olam he-zeh v’olam ha-ba
Greenspoon, Leonard J.

Published by Purdue University Press

Greenspoon, Leonard J.
olam he-zeh v’olam ha-ba: This World and the World to Come in Jewish Belief and Practice.
Purdue University Press, 2017.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/62520.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/62520

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2223634
The Dybbuk: The Origins and History of a Concept

Morris M. Faierstein

Approximately a century ago, Shlomo Zanvil Rapoport, better known by his pen name, S. An-sky, began to write a play he called *Between Two Worlds*. The play was a love story surrounded by a story of dybbuk possession.¹ An-sky’s interest in the dybbuk came from his ethnographic work, collecting and preserving East European Jewish folk traditions that were quickly disappearing. The play premiered on December 9, 1920, in Warsaw, and the rest is history. It became the most popular Yiddish play, quickly translated into Hebrew and a number of other languages, and performed all over the world. It remains the great icon of Yiddish theater. A side effect was that the subject of the dybbuk was popularized as a folk motif. Despite this popularity, or perhaps because of it, the subject of dybbuk possession did not become the subject of serious scholarly inquiry. The few scholarly studies that have been published take An-sky’s play as their starting point and assume it represents an accurate understanding of the concept and its history.² This study will endeavor to reconsider the concept of the dybbuk through an examination of the primary sources that discuss this concept without prior assumptions or theories. It will also trace the historical development and evolution of the dybbuk concept.

Tales of people being possessed by demons and other evil spirits can be found in Jewish literature as early as the first century c.e. Talmudic and midrashic literature also contain such stories,³ but these stories did not attract significant attention or comments in the post-talmudic medieval Jewish tradition. The classic models of possession in Christianity were the stories of possession of people by demons and by Satan, and their exorcism by Jesus in the New Testament.⁴ Following Jesus’s example, stories of possession and exorcism were often encountered in the lives of Christian saints. The ability to exorcise or subdue a demonic spirit or even to vanquish the works of Satan was a sure sign of sainthood. Stories of demonic possession and connection to Satanic forces, which came to be known as witchcraft, grew in the course of the medieval period and reached a high point in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the midst of the religious and political conflicts arising from the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation.⁵
In the Jewish tradition, aside from the talmudic stories of demonic possession, it was only in sixteenth century Safed that we hear of cases of people being possessed and needing exorcism. A new type of entity appeared, the soul of a Jewish man who had committed a sin whose punishment was that the soul would be trapped between this world and the next and would have to wander until expiation was found for the sin. There is no evidence in the literature of a female dybbuk. Hayyim Vital explicitly stated that the soul of a woman cannot become a dybbuk because women do not participate in the process of *gilgul*. Rather, their souls are sent directly to gehenna, where they are punished for their sins. There is also no evidence that the soul of a non-Jew could be a dybbuk.

The soul of the sinner condemned to *gilgul* was originally called an “evil spirit” [*ruah rah*] in the early possession stories from Safed. It has been the conventional wisdom that the term *dybbuk*, meaning that which is attached, began to be used instead of “evil spirit” at the end of the seventeenth century. More recently, Sara Zfatman has demonstrated that this terminological transition took place later, in the first part of the eighteenth century. The first reference to the term *dybbuk* that she found is in a story of an exorcism in Speyer in 1715. For the purpose of clarity, I will use the term *dybbuk* even where it is historically anachronistic.

**THEORETICAL ORIGINS OF THE DYBBUK CONCEPT**

The theoretical bases for the concept of the dybbuk are two kabbalistic concepts, *gilgul* [transmigration or metempsychosis] and *ibbur* [impregnation]. The concept of *gilgul* is first found in the early kabbalistic work, *Sefer Bahir*, and then expanded in the *Zohar*, the great classic of medieval Kabbalah. The punishment of *gilgul* was originally related in kabbalistic literature to transgressing the laws of levirate marriage. The person who refused to marry his sister-in-law and perpetuate the memory of his brother by having a son with her or participating in the ritual of *halitzah*, which would allow her to marry someone else, was punished with *gilgul*. That is, his soul would wander the earth endlessly and he would never find rest or find expiation for his other sins. Gradually, the range of sins that necessitated the punishment of *gilgul* and that could be expiated through it was expanded.

There is a midrashic exemplum, “The Tanna and the Dead Man,” that is probably the earliest description of a case of *gilgul* and its resolution, even though the term *gilgul* is not attached to this story. Various versions of this
story are cited in a number of post-talmudic and medieval sources, including the Zohar. An early version of this story is found in tractate Kallah Rabbati:

Come and hear; R. Akiba went to a certain place [a cemetery] where he met a man [i.e., a ghost] carrying a heavy load on his shoulder with which he was unable to proceed, and he was crying and groaning. He asked him, “What did you do [in your lifetime]?” He replied, “There is no forbidden act in the world which I left undone, and now guards have been set over me who do not allow me to rest.” R. Akiba asked him, “have you left a son?” He answered, “By your life! Do not detain me because I fear the angels who beat me with fiery lashes and say to me, ‘Why do you not walk quickly?’” R. Akiba said to him, “Tell me whom have you left?” He replied, “I have left behind my wife who was pregnant.” R. Akiba then proceeded to that city and inquired, “Where is the son of So and So?” [The inhabitants] replied, “May the memory of that wicked person be uprooted.” He asked them the reason and they said, “He robbed and preyed upon people and caused them suffering; what is more, he violated a betrothed girl on the Day of Atonement.” He made his way to the house and found the wife about to be delivered of a child. He waited until she gave birth to [a son], circumcised him and when he grew up, took him to the Synagogue to join in public worship. Later R. Akiba returned to that [cemetery] and [the ghost] appeared to him and said, “May your mind be [always] at rest because you have set my mind at rest.”

Later versions of this story are much more detailed and have many similarities to the interrogations of the dybbuk found in some of the dybbuk tales from the seventeenth century and later. However, this story, which is the prototype for the concept of *gilgul*, only brings us halfway to the concept of the dybbuk. The second aspect that is also crucial to the dybbuk is the concept of *ibbur*, impregnation of a soul within the body of another person. As we will see, *ibbur* remained a theoretical concept until we get to the kabbalists of Safed.

Another definition of *gilgul* that evolved entailed the soul being reborn into a new body and being given the opportunity to atone for a sin that had not been completely expiated in the original lifetime of the soul. A famous example is the story of the ten Rabbinic Martyrs who were killed by the Romans at the end of the Bar Kochba rebellion. According to the medieval Midrash Bereshit Rabbati, by Rabbi Moses ha-Darshan, the death of the ten martyrs was a punishment for the sin committed by Joseph’s ten brothers, who
were present when they sold him into slavery. This is found in an extended commentary on Genesis 37:26. The rabbis were the *gilgulim* of the ten brothers. An extended discussion of this type of *gilgul* can also be found in Hayyim Vital’s mystical diary, *Sefer Hezyonot*, which will be discussed below.

A dybbuk was a soul that had committed particularly heinous crimes that could not be atoned for merely by being transmigrated into a new body, where it could atone for its original sin. The dybbuk was trapped in a limbo, wandering between heaven and gehenna, between this world and the next, until expiation was found and the soul could be judged and sent to gehenna for its punishment and then on to the Garden of Eden for its reward. *Ibbur* was considered a much more esoteric subject than *gilgul* and was not the subject of significant discussion. The term *ibbur* was always preceded by the term *sod* [the secret of], and any discussion of the concept and its significance was strongly discouraged. For the most part, *ibbur* was restricted to the righteous and considered a reward rather than a punishment.

Before the fifteenth century, the concepts of *gilgul* and *ibbur* were only abstract concepts found in rabbinic and kabbalistic literature. With the dissemination of kabbalistic texts and ideas the concept of *gilgul* became the subject of debate and disagreement between kabbalists and rationalist Jewish philosophers. The philosophers rejected the concept of *gilgul*, under the influence of philosophical traditions going back to Aristotle’s concept of the soul. It is noteworthy that Christianity and mainstream Islam also rejected the concept of transmigration. Christian theologians of all denominations, Protestant and Catholic, repeatedly rejected the concept of transmigration and the possibility of possession by the souls of the deceased. Sunni Islam also does not accept the concept of transmigration, but some offshoots of Shi’ite Islam, like the Druze, Alawites, and Ismailis, accept the concept of transmigration. In other words, belief in possession by a dybbuk is impossible in the Christian and mainstream Muslim traditions. It is a uniquely Jewish concept. Of course, transmigration is a key concept in Hinduism and Buddhism along with the religions that emanate from them. However, the understanding of this concept in these religions is different from its understanding in Judaism, and an analysis is beyond our present purview.

**GILGUL AND IBBUR IN SAFED**

The first reports of actual cases of possession, based on the concepts *gilgul* and *ibbur*, appeared in the literature of the kabbalistic revival in Safed. Why did
the Safed kabbalists give life to the concept of dybbuk possession, and what purpose did it serve in their reinterpretation of Jewish belief and practice? Why did this concept move from the theoretical to the actual only in Safed? There are no reports of the appearance of a dybbuk prior to the Safed events. Central to answering this question are the concepts of *gilgul* and *ibbur* and how they were implemented by the kabbalists of Safed. The aspect of *gilgul* that most interested the kabbalists of Safed is the idea of soul families and family trees. This concept asserts that there is a familial relationship between souls that can impact a person’s present life and behaviors. One of Luria’s mystical talents was that he could also look at someone’s forehead and tell them about the history of their soul, not only about their previous *gilgulim*, but also identify to which soul families they belonged.

In the fourth part of his mystical diary, *Book of Visions*, Hayyim Vital discusses in great detail what he was told by R. Isaac Luria about the origins and history of his soul, tracing it back to Adam’s sons, Cain and Abel. Surprisingly, Vital’s soul is traced back to Cain, rather than to Abel, as one might normally expect. Luria also told Vital about his prior *gilgulim*, starting with Rabbi Vidal de Tolosa (second half of the fourteenth century), author of the *Maggid Mishneh*, an important commentary on Maimonides’ great halachic work, *Mishneh Torah*. Vital then went through several more *gilgulim* in undistinguished people, each of whom committed a sin relating to blood that was not atoned for. It was now Vital’s turn, and he needed to exert himself to finally atone for the sin first committed by Rabbi Vidal de Tolosa.

This was important because a *Yihud* or unification, which is a form of *ibbur*, was efficacious when one tried to unite their soul with the soul of a deceased worthy who was from the same soul family. *Yihud* of two souls that have a familial connection is one version of positive *ibbur*. The concept of *ibbur* asserts that it is possible for the soul of a deceased person to enter the body of a living person and communicate with the living person’s soul and mind. There are two types of positive *ibbur*, and one of negative *ibbur*, and all three, *Yihud* and the two types of *ibbur*, are represented in the literature of Safed. Of the three, the negative one, dybbuk possession, is the best known, but the positive ones were the more important ones for the kabbalists of Safed. The most important practitioner of *Yihudim* was Isaac Luria, who regularly visited the grave of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, the purported author of the *Zohar*, the canonical text of the kabbalistic tradition. Rabbi Simeon’s grave was in Meron, not far from Safed. Luria also saw himself, and was seen by his disciples, as a *gilgul* of Rabbi Simeon, which further enhanced his aura of
authority. Not only was Luria a *gilgul* of Rabbi Simeon, but his disciples were also seen as the *gilgulim* of Rabbi Simeon’s disciples mentioned in the *Zohar*.

In addition to the *Yihudim* of Luria and his disciples, there was another type of positive *ibbur* possession in Safed. In this type of *ibbur*, the person being possessed did not directly invite the possession, but it was for a positive purpose and the person was not harmed. The best known example is the *Maggid*, the heavenly messenger who guided Rabbi Joseph Karo in many ways throughout his life. The messages and instructions of the *Maggid* are contained in Karo’s book, *Maggid Mesharim*. Another example of maggidic possession is found in Hayyim Vital’s mystical diary, the *Book of Visions*. It tells the story of the heavenly messenger who possessed the daughter of Raphael Anav and brought a number of messages for Hayyim Vital, with her acting as the medium.

**MAGGID AND DYBBUK**

About the same time that the phenomenon of maggidic possession appeared in the sixteenth century, another type of possession appeared, by a malevolent spirit that came to be known as a dybbuk and that could be seen as the negative inverse of the *maggid*. Rather than bringing positive revelations, it brought discord and the revelation of sins and misbehavior on the part of participants and observers. As Moshe Idel has observed, it is no accident that Rabbi Joseph Karo, the best known person possessed by a *maggid*, was also the first exorcist of a dybbuk. The two phenomena were two sides of the same coin, the result of attempts by kabbalists in the sixteenth century to access divine revelations by magical means.

**DYBBUK POSSESSION IN SAFED**

The negative form of *ibbur* is what we call dybbuk possession. In this circumstance, a soul that has been condemned to the punishment of *gilgul* finds a vulnerable human host and takes it over. Dybbukim, when questioned, often mentioned the pain of wandering and their desire to find rest, which can be found only in a host. The dybbuk not only took over control of the host’s body, but also took over the ability to speak and move, and the host became a puppet that was controlled by the dybbuk. While the details of how and why a dybbuk entered a person are interesting, our interest here is in the larger social and cultural significance of dybbuk possession.
The Safed literature contains seven stories of dybbuk possession. Certain things stand out about this group of stories. The people being possessed were four men and three women. Two of the males were described as young boys, and one was eighteen years old. The fourth man was Rabbi Hayyim Vital, Luria’s most important disciple.25 The three females are described as a woman, the daughter of someone, and a widow.26

Another characteristic of the Safed exorcism stories is that relatively little attention is paid to the actual events in most of the Safed descriptions. There are no detailed descriptions of what happened at an exorcism in Safed in the literature produced by the Safed kabbalists themselves. The event of possession is mentioned and that an attempt at exorcism was made. Half the time the exorcism failed, and the person being possessed died as a result of the process of forcing the dybbuk to leave. In one case, R. Isaac Luria could not go, so he taught his disciple, R. Hayyim Vital, what to do and sent him to deal with the matter alone. In another case, Vital records that he became angry at a dybbuk for not showing the proper respect he felt was due him. After slapping the dybbuk and rebuking him, he concludes his account with, “and then I exorcised him.”27 It would seem that getting proper respect was more important for Vital than exorcising a dybbuk.

THE PURPOSE OF DYBBUK STORIES IN SAFED

There does not seem to be any larger purpose in these stories. Unlike other stories about Luria, they do not reflect positively on his mystical powers and abilities, which seems to be the purpose of most of the other stories preserved about him. What then was the significance and meaning of these dybbuk possession stories for the kabbalists of Safed? If the purpose were to glorify Luria’s magical and mystical powers, one would have expected a much higher success rate for the exorcisms that Luria attempted. Rather, I would suggest that they are related to the important role that the concepts of *gilgul* and *ibbur* played in Safed Kabbalah. These two interrelated concepts were central to the process of validating and authenticating the apparently new ideas and practices of the Safed kabbalists.

By the second half of the sixteenth century, a combination of factors, including the codification of Jewish law in Rabbi Joseph Karo’s *Shulhan Arukh*28 and the printing press, which made many more works available, had the effect of canonizing certain ideas and practices. This gave them an air of authority that made religious innovation more difficult than it had been before
the age of print. Yet, in spite of the increasing difficulties of religious innovation and creativity, Isaac Luria and the circle of kabbalists in Safed were able to revolutionize both the study of Kabbalah and more importantly the practice of Judaism. The new religious practices and rituals created or “rediscovered” by the Safed kabbalists in the Zohar and other medieval kabbalistic texts transformed Judaism in the following centuries.  

**THE SOURCE OF ISAAC LURIA’S RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY**

Central to understanding how this innovation occurred is the question of Isaac Luria’s religious authority. There were two stages in Luria’s career, and in each of them a different reason was offered to support the religious authority and sanctity of Luria’s teachings. The first phase was the six years in Egypt that began when he obtained a manuscript of mystical writings and ended with his heavenly mentor, Elijah the prophet, telling him that the time had come for him to go to the land of Israel and become a teacher of mysticism. During these six years he spent his time in a hut near the Nile studying with Elijah, who taught him the meaning of the esoteric manuscript that he had obtained. Thus, his ideas had the approval and support of his heavenly mentor.

Luria arrived in Safed in early 1570 c.e. That summer, Moses Cordovero, who had been considered the greatest kabbalist of Safed before Luria’s arrival, became ill. Before his death his disciples asked him, who would be his successor? He responded that it would be the one who would see the pillar of fire over his grave. At the funeral, Luria said that he saw a pillar of fire in a certain place in the cemetery and that should be the site of Cordovero’s grave. Luria had fulfilled the sign that Cordovero had told his disciples to look for. Within a few months of his arrival in Safed, Luria became the dominant figure in the Safed kabbalistic community that had been established approximately thirty-five years earlier. His kabbalistic teachings supplanted those of Cordovero and became the dominant school of kabbalistic thought.

There is no evidence of any claims to revelations from Elijah during his period in Safed. Aside from his personal charisma, which undoubtedly was great, what was the religious authority that gave the great weight necessary to move the community to accept his teachings and innovations in religious practice over those of his predecessors? An additional problem is the belief among kabbalists that true innovation in Kabbalah ended with Nahmanides (d. 1270 c.e.). I believe the answer is to be found in his claim to be a *gilgul,*
a transmigration of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, the author of the Zohar, the most authoritative work of Kabbalah, and the use of the concepts of *gilgul* and *ibbur*, which were combined in the concept of *Yihud* as the explanation and validation of his spiritual and charismatic authority.

**YIHUDIM**

The process of *Yihudim* [unifications] was that Luria would prostrate himself on the grave of his soul mate, Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, and through a series of prayers and mystical incantations invite the soul of the deceased to come down from heaven and unite with the kabbalist’s soul in his body. When this union was effected, the kabbalist could communicate with the other soul and acquire information about future events or obtain a better understanding of a text that was not clear. R. Shloimel Dreznitz, author of the first hagiography of R. Isaac Luria, quoted a description of Luria’s practice of *Yihudim*:

> He [Luria] used to stretch himself out on the tomb of R. Simeon bar Yohai, and he knew how to cleave spirit to spirit, and to concentrate on binding and raising up his soul with that of R. Simeon until he brought about unity above. Afterwards, R. Simeon’s soul descended into his body, and R. Simeon would speak with him, revealing to him all that he had learned in the academy on high, as a man speaks with his neighbor.33

Were one to see R. Isaac Luria as he engaged in one of his *Yihudim* in Meron, one would see little beyond Luria lying on the grave, praying and perhaps some small bodily movement. On the other hand, the positive and negative public manifestations of *gilgul* and *ibbur*, that is, dybbukim and maggidim, were public events that the community could see and hear. They helped reinforce Luria’s claims to spiritual authority. Having seen a dybbuk possess someone or hearing from eyewitnesses about Karo’s maggid gave greater credence to the idea that Luria could meditate on the grave of a great talmudic figure, like Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, and come back with new interpretations and teachings that derived from a heavenly source that vouched for its authenticity and authority. The dybbuk stories in Safed did not play a central role in developing the status of Rabbi Isaac Luria as a holy man. Rather, they supported and added further validation of his status as a religious authority whose innovations were supported by the heavenly and ancient authority of his earlier incarnation and soul mate, Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, the author of the holy Zohar.
THE DYBBUK IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The subsequent history of the dybbuk concept and its relation to the Safed incidents is complicated. Many of the relevant Safed stories concerning dybbukim were found in documents that remained in manuscript and were not published until much later, some as late as the middle of the twentieth century. For example, Hayyim Vital’s *Sefer Hezyonot*, the single most important source of dybbuk stories in Safed, was not published in a complete edition until 1954. Thus, most of what was subsequently known about dybbuk possession was based on two documents first published in the seventeenth century.

The first source is a letter written by R. Elijah Falcon, a disciple of Luria’s, who was expelled by Luria from his group of disciples. Falcon wrote a long letter in which he described in great detail an exorcism that occurred in Safed in 1571. He also appended a second shorter exorcism story. He circulated copies of this letter to a number of Jewish communities. His motivations in sending this letter are not clear, and we do not know to which communities he sent this letter. However, copies of this letter have survived in a number of sources. The first published version of his whole letter was in Manasseh Ben Israel’s work *Nishmat Hayyim*, which defended the immortality of the soul and was published in Amsterdam in 1652. The story of the possession and exorcism was published in the context of being another piece of evidence attesting to the immortality of the soul. The second story in Falcon’s letter appeared in the Yiddish *Mayse Bukh*, first published at Basel in 1602. This is the first published account of a dybbuk. Another important witness to the circulation of Falcon’s letter is *Divrei Yosef*, a chronicle by Joseph Sambari, composed in Damascus in the 1670s, but not published until the 1990s.

The second description of a dybbuk is found in Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo’s *Ta’alumot Hokhmah*, published by his disciple, Samuel Ashkenazi, at Basel in 1629. Among the things published in this kabbalistic miscellany were three letters by R. Shloimele Dresnitz and an appendix that described the possession and exorcism of a dybbuk. Dresnitz was a kabbalist from Moravia who went to Safed in the 1590s to learn more about the new kabbalistic developments there. He stayed and married the daughter of one of Luria’s disciples. He also sent a series of letters to his friend, Rabbi Issachar Ber of Kremnitz, in Poland describing what he had heard about Luria and his greatness. These letters became the basis of the hagiographical account of Luria’s life known as *Shivhei ha-AR”I*. At the end of the third letter there is a dybbuk story, similar in many ways to Falcon’s account.
These two accounts by Dresnitz and Falcon became the basis for many of the future dybbuk stories and traditions. The relationship of these two documents to the actual events in Safed that they purport to describe is not entirely clear. Further analysis and comparison of these two accounts is necessary before a decision can be made with regard to their historical accuracy. There are significant differences between these two accounts and the accounts of possession and exorcism found in the writings of Hayyim Vital and other Safed kabbalists that were not published until the late nineteenth or even twentieth century.

One thing that jumps out when one compares the Safed accounts to these two letters is the brevity and lack of detail in the Safed accounts and the prolixity and great detail of these letters. In addition, motifs, concepts, and procedures first found in these two texts became stereotypical aspects of almost all the later stories of possession and exorcism, but are not found in the Safed texts. For example, the intense interrogation of the dybbuk that is a central part of the Falcon letter is not a feature of the Safed stories. Isaac Luria had the unique ability to discern the sources and sins of souls and did not need to interrogate the dybbuk. Introducing smoke under the nose of the possessed person to drive out the dybbuk is also not found in Safed. It is noteworthy that both of these motifs are important in stories of Christian stories of demonic exorcisms. A closer comparison between the details of the Safed stories with the Dresnitz and Falcon accounts is an important desideratum. The Falcon account, in particular, has aspects that raise questions about its authenticity.

The second half of the seventeenth century also produced the first dybbuk account that is most likely fictional. Sarah Zfatman found an interesting Yiddish pamphlet that is known in only one copy that has survived, called “The Exorcism of the Evil Spirit in Koretz.” Her study of this story demonstrated that it had no historical basis and must be considered to be a fictional account. The pamphlet has no date, but the physical evidence of the pamphlet dates it to the end of the seventeenth century in Eastern Europe. More recently, Zfatman has discussed several more dybbuk stories reported in the same period and geographical area in a major monograph. Unlike the Koretz story, the story of a dybbuk in Nikolsburg, Moravia, in 1696 included well-known historical figures, and the story was widely reported and may have become a model for later dybbuk stories.

One aspect of this story that stands out is the Sabbatean connection of some of the figures involved in this episode. This relationship to Sabbatianism may be the key to understanding the significance of this dybbuk incident.
From its beginnings, this movement sought to demonstrate its legitimacy by modeling itself on the Safed kabbalistic revival. Prophecy and direct contact with the divine world were central aspects of Sabbateanism, and like in Safed, a dybbuk would be a vivid illustration that direct contact between the mundane and heavenly worlds was still possible. In other words, the dybbuk played a similar role for the Sabbateans in late seventeenth century Moravia as it did for the kabbalists in Safed a century earlier.

The Sabbatean relation to the dybbuk is confirmed by the significant role it played in the writings of Rabbi Elijah ha-Cohen of Izmir, known by his nickname, Ittamari. He was born in the middle of the seventeenth century, lived in Izmir, and died in 1729. He is best known as the author of the famous ethical work Shevet Musar, but he was a prolific author who wrote a large number of homiletical and ethical works, most of which were published after his death. He never served as a rabbi, but was a popular and influential preacher, who was influenced by Kabbalah. Recent scholarship has suggested that he was a moderate follower of the false messiah, Sabbetai Sevi. He gives the following explanation as his reason for his interest in dybbukim: “I, the author, say that it is a mitzvah to publicly inform the public about the concept of gilgul and to inculcate this in their minds that through the concept of gilgul many difficult questions can be resolved that cause a person to turn from God, because of the [problem of] the righteous who suffer, and similar things. Through the concept of gilgul, these problems will be resolved, and the wise will understand the matter.”

With the rise of Chasidism, the ability to exorcise a dybbuk became one of the attributes of the Chasidic zaddiq. The hagiographical biography of Israel Baal Shem Tov (Besht), the founder of Hasidism, Shivhei ha-Besht, was directly modeled on Shivhei ha-Ari, that of Isaac Luria. Shivhei ha-Besht included an important story of his encounter with and domination of a dybbuk. According to one story, when the Besht and several others entered the room where a possessed woman was found, the spirit possessing her greeted each according to his deeds and status. However, the spirit said to the Besht that it was not afraid of him because it knew that he had been forbidden by heaven to utilize holy names and to practice as a baal shem before his thirty-sixth birthday. In turn, the Baal Shem Tov became the model for future Chasidic leaders, and exorcism stories proliferated and became a standard part of Chasidic hagiography. Accounts of dybbuk possession and exorcism were part of later Chasidic hagiography, chapbooks, and popular folklore. It is also noteworthy that most of the dybbuk stories in Chasidic hagiography are secondhand accounts, stories
told about earlier figures and not firsthand accounts of events witnessed by the narrator of the story.49

An-sky's play is a combination of several of these factors with a heavy dose of influence from Russian theatrical adaptations of Romeo and Juliet, as has been demonstrated by a number of authors in the important collection of essays on An-sky edited by Steve Zipperstein and Gabriella Safran.50 It may be good theater, but in no way does it reflect the historical reality of dybbuk possession. The full history and meaning of the dybbuk concept remains to be explored.

NOTES


2. Two recent studies of this type are Jeffrey H. Chajes, Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists and Early Modern Judaism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Rachel Elior, Dybbuks and Jewish Women in Social History, Mysticism and Folklore (Jerusalem: Urim, 2008).


22. The story is found in Faierstein, *Jewish Mystical Autobiographies*, 57–62, and 65–73.

23. Earlier figures that claimed maggidic revelations were Karo’s teacher, Rabbi Joseph Taitatzak and the anonymous author of the *Book of the Responding Angel* [Sefer ha-Mesiv]. Concerning Taitatzak, see Gershom Scholem, “Rabbi Joseph Taitatzak and the Revelations attributed to Him [Hebrew],” *Sefunot* 11 (1971–1978): 69–112. Regarding the Sefer ha-Mesiv, see Moshe Idel, “Inquiries in the Doctrine of Sefer ha-Mesiv [Hebrew],” *Sefunot* 17 (1983): 185–266. However, it is important to remember that both of these works remained in manuscript until the recent publications by these scholars and thus their influence was minimal at best.


27. Faierstein, *Jewish Mystical Autobiographies*, 73.


31. Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, is the most comprehensive biographical study of Luria and describes his life in Safed in great detail.


This World and the World to Come in Jewish Belief and Practice (Jerusalem: Machon Ben Zvi, 2005). A much-abbreviated version of this work, which did not contain all of the possession stories, was published under the title Shivhei Rabbi Hayyim Vital (Ostraha, 1826).

35. Faierstein, Jewish Mystical Autobiographies, 236. Vital does not explain why Falcon was dismissed from the fraternity, only that he did something that greatly vexed Luria. We know from other sources that Luria and Vital after him strived to maintain the secrecy of Luria’s teachings. Perhaps the distribution of his letter was a factor.


38. Yosef Shelomo Delmedigo, Ta’alumot Hokhmah (Basel, 1629), 49b–50b.


40. Zfatman, Leave Impure One.

41. Ibid., 241.

42. Ibid., 203–24.


49. These Chasidic stories are described and analyzed by Gedalyah Nigal, The Hasidic Tale (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), 195–211.

50. See above, note 1.