, the rise of the Zohar in popular acceptance was slow and steady. Then, when the travail of Spanish Jewry reached its climax in the fateful expulsion of 1492, the Zohar was catapulted to canonical holiness, attaining a degree of authority that was third only to the Bible and the Talmud.¹

While the Zohar is the central text of Qabbalah, there was a great body of esoteric lore antedating it, which was incorporated in the Talmud, the Midrashim, and in a number of Qabbalistic works of which the Sefer Yezira (The Book of Creation), attributed to the patriarch Abraham, was the best known and most revered. Altogether, the term “Qabbalah” comprises today a vast literature, containing more than three thousand volumes. While some of the classic works contain elaborate metaphysical systems, most of these volumes spin the ancient threads in endless variations, with the view of uncovering the “inner secrets” of the Torah or proposing a quasi-magical formula of “holy names” for the propitiation of angels and the banishment of demons. Yet, in all its vast variety, Qabbalah contains certain basic intellectual principles and concepts, which its devotees employ with virtual unanimity.

While some rationalistic students of Jewish thought regard the Qabbalah as a temporary aberration, born of ignorance and despair, which could rightfully be excluded from the history of Judaism, we cannot overlook the fact that, for many centuries, the Qabbalah constituted the regnant philosophy of the Jewish faith. From Crescas to Mendelssohn, no Jew dared venture into the field of metaphysical speculation without treading the approved pathways of Qabbalah. Nor can it be said that Orthodox Judaism in our day has repudiated the organic complex of Qabbalistic ideas, for so authoritative a religious personality as the late chief rabbi of Palestine, Abraham Isaac Kuk, framed his ideas in the molds of Qabbalah. And the Hasidic movement of the eighteenth century was essentially a reassertion of Qabbalistic thought. Hasidism converted the esoteric lore of Qabbalah into a mass movement, preaching its doctrines in public and applying them in practice.

The degree of authority and prestige enjoyed by the Qabbalah may be gauged by the circumstance that Rabbi Joseph Karo, author of the Shulhan Arukh, was not only a devotee but also a living “channel” of Qabbalistic revelation. Maggidim, or holy souls from heaven, would visit him when he was in a trance and bring him tidings from “the world of
truth." Rav Hai Gaon believed in the authenticity of the mystical visions of his contemporaries, the yordai hamerkabah, who were precursors of the Qabbalah. Nahmanides, whose commentary on the Torah was widely read and whose influence on Spanish Jewry was unsurpassed, was one of the master builders of Qabbalah. Rabbi Joel Sirkis, author of the classic halachic work, Baith Hodosh, asserted flatly that "he who denies the truth of the wisdom of Qabbalah is called a heretic."\(^2\) Rabbi Moses Isserles, the greatest halachic authority of Polish Jewry, allowed himself considerable latitude in the interpretation of Qabbalistic doctrines and deplored the tendency of improperly trained scholars to venture into the dangerous domain of the "wisdom of the hidden." Yet he too agreed that Qabbalah was authentic tradition, received by Moses at Sinai and "transmitted from mouth to mouth."\(^3\) The Gaon of Vilna and his disciples were staunch believers in the revelations of Qabbalah, insisting only on the relative independence of the realm of Halachah.\(^4\)

On the other hand, a few bold voices even in medieval times dared to challenge the pretensions of Qabbalah. Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet Barfat took issue with the Qabbalistic method of directing different prayers through different channels or sefirot, insisting that childlike naivete is the best attitude for prayer.\(^5\) The sixteenth-century Italian rabbi, Leo de Modena, condemned the whole Qabbalistic theosophy as spurious, identifying it as pagan in origin.\(^6\)

The eighteenth-century rabbi, Jacob Emden, accepted the general texture of Qabbalistic ideas in his introduction to the prayer book; yet, worried by the possible misuse of Qabbalah by sectarians, he asserted that the text of the Zohar was corrupted, so that it can only be used with the greatest of caution.\(^7\)

From all the above, it would appear that although the Qabbalah dominated Jewish thought for several centuries, there was never a time when its authority was entirely unchallenged.

The term "Qabbalah" means "tradition." Unlike the discipline of philosophy, the Qabbalah is founded upon the testimony of revelation, not the axioms of reason or the wisdom of experience. The Qabbalists maintained that their "hidden wisdom" was charged with cosmic potency and given over to the safekeeping of chosen individuals. The basic books of Qabbalah were alleged to be written by ancient revered sages, or by heavenly beings such as "Raziel, the angel."

Enthusiastic adherents of the "wisdom of truth" maintained that
Elijah the prophet revealed the principles of Qabbalah to Rabbi David of Provence, who was the father of Rabbi Abraham (RabD), famed as the bitter critic of Maimonides. The son was also privileged to behold Elijah in his visions. His disciple Rabbi Yizhak was similarly blessed, transmitting his lore to Ezra and Azriel, “who were the fourth generation, receiving direct information from Elijah.” Another Qabbalist maintained that a certain Rabbi Keshisha Gaon brought this secret lore from the ancient academies of Babylonia to Rabbi Yehudah he-hassid of Germany.

Rabbi Jonathan Eibshitz, one of the leading rabbinical figures of the eighteenth century, declared categorically that “the Qabbalists received their doctrines directly from the prophets.”

Modern scholars encounter no difficulty in finding parallels between the central concepts of Qabbalah and the Gnostic systems of the ancient world, which in turn were compounded in diverse combinations out of the floating debris of pagan mythology and Judeo-Christian elements. But the building blocks of philosophic systems are not as significant as the cement of thought and inspiration that holds them together. At its noblest reaches, Qabbalistic thought is rich in profound insights and noble sentiments, though it is never entirely free from the clinging “shells” of superstition. So thoughtful an author as Rabbi Joseph Irgash did not disdain pragmatic “proofs” for the truths of Qabbalah. Proceeding on the principle that truth is that which works, he challenged the philosophers with this clinching argument: “Which philosopher ever created a calf, as the Talmudic sage, Rovo, is reputed to have done?”

The classic Qabbalists believed in the possibility of the miracle, but scorned the employment of lofty principles for such lowly tasks, contending that only a “calf” would bother to make a calf. This was the aspect of Qabbalah which Maimonides particularly resented as rank stupidity and madness. The Qabbalists retorted in time by inventing a letter in which the aged philosopher is said to have repented of his errors.

In its essential motivation, Qabbalah sought to re-establish the validity of the Jewish ritual against the challenge of rationalistic philosophy. It represents, therefore, a reflective formulation of the principles of naïve faith, a blend of the philosophic passion for analysis and systematic consistency with the religious yearning for the assurance of divine favor, humanly won and securely held. This mighty effort to provide solid intellectual scaffolding for the tender tremors of naïve piety underlies all
of Qabbalah. And this effort was directed through several channels, for, as we have seen, the rational philosophy of the Middle Ages emasculated the sinews of piety and assigned to religious ritual a subordinate role in the attainment of intellectual perfection, exalting the virtue of philosophic reflection above that of strict ritual observance. Compelled to live in perpetual readiness for martyrdom, Jewish people could ill afford the corrosive effects of rational criticism.

A mild but ever-present undercurrent in Qabbalistic writings reflects the hurt pride of the Jew. How could Maimonides possibly be right in his description of the “alien” wisdom of the Greeks as the essence of Jewish teaching? If profound essences are hidden in the Torah, they would be revealed to great Jews, not Gentiles. Are loyal, observant Jews to be compared to those who wander about the palace, while the Greek philosophers were safely inside?

Rationalistic wisdom is not at all peculiar to Israel, but is the portion of all nations, reflecting as it does human efforts. Thus, the other nations had among them greater philosophers than we, even when our people were seduced by this wisdom. But the wisdom of Israel is inward, divine, received from the Almighty and not shared by the other nations.

Jewish reason is different from the reason of the other nations, even as the Jew is different in the possession of a different soul, as is known to the wise, and Jewish reason is perfected through the study of Torah, its mysteries and secrets and through the dialectics of the true wisdom, which is far above the wisdom that is derived from experience. This level the philosophers did not attain and did not merit.\(^\text{13}\)

To be sure, we are bidden to make use of our speculative and reasoning faculties, but the Qabbalists agreed with Halevi that every rational system starts out with a number of unproved axioms or assumptions. We may make use of our powers of reasoning only when the “tools” of basic intuitions are made available to us by revelation. All philosophers base their speculative systems upon one or more “first principles,” and these “first principles” are extra-rational, deriving either from the illusions of human imagination or the truths of God. “For Torah and wisdom were both derived from the divine reason, and are substantially one, complementing each other, and the believer requires both for his perfection. But the first principles upon which the philosophers build their systems are not derived from the divine reason. Hence, all their conclusions are false, incapable of providing salvation.”\(^\text{14}\)
On a deeper level, the Qabbalists were concerned with the task of reconciling the personal philosophy of Jewish monotheism with the implicit mechanistic naturalism of Greek philosophy.

In Judaism, the fundamental analogy for the bonds between God and man in all their variation and complexity is the relationship between two personalities. There is God, the Master, the Father or the King who commands, instructs, pleads, demands, promises or punishes. None of the seductive impulses of the flesh affect Him, for He is spirit, and none of the forces of nature prevail against Him, for He is the creator of the totality of existence out of the naught. Still, in all His omnipotence and omniscience, God is a person. The Talmudic sages shied away from attributing material qualities to Him, but they did not envisage Him without the temperamental and psychical qualities of a human being. It is significant that Rabbi Abraham of Posquieres, who opposed the Maimonidean conception of an abstract Deity, arguing that material qualities are applicable to the nature of God, was deemed to be one of the inspired fathers of the Qabbalah.15

But even those who shunned the coarse attributes of the flesh conceived of God as the ideal saint, who learns, prays, judges and administers His domain, so that His every action might serve as a model for human action.

Upon this basic insight, the entire world view of Judaism was founded. The tortuous and uncertain course of the human adventure in history is explained as the result of the perpetual tension between God and men. There is no fundamental force that is arrayed against the Deity, even Satan serving His purpose in some way, but from time to time the free human will sets itself in direct opposition to the divine will. The consequences of this human rebellion are not automatic or necessitous, for the Lord may, according to His Wisdom, elect to act in accord with the “policy of mercy” or the “policy of law.” Typical of the personal concept in Judaism is the rejection of the pagan-magical view of guilt as an intangible slimy substance clinging to a person as well as the philosophical view of punishment as being causally related to its corresponding crime. The concept of teshuvah, repentance and reconciliation, reflects the genuine nonmechanistic impetus of Jewish genius—the causal chain is set aside by God, who forgives the sinner out of His goodness and His love for His creatures.

In Jewish monotheism, nature was not conceived as operating in accord with laws that were forever fixed in its very being. All the forces
of nature are His "servants," with the sun "rejoicing" to do His bidding and the stars being "counted" upon their disappearance from the sky. The heavens are His "chair" and the earth His "footstool"; still, He speaks to man "out of the hair on His head," and "looks upon the poor and those that are contrite in spirit."

It is through speech that He reveals Himself to man, for speech is the fundamental form of communication between two rational beings. While God cannot be seen, He can be heard, with all the Israelites hearing His words at Sinai; later, His words were restricted to the prophets and still later the sages heard the "echo" of His voice (Bath Kol). In all these relationships, there was no basic difficulty for the religious imagination, since God was conceived as the epitome of a free spirit, able to move about wherever He pleased.

It was Aristotle's concept of a natural law operating in the whole of nature that provided the basic antithesis to the personal concept of Judaism. Man's relation to the universe about him could now be conceived in terms of the necessitous laws of cause and effect, which, once postulated, could not be terminated at any arbitrary point. The inner bond between the logical process and the concept of causality opened up a way of reasoning which sought to find necessitous connections between all events. Even the world exists by necessity, and if man is to rise above the destiny of the animal kingdom, he must achieve his goal by using the laws of necessity to his advantage, avoiding the downward pull of the material and the fever of desire in favor of the truly human exercise of philosophical contemplation. The principles of necessity and of will are polar opposites; each is capable of being stretched so far as to account for the whole of existence, and the two philosophies so generated are perpetually in conflict. The Jewish concept exalts freedom and God as the source of all life, seeing nature as a pale reflection of His dynamic will; the Aristotelian allows necessity and nature to absorb God, as it were, leaving the whole of existence in the iron grip of an inexorable machine.

While Maimonides sensed the ominous implications of this fundamental conflict, nevertheless he yielded to the Aristotelian conception of mechanism and necessity. He concurred in the description of the Deity as "alive, powerful, wise and purposive," but he emptied these adjectives of any real content by declaring that they were only to be taken as negations of negations; i.e., God is not not-alive, not not-wise, etc. To Maimonides, the way to reach God is to declare concerning all
things: “They do not apply to the Deity.” Accordingly, the relation between man and God, so simple and natural in prephilosophical monotheism, becomes an insuperable problem. “How then can one conceive the relation between Him and that which is outside of Him, thus postulating a dimension of existence including them both?”

Man’s rise in the scale of being occurs in accord with the necessitous laws of nature. As his mind grows into unison with the Active Reason of the universe, man achieves a kind of “nearness” to the divine being and a measure of liberation from the swirling currents of passion and the universal sway of death. But it is man himself who thus achieves the ascent, so that at the level of prophecy, a direct intervention of the Deity is required in order to prevent prophecy. Philosophical contemplation is, in this view, the crown of the good life, with the laws of morality and the regulations of piety serving only as the necessary preparation and context for the art of contemplation.

The mizvoth of the Torah are interpreted as fulfilling their function in a necessitous manner, by affecting the mind of the worshiper or the social pattern of society. The inner mechanical logic of Aristotle reigns supreme within the Maimonidean conception of Judaism. The dynamic concept of personality, in which fundamental reality is in continuous tension between the human qualities of love and domination, justice and mercy, wrath and forgiveness, is replaced by the static concept of a self-perpetuating machine in which no change ever occurs. The prophetic declaration, “I, the Lord, did not change,” was intended only to describe the reliability of His character, asserting that God does not forget His promises. But when the rational spirit came to prevail within the “tent of Shem,” this verse was interpreted as referring to the rigid inflexibility and unchangeability of the divine nature; hence, it meant also that God was not moved by prayers, petitions or penitence.

To many saintly souls, the austere and heroic synthesis of philosophical Judaism could only appear disastrous. As a Qabbalist of the eighteenth century put it, “This concept is in truth desolation and death; whoever accepts it should be separated from the community that is in exile, and he should not bother with mizvoth.”

This tension between freedom and necessity, personality and mechanism, is overcome in Qabbalah by the assumption of an infinite chain of being, in which personality constitutes the one direction and necessity the other. It is the progressive diminution of the “grace,” emanating
from the source of divine personality, that permits reality to freeze into a rigid system of inexorable “laws.” There are no dichotomies or absolute divisions in existence, with the total character of the universe shading off progressively from the source of all meaning that is God to the Satanic naught.

If reality is infinite, then all that is finite partakes of unreality and every line of demarcation is only relatively true. Hence, we are led to the conclusion that all separable categories are not really separate, but united by some mediating categories. “Between every two categories there is always a middle category,” and “It is of the nature of existence to have a mediating entity between two opposites.” The principle of continuity furnishes us with the master key for the understanding of the universe, which bears in all its ultimate constituents the double seal of both freedom and necessity, spirit and matter, personality and mechanism. This duality, the Zohar points out, is reflected in the divine name, Elohim, which frequently stands for the Deity as reflected in nature, the numerical equivalents of its letters being equal to those of the Hebrew word for nature (teva). This name consists of two words, ale and mi, standing respectively for the “many” of existence and the “who” of personality. The inference that is drawn from this quaint juggling is that nature consists of a continuous flux of phenomena, moving between these poles of being.

In all likelihood, this organic concept was derived from the contemplation of the human personality, which is spiritual in essence and physical in appearance; free in its own consciousness, yet subject to the operation of a multitude of mechanical laws. “For man is a microcosm, therefore it is right and proper to take him as an analogy and archetype of all the worlds.”

While the Qabbalists derived their teaching from many sources which were not always mutually consistent, they rarely dispensed with the principles of continuity and polarity. In respect of the doctrine of God, they envisaged the Deity in the most “negative” terms, referring to Him as Ain Sof (“Endless”), and denying to Him any physical attributes whatsoever. “For the single Master, called Ain Sof, cannot be said to possess will or desire, intention or thought, speech or action.”

At the same time, they envisaged the Ain Sof as identified in some way with primal man (Adam Kadmon), which is the spiritual archetype of personality, and it was considered rank heresy to separate these
elements in thought. As will appear in the sequel, they also conceived the primal man, in his lower representations, as functioning in automatic response to the performance of mizvot on earth. Mechanism leads into personality and beyond—on to the inscrutable and the incomprehensible. The primal man consists in his turn of ten sefirot, which were conceived as being both God and not-God. "For that which is infinite and boundless could not make that which is finite and definite; therefore, it was necessary to postulate ten sefirot in the middle, which are both finite and infinite."23

Similarly, the human soul was regarded at its lowest as quasi-material, ascending thence by degrees to higher levels which receive "light" from its "roots" in primal man. Whatever man does on earth strikes echoes in the upper reaches of his soul, reverberating in the "upper worlds," bringing about either the "hardening" or the "sweetening" of the "laws."

Fundamentally, the religious content of the principle of continuity is best seen in the practical inference of the supreme importance of every human action. Qabbalistic symbols, which are generally coarse and frequently intricate in detail, were not intended to be merely symbols, but to be taken as the lowest links in the chain of being, which when moved "below" effect changes "above." Nothing that man does is unimportant, for he was designed to be the custodian of the vast palace; that is, the universe, "constricting" or "expanding" the channels of grace by his obedience to the law or his rebellion against it. "The Lord is thy shadow" was interpreted to mean that the Deity reacts in automatic fashion to the actions of men. (While we employ the term "man" in this connection, we must remember that for most Qabbalists only an Israelite deserved this designation. The souls of other nations were not connected by "channels of light" to the upper worlds and were therefore incapable of affecting the operation of the sefirotic world by their deeds or misdeeds.24

Thus, the absolute dichotomy between matter and spirit, between this earthly world and the divine being, was overcome in Qabbalah by the assumption of a host of mediating and connecting entities. The metaphysical difficulties posed by philosophical analysis were solved by the bland denial of the logic of contradiction and the law of the excluded middle. The world is one; hence, all opposites are dynamically related by entities that were at once of one category and of its opposite.
For our abstractions are not metaphysically ultimate. "They reach and
do not reach" (mo-to v'lo moti).

The problem of a change having occurred in the eternally changeless
nature of the Infinite, when the universe was created by His will, is
resolved by the assumption that creation took place at levels that were
far removed from the inner being of God, with the extent of volition
required diminishing as the current of Divine influence is traced back
to its ultimate source, so that virtually no effort was needed at the end
of the infinite chain of causation: "... so that when we come to the
ultimate Emanator, we find that no change occurred in Him, because
of the chain of will leading to will. . . . At the source, we find that
which is midway between potential and actual functioning." 25

In the same manner, the Qabbalists solved the paradox of God's
spirituality and mercy leading to the materiality, harshness and satanic
uncleanliness of this world. In the endless chain of being, things get
"coarser" and more evil in proportion to their "remoteness" from the
source and in direct relation to the number of "garments" in which the
holy spark is hidden. "Just as all the laws are love in their source, so the
unclean are clean, and everything is rooted in the will of wills." 26

The Qabbalistic logic of continuity obliterated all distinctions be-
tween intellectual concepts and the physical world, by the assumption
of intermediate essences, with the result that seemingly naive primitive
ways of thinking were reinstated by the supreme subtleties of their
dialectics. The term "spirit" for instance, which originally meant
breath, came to be reidentified with the breath of the spoken word,
especially the spoken Hebrew words of prayer.

For, behold, the letter is a palace and fortress for the spirituality to which
it points, and when a man mentions or moves one of the letters, that
spirituality is necessarily aroused. Also, holy forms come to be made out
of the breath of the mouth which are uplifted and bound together in
their roots within the domain of Emanation. Not only this, but in their
physical existence; that is, in their writing, spirituality rests upon the
letters. This, indeed, is the reason for the holiness of the Scroll of the
Law. 27

By the same token, the ethereal realms of spirituality were conceived
to be fashioned in forms corresponding to the Hebrew letters, the
alphabet being elevated to the rank of a cosmic, eternal pattern.
They said that the higher intelligences are precious lights, of the utmost purity, fashioned in the form of letters. This association applies to all forms of light, for even physical light consists of letters, as the masters of the wisdom of magic testify, for when they make fire they see letters, by means of which they comprehend diverse branches of knowledge and are enabled to foretell the future. And if this be true in the case of physical fire, how much more is this applicable to the case of the higher lights, which contain the forms of letters and sefirot, with little letters subsisting within big letters. . . .

This concept enabled the Qabbalists to interpret the actual Torah as an earthly embodiment of a corresponding “spiritual” Torah, consisting of divine “lights,” functioning as the key to the upper realms of grace.

“The verse, ‘Torah is light,’ is to be interpreted as meaning real light, not illumination in the sense of analogy, and not wisdom only but actual light, for this is the form of its existence above.”

It follows that the earthly domain of time and matter was bound by a chain of mediating essences unto the spiritual realm of eternity and spirit. The sefirot were at once God and not-God, spatial and nonspatial, temporal and eternal.

We say that it is true that the realm of Emanation is not body and not matter, but that from it body and material issue. Thus, the masters of Qabbalah believed that the four elements are “pointed to” in the sefirot. . . . Not that the actual elements are to be found in them, heaven forbid, but the roots of the elements out of which they issue: even so, with the dimensions and concepts of body. That is why we are justified in saying, length, width and depth, for we mean the power whence length issues, the power of width and the power of depth.

From all the foregoing, the net religious substance of the Qabbalistic world view becomes clear. The observant Jew was assured that his every action was charged with endless “cosmic” ramifications. Upon him and his fellow Jews, the cosmic order in all its vastness and complexity hung breathless. Every mizvah he performed helped to effect an “improvement” in the upper spheres, while, at the same time, it provided an additional “thread of light,” out of which he would eventually accumulate those “garments of light,” in which his soul might be clothed when it dwells in the “lower paradise.” By the same token, every avera (sin) constituted a “blemish” in the higher “realms of purity,” which re-
dounded ultimately to the injury of the entire world, besides daubing his soul with a diabolical stain, which would have to be removed by pain and repentance, before the soul could ascend back to its source. This ascent was conceived as an infinite adventure, continuing in the various domains of paradise in the hereafter, until the soul attains a higher degree of beatitude than it had before creation. And all these effects are virtually automatic, with the “above” domain of the spiritual responding mechanically to the actions of the Jewish people here “below.” To the believers, the psychological motivations for the utmost exertions of piety were manifestly all embracing. They labored at the salvation of their own souls, yes, but at the same time they fulfilled the most crucial function in the total economy of the universe. Their prayers were for the sake of “the world above” and for the well-being of mankind generally. Their piety partook of universal, even cosmic, idealism and of the urge to sacrifice one’s own comforts in behalf of the salvation of all men.

The Qabbalistic mentality was saved from the danger of sinking to the level of theosophic juggling by constant emphasis on the psychological attitude of the worshiper. The old virtue of humility was conceived to be the master key to every forward step in the domain of Qabbalah. In all their fantastic flights to the upper realms, the Qabbalists did not forget to extol the simple and fundamental virtues of Jewish piety, guarding against the insidious sins of pride and complacency. As they strove for the powers “above” they did not neglect the moral struggle of men here “below.”

Furthermore, their concept of the cosmic “mission” of the Jewish people was so exalted that they were kept from indulging in the cultivation of their own individual piety. While individual “saints” are capable of moving the worlds, the Jewish people as a whole constituted the major link between the upper and lower worlds. Though every nation possesses a governing “genius,” the Jewish people represent an earthly embodiment of the Shechinah, which is the tenth sefirah, and is called malkhuth, or dominion. Not humanity, but Jewry in its totality, is the center of the cosmic drama, and it is for Israel to bring about by its actions the “union of the worlds,” the return of the fallen sefirah back to its source. The individual Jew was thus bidden to unite himself in thought and sentiment with the totality of the Jewish people, performing every mizvah for the sake of “the unification of the Holy One,
blessed be He, and His Shechinah, in the name of all Israel, through Him who is hidden and inconceivable."

The particularistic loyalties of the Jew were exalted in the most superlative terms. While philosophic Judaism labored to widen the common intellectual and moral ground of all faiths and peoples, the Qabbalah sought to isolate Israel from the culture of "the other nations," which is derived "from the worlds of uncleanness." By its general doctrine of things in this world "pointing to" essences in the higher worlds, the Qabbalah was able to assign supreme importance to every Jewish custom and practice, and to give added impetus to the growth of fanaticism and ethnic self-exaltation. Rabbi Shalom Sharabi, author of a "holy" Qabbalistic prayer book, which is still used by pietists in Jerusalem, boasted in his introduction that he had never looked at any book which was not written by the great Qabbalists, Isaac Luria and Hayim Vital and their authentic disciples; i.e., the "purity" of his vision was not dimmed, God forbid, by the "shells" of "impurity" dwelling on unholy letters. Thus did those who aimed so high, seeking to encompass the daring of philosophy along with the depth of piety, occasionally sink so low in fanaticism and self-aggrandizing dogmatism. The Qabbalists tapped new wells of enthusiasm and devotion in behalf of the Jewish faith, raising the pitch of piety to feverish heights and strengthening the resistance of the Jew during the dismal, torment-filled centuries of the later medieval and the early modern period. But this good was purchased at a price, a price which all but extinguished the sweet rationality and even-tempered humanity of Judaism at its best.

NOTES

1. See introduction to T. Tishbi, Mishnath Hazoar (Jerusalem 1971).
2. Teshuvoth HaBah Hayshonoth, 5.
3. Torath Haolah, III, 4.
4. Nefesh HaHayim, IV; see also the introduction of Rabbi Hayim Volozhin to the commentary of Rabbi Elijah of Vilna to the Safro Dizniuta. Printed in Shiveath Hameoroth (Vilna, 1913).
5. Teshuvoth Ha-Rivesh, 157.
7. J. Yavetz, Mitpahath Seforim.
11. Shomair Emunim, I—Dispute. See also beginning of Sefer HaPeliath, where a human being is created by a combination of letters and then restored by reversing the formula.
14. Ibid.
15. See reference above to chain of authority; also, Meirath Ainin, Beshaloth; commentary of Rikanati on Torah, Nasso.
17. Ibid., III, 28:36:32.
19. Commentary of RabD to Sefer Yeziarah, p. 54; also R. Hayim Vital in beginning of Aitz Hayim.
20. See Zohar, Hakdomo.
21. Shomair Emunim, p. 27.
22. Quoted in the name of Rabbi Isaac the Blind in Shem Olam, p. 77; see also commentary of RabD to Sefer Yeziarah.
24. See Shefa Tal, Chap. 13; Tanya, Chap. 6; Nefesh HaHayim, I. 4. On the other hand, note the opposing view of R. Elijah Ginazina: “But know that the other nations can also effect some improvements in the channels, when they observe the seven Noachide mizvoth, but their improvements are not as perfect as those of the 613 mizvoth.” (Iggeret Hamudoth, p. 37.)
26. Ibid., II, 6–18.
27. Pardes Rimonim, shaar haotiot, II.
30. Pardes Rimonim, shaar taam haqaziluth. Some Qabbalists referred to the sefirot as quasi-spatial entities. See Kelach Pithhai Hokhmo, 29: “But, before space came into being, it was impossible for anything to exist; only after space came to be, the sefirot emerged in accordance with the nature of space.” Of particular interest is the manner in which the category of space is derived by some writers from the ten sefirot. As the infinitesimal point “expands” out of the naught, it asserts itself along three dimensions, each of which possesses a beginning, middle and end, thus reflecting the number ten. This derivation has its philosophic parallel in the “critical” philosophy of Hermann Cohen, particularly his Category of the Source.
31. Nahar Shalom, in introduction.