INTRODUCTION

I. Religion, Mysticism, and Language

Mysticism, as it is usually understood, is a religious phenomenon, yet the relationship between the two is very difficult to define. In current usage, the term is often used as designating the depth of one's faith. Someone who prays is religious; someone who really means it is a mystic. This makes the relationship between mysticism and religion a quantitative one: Mysticism is religion, but a little more so. The terms by which mysticism is often described—a way to approach God, to sense his presence, an intense emotional response to him, be united with him—are actually religious ones, promised by most religious establishments, but within the framework of mysticism they are "really" taken seriously. Mysticism has often been described as the pinnacle of religion.[1] Catholic scholars, especially, tend to view the mystical experience as expressed by the great Carmelite mystics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the maximal expression of faith, striving for a complete spiritual union with God and the human soul's immersion within the Godhead.[2]

If it were so, it would be difficult to explain the insistence of mystics themselves on the separate, different nature of their approach to God. A historical analysis of the subject of mysticism,[3] however, tends to reveal meaningful tensions between established religion and mysticism, sometimes leading to a conflict between them. Despite the reverence shown by many Catholics to mysticism, it is a fact that there was never a pope who was a mystic, and hardly any cardinal. As will be dis-

cussed below, the basic premises of a mystical attitude to religion are often contradictory to those of established religion, though the nature of mysticism is such that it successfully avoided, with few exceptions, an open clash with the church.

The three so-called monotheistic religions, which are better described as the religions of revelation or scriptures, are recognized by their deep faith in the communicative power of language. In all of them, God spoke, and people recorded his words in texts, and these texts reveal understandable meanings that have to be obeyed. Isaiah, Jesus, and Mohammed are described as having spoken, and their words were followed or disregarded, but not misunderstood. The founders and prophets of these religions spoke in public; they did not whisper secrets in the ears of the selected few who had particular spiritual or intellectual qualities. The scriptures of the three religions are portrayed as understandable and communicative for all; even the portions that later generations and modern scholars found difficult to understand are not presented as such. The words of divine revelation included in the sacred texts have sometimes been disobeyed, but not misunderstood, according to the traditions of these religions.

The adherents of these religions are required to listen carefully to the divine message incorporated in scriptures, to follow the leadership and directions of their religious leaders, and to perform what is required of them, and then they can be confident that they will achieve the maximum possible spiritual rewards promised to the faithful. No provision is made to a possibility of language being a barrier between man and God; rather, the language of the sacred texts is believed to be accessible to all people of good will, without any difference concerning background, gender, education, and even age. Young and old, women and men, can share the communication offered by the word of God.[4] It is evident, therefore, that the three scriptural religions are based on the concept that language should communicate to anyone with open ears and heart the full meaning of the divine message that will save his soul and provide him with all the benefits that such communication promises.

The starting point of the mystical attitude to religious truth is the deep doubt—or, very often, complete denial—that communicative language can reveal divine truth to a believer. Mysticism, above anything else, is the result of the certainty that language, as spoken by people, cannot serve as a vehicle for the revelation and communication of the nature of God and the truth of his message to humanity. Only nonlinguistic means can glean some aspects of the hidden divine truth.[5] The term *mysticism* itself is a negative term: It does not denote anything specific, but rather the absence of something. *Mysticism* is a seemingly positive term that denotes a negative, as the word *darkness*, which seems to be a positive term, denotes only absence—the absence of light. It is not knowledge or perception, but their absence. Yet not every kind of ignorance is mysticism; the real question concerning the meaning of mysticism is: the absence of what? A mystic is someone who does not know, but does not know what? The most prominent absence that the mystics describe when they discuss their own uniqueness is that of the meaning of communicative language. A nonmystic is someone who believes that when truth is explained to him in words, he should understand that truth. The mystic is someone who knows that real truth, meaningful truth, can never be fully expressed in words.

It is not only language that the mystic distrusts, but the whole range of means by which people acquire knowledge, especially the senses. logic and thought. The best one-sentence expression of this attitude may be found in the "secret" that the fox reveals to the Little Prince in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's tale: "This is my secret, and it is really very simple: That which is really important is hidden from the eyes." If we understand "eyes" to mean the totality of human perceptions, sensual and intellectual, we may have a glimpse of the mystic's attitude toward the world. If something is revealed, obvious and understood, it cannot be "really important." Only the trivial, or the false, can be communicated and understood. Truth is beyond comprehension, it is eternally hidden from the senses and the mind, it is "mystical."

People who like what they see, who enjoy learning and understanding, who willingly join conversations and communicate their feelings and thoughts, who are dialogical and well attuned to the world around them, will not become mystics. Mysticism is characterized by a deep pessimistic attitude toward the universe and human existence in it. This is not a pessimism resulting from a particular state of affairs that can be changed, but an existential attitude, which results from their disbelief in the possibility of linguistic communication. The belief in the ability of human beings to communicate with each other is based on

our faith in the common nature of our sensual and intellectual experience. If we believe that our eyes perceive colors in the same way, and that our minds grasp syllogisms in an identical way, then we can use these shared perceptions to give words meanings that will bridge one mind with another. If, on the other hand, we do not believe that the senses and logic penetrate into the real truth that is hidden from us, we are unable to communicate, at least concerning meaningful and important things. Each soul is isolated in its own realm, in quest for a truth that even if it achieves a glimpse of, it cannot share it with anybody else, lacking a means of communication.

It is very probable—though there is no way of knowing or proving it—that as a result of this attitude most mystics are silenced by the paradox of their own denial of communication. We shall never know that, because anything that is not communicated is "lost" as far as history and culture are concerned. No one will ever know how many silent mystics dwell around us, in the same way that we shall never know how many of our neighbors and acquaintances write poetry and burn the pages or hide them in drawers. The mystics whom we know are those who found a way to break out from their shells of silence and create some kind of communication with the surrounding world. These are the mystics who are committed to any of the three scriptural religions. These religions not only enable them to do this, but actually impose it on them, because to be a believer in one of these religions one must accept that language is not a human means of communication but an aspect of divine wisdom, which God chose first and foremost as his tool for the creation of the universe, and then addressed humanity by it. If God used language, it must be possible to communicate truth by language, because God's word must be true. The scriptural believer who is also a mystic cannot, therefore, deny language totally. He has to accept that language can convey truth—at least when it is shaped and used by God.

This may seem to be a bridge that brings together mystics and nonmystics within the structure of a scriptural religion. It does not. On the contrary, it identifies and emphasises the differences between mystics and nonmystics. They may share the same scriptures, use the same prayer book, listen together to the same sermons, and identify their faith by the same terminology. Yet they differ from each other in the most drastic manner because the nonmystic believes that he understands the

text of the scriptures on the levels of communicative language, while the mystic knows that these denote, at best, the trivial and superficial if not that which is completely false, whereas the real meaning, the mystical message of scriptures is beyond communication. It is hidden within the text, but it can be glimpsed only by mystical means. A sensual-intellectual approach to the text of scriptures is either irrelevant or wrong. Only the mystic, by his metasensual and metaintellectual perceptions or experiences, can achieve a glimpse of the hidden truth. It can be said that *the mystics and the religious are two kinds of believers who are separated by a common language.* A religious person believes in the word of God incorporated in scriptures, and is certain that he understands it, or at least that its core, its most important meaning, has been absorbed by him. The mystic knows that various levels of communicative interpretation—including allegory, analogy, etc.—cannot reveal the hidden divine truth, which can be achieved only in nonlinguistic ways.

What is that mystical truth? What is that mystical, metalinguistic way of achieving it? What is the mystical experience that opens it for the mystic? At this juncture the historian must stop explaining, if he follows the mystics, because they claim consistently that the mystical is that which cannot be conveyed in words. When a scholar tries to formulate the inner nature of mysticism in positive terms (we have, up to this point, used only negative terms—discussing what mysticism is not rather than what mysticism is), he puts himself in the position of knowing better than the mystics themselves what they have experienced, and succeeding where they say failure is inevitable—expressing the inexpressible in communicative language. This approach, I believe, is a wrong one, unacceptable on methodological grounds. If the mystics insist that this is beyond words, it is the duty of the historian to accept it, and stop his research at this point. Mysticism is that which cannot be expressed in words, period.

This injunction is valid only concerning a general definition or description of mysticism. It is different on the contingental level, dealing with individual or groups of mystics in particular historical contexts. When this approach is adopted, a lot can be learned from the study of the sources of the mystic's terminology and images, from his references to the cultural and historical reality surrounding him, from his choice

of emphases and denials, and many other aspects of textual study and criticism. But even then, it is impossible to ask: What did the mystic really mean? What vision was presented to him? Do all mystics share the same experience, or does every mystic have his own hidden spiritual world, distinguished from all others? When one answers such questions, one expresses his own dispositions, ideology, and faith, rather than describing the world of the mystics he is reading. *The mystical text, for the nonmystical reader (e.g., the historian) is a set of signifiers without signifieds.* The signifiers cannot be reached by any other means in order to check or verify them, and comparative study of mystical texts is even more misleading because there is no way to verify that the various sources represent the same or similar experience. If two sources use similar terminology, this does not denote that they have "seen" the same thing; the similarity of words and images is the result of shared cultural background rather than proof of the identity of experience.

One may ask: If so, how do we know that the mystical realm ever existed? How do we know that the mystics mean anything? Maybe there is just nothing there, nothing to explore, nothing to discuss. This may indeed be the case: We have no way of confirming that the mystic did indeed envision this or experienced that. Yet this does not mean that historical study of mysticism is pointless. We cannot put ourselves in the place of the mystic and share his visions and experiences. Yet we can do something that may be much more meaningful: we can place ourselves in the position of the mystic's readers, those nonmystics who read, listened, and were influenced by the mystics, and acted to shape their own worldview and culture as a result. We cannot know what the inner truth of mysticism is. We can and should investigate and learn how mysticism operated within the history of religion and culture. There may not be "mysticism" as such, yet no one can deny that hundreds of people who believed themselves to be mystics, and hundreds of thousands of people who were their adherents, believed in the existence of the mystical realm, and shaped their own lives and cultures being influenced by the words of these mystics. We shall never know whether the medieval readers—or modern ones, or even scholars—really understand what the mystics meant, and whether their words really portray their hidden, mystical realms. But we can know what their nonmystical readers and followers understood, so that we can follow the impact of their words in history, culture, and religion. Mysticism as a spiritual experience may be forever hidden from us, but mysticism as an operative, dynamic force in shaping religion and culture can be studied and understood.[6]

II. Jewish Mysticism

The term *mysticism*, when applied to a Jewish religious phenomenon, is different from when it is used to denote a Christian one, because the Hebrew language does not have a term parallel in meaning to *mysticism*; nor is there in Jewish culture any concept that can be identified as equivalent to *mysticism*. The same is true concerning Arabic and Islam. When something is described as *Islamic mysticism* the designation is not authentic but imposed by the analogy to similar Christian phenomena. *Mysticism*, the term and the concept, is authentic only in the framework of Christianity; using it outside the cultural context of that religion is analogical, imposed by contemporary scholarship. No Jew or Muslim, at least until the last few decades, ever knew that he was—or was not—a mystic, whereas the word and the particular kind of religiosity associated with it were present within Christianity from antiquity. It developed within Christianity since the second century, and took shape in the third one, both in Greek and Latin, Eastern and Western branches of that religion. Because of this, how "mystical" a certain Jewish phenomenon is cannot be decided by intrinsic, immanent characteristics. Contemporary scholars evaluate such phenomena according to their similarity to its authentic Christian counterpart, and then decide whether it is appropriate to use that term. Therefore, nothing in Judaism is "really" mystical, because no Jewish religious writer ever described himself in this way. The concept of "Jewish mysticism" is the invention of contemporary scholars dealing with comparative study of religion.

It has become commonplace since the middle of the nineteenth century to identify the kabbalah with Jewish mysticism, and in a similar way to identify Sufism with Islamic mysticism. This is wrong and misleading, causing numerous misunderstandings. Kabbalah, in Judaism, is an authentic term—thousands of Jewish religious teachers and writers identified themselves as kabbalists (as did many Sufis in

Islam). What they meant by this term was a concept completely different from the Christian concept of mysticism. *Kabbalah* in Hebrew means "tradition"—any tradition, including legal, exegetical, historical, etc.[7] In this context, *kabbalah* means a particular kind of esoteric, secret tradition concerning the divine world, which the kabbalists believed was given to Moses on Mount Sinai and was transmitted secretly from generation to generation. *Kabbalah* is an abbreviation of "secret tradition concerning the divine world." Kabbalists may sometimes reveal in their works the characteristics usually identified as "mystical" in a Christian context, but they do not do it because they are kabbalists: It may be even said that kabbalists may become mystics in spite of, or in denial of, their being "kabbalists." A pertinent example may clarify this.

One of the greatest kabbalists—arguably, the greatest—in Jewish history was Rabbi Moshe de Leon, who lived in Castile in the second half of the thirteenth century (d. 1305). He was the author of the book *Zohar* ("Brilliance"), the most important, rich, and influential kabbalistic text, which became in the late Middle Ages a sacred text and established in the same category of sanctity as the Bible and the Talmud. De Leon was destitute most of his life, and used to sell copies of portions of the *Zohar*. He claimed that the book was an ancient one, written twelve centuries before by Jewish sages, and that a manuscript of that lost work was brought to Europe and is now in his possession; in other words, he wrote the *Zohar* as a pseudepigraphy, and claimed to be its copyist rather than its author. When he died, his widow and his daughter were left without any means of support. A rich Jew heard about their situation, and offered them a large sum of money for the original manuscript of the *Zohar*, from which De Leon claimed to be copying. The widow responded to this offer by saying that she could not do that because there never was such a manuscript; "He was writing from his head," she said about her late husband, not copying an ancient manuscript.

This story, recorded by an early fourteenth-century kabbalist,[8] may be understood as identifying the difference between kabbalah and mysticism. Moshe de Leon himself claimed to be a kabbalist, a traditionalist: He was not doing anything original, just copying and transmitting an ancient tradition, as written twelve centuries before him, and including truths that were as old as the divine revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai. His widow, on the other hand, claimed (unknowingly) that he was a mystic. He was not transmitting, but inventing and experiencing the fascinating visions included in the *Zohar*. Moshe de Leon was either this or that; he could not be both. There is little doubt that the widow was correct, and that de Leon was one of the most creative mystics who ever wrote in any religious context. He claimed to be a kabbalist but he was really a mystic—a term that he did not know, expressing a concept of which he was never aware.

It is not surprising that within the closed, esoteric circles of the medieval kabbalists mystics have found a haven, and therefore many of the Jewish mystics flourished within the framework of the kabbalah, pretending to present ancient traditions while they were actually having spiritual experiences that were often similar in nature to those of the Christian mystics. Yet the phenomena that may be characterized as mystical were not confined to the kabbalistic circles. Jewish mysticism began a thousand years before the appearance of the kabbalah, in late antiquity, in talmudic times. The kabbalah appeared only in the High Middle Ages, in the last two decades of the twelfth century, and flourished especially in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, before it surged and became the dominant worldview in Judaism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In that late period, when almost every Jewish writer, thinker, and leader was versed in the kabbalah, there certainly was no identity between mysticism and kabbalah. Judaism became, in modern times, almost completely kabbalistic, but certainly not completely mystical. There is a link between kabbalah and mysticism: For several centuries from the High Middle Ages to modern times, most Jewish mystics found their natural habitat within the framework of kabbalistic traditionalists. Yet Jewish mysticism flourished also outside the confines of these circles and independently of them. There is no intrinsic connection between kabbalah and mysticism, even though many Jewish mystics were indeed kabbalists.

III. The Jewish Concept of Language: The Midrash

One of the most stubborn barriers that separates Judaism in general and Jewish mysticism in particular from the Christian-European culture is the vast, radical difference in the basic conception of language, result-

ing from the completely different experiences of language in the cultures based on these two religions. The following paragraphs are an attempt to explain this, yet my experience has taught me that the chances of succeeding in it are very remote. The Jewish concept of language is so far from the intuitive attitudes of European culture (now shared also by that of modern Hebrew, which adopted completely the European concept of language), that no amount of explanations can bridge it.

Judaism differs from Christianity in that it believes that it has recorded, in its scriptures, the actual word of God in its original language. Christianity, on the other hand, is based on the word of God in translation. The Hebrew bible included tens of thousands of words, believed to be the actual syllables uttered by God or inspired by him. The New Testament includes thousands of words said by Jesus Christ or inspired by him, not in their original form but in their translation to Greek. Only six words uttered by Jesus are recorded as they were actually pronounced—"Talita kumi," and, "Eli eli lama shavaktani." As we all know, translation is interpretation, and a selective one at that; the words of Jesus as preserved in the Christian scriptures contain, at best, one of the possible interpretations of the meaning of the original. The rest is lost.

The language of Christ as preserved in the New Testament is the one put in his mouth by his human translators-interpreters. The Hebrew bible, according to Jewish and Christian faiths, includes the word of God as actually uttered by him even before humanity was created. When God said, "Yehi or," he did not only convey the message "Let there be light," he actually uttered these syllables, and as a result there was light. God's utterance was not a semantic one: There were no people, nobody could be listening, it could not be an order because there was no one to carry out the order. The very utterance was the deed, the cause of the emergence of light. Its semantic interpretation came later. It is the human conclusion that if the sound *yehi or* makes light, then it must carry the meaning "Let there be light." It is as if we interpreted the click of the light switch as an order for the lamp to light up. But in the case of the lamp we know that the switch releases an electric current that heats a wire and causes it to glow. How did the sound *yehi or* switch on the universe? This is divine wisdom, forever hidden from us. The syllables *yehi or* include not only a sound, but also a picture of six letters of the Hebrew alphabet. They include vocalization marks (*nekudot*) and musical signs (*teamim*). The letters are decorated by little crowns (*tagin*). The letters also include a numerical value, because writing words and numbers was done in Hebrew (as in Arabic, Greek, and Latin) by the letters of the alphabet. It could also be an acronym, possibly of the names of the letters—*yod he yod aleph vav resh*—which are also derived from divine wisdom, because they preexisted in God before the creation. Each of these components could be the decisive one in the creation of light. We can never know their hierarchy of importance and meaningfulness because we cannot introduce such a hierarchy into divine, infinite wisdom. All we can know is that the totality of the linguistic phenomenon—the sound, the picture, the music, the "decorations" (the term indicates that this is a secondary element, which of course cannot be within divine infinity), and all the other elements combine into the essence of language as a creative—rather than communicative—instrument.

When *yehi or* is translated into any language carrying the semantic message "Let there be light," all these elements are lost. There are no vocalization marks, crowns, or musical signs. The sound is now different, and the shape of the letters is different. The numerical value is changed. The only component that remains is the assumption—an arbitrary one—of a semantic message. The concept of language as essentially a communicative device for semantic messages in Western culture is the result of the historical accident that Christianity was based on the word of God in translation into existing languages that had a vast pre-Christian literature that was essentially semantic. Hebrew and Arabic viewed themselves as languages identical with their religions. Christianity could not do that, because it integrated itself into existing languages—Greek and Latin—that sustained great civilizations that were not dependent on Christianity.

Once language is recognized as an aspect of infinite divine wisdom, it cannot have finite meanings. In the same way that no one can ever know the "real" meaning of *yehi or* from the divine point of view—one can only view the earthly result of the utterance—so one cannot glean the real, finite semantic message of any word of God. It is impossible therefore to present the "true" meaning of any biblical verse. One

can only search further and further, digging deeper into the infinite layers of divine wisdom, never reaching the end. Exegesis is an infinite process, and no new discovery negates the previous ones. Different, or even contradictory interpretations have equal validity, because the laws of exclusion have no relevance within divine wisdom.[9]

These principles became of vital importance after the most crucial change in religious perception that brought forth religious faith as we know it in the three scriptural religions, namely *the end of prophecy*. From the first words that God spoke to Adam to the last words of Hagai, Zecharia, and Malachi, God was ever-present in human affairs. According to the biblical narrative, he was always available to direct and guide, to chastise and reprimand. There were always people who were inspired by him and spoke for him—prophets and judges, elders and priests. When God is present in such a way, scriptures are superfluous: You do not have to browse in the Bible to find an answer because a prophet or a priest will tell you what to do. Mysteriously, however, this divine presence came to an abrupt end in the early days of the Second Temple, in the sixth century B.C.E. From then on, no new revelation can be relied on; the old collection of divine utterances becomes the only tool of guidance for present and future religious authority. Exegesis now replaces revelation as the expression of divine will. God can no more be envisioned, there is no direct dialogue with him. It is necessary to interpret his words to Isaiah in particular circumstances many centuries ago in order to surmise what he wishes us to do now.

The transition from direct, constant divine presence to scriptural exegesis was a long and complicated one. Some religious phenomena seem to have been attempts at preserving the old order even though they accepted the norm that prophecy has come to an end. Thus, the great pseudepigraphic literature of the Second Temple period presented new divine revelations, but ascribed them to old, biblical figures—Adam and Abraham, Isaiah and Moses. People still claimed from time to time to having experienced visions and revelations, "the holy spirit" and messianic aspirations, but they did not acquire a position of communal leadership and were not regarded as legitimate representatives of divine messages.

The greatest expression of the rebellion against "the end of prophecy"—though even that was not a complete and radical one, was early Christianity. It represented the belief that God has appeared again and spoken again to the people in the most authoritative way. Yet even the writers of the Christian Gospels, who represented the believers who actually experienced divine presence and message—could not refrain from adding to that direct relationship an element of exegesis. Each step in Christ's life is accompanied, in the text of the Gospels, by a verse from the prophets of the Hebrew bible that predicted it. It is as if the direct divine revelation is not authoritative enough if it had not been predicted by the ancient prophecies. Several decades later Christianity joined Judaism in the denial of constant divine revelation and its substitution by textual exegesis—though this was an exegesis of a different kind, because it was based on a nonoriginal, human translation of the divine message.

In Judaism, the most potent bridge between constant divine revelation and complete reliance on exegesis was the concept of the oral Torah, the tradition given to Moses on Mount Sinai that was transmitted from generation to generation, from elders to judges, from judges to prophets, from prophets to sages, thus making certain that a divine message, which was at the same time ancient and contemporary, was always available. The Mishna—the most prominent expression of the Jewish legal, religious, and social system is given authority by oral tradition. These two elements—oral tradition and exegesis, were united in the phenomenon of the *midrash*, which became the dominant component of Jewish religious culture, besides the *halakhah*, the law, from the early centuries of the Common Era to the present.

The typical midrash consists of an opening sentence that claims that rabbi so and so said, in the name of rabbi so and so, thus establishing a link with the ancient tradition that leads to Moses. Then a verse from the Hebrew bible is quoted, and the speaker offers his exegesis, often relying on other verses as well. Midrashic sections are frequently connected to each other by the term "another statement" or "another possibility"—*davar aher*), offering a different interpretation for the same verse. In many cases we may find long series of such sections that offer half a dozen or more different interpretations of the same verse. Obviously, none of these present the one-and-only, ultimate meaning of the verse: that is impossible, because the verse expresses infinite divine wisdom that can never be exhausted. This gives

scriptural exegesis its eternal power: Divine truth can always be gleaned from the verses, even when each has scores of interpretations already. The term *midrash*, and the concept of midrashic exegesis, cannot be translated to another language, because in a European cultural context exegesis and interpretation are inherently connected with the concept of the quest for the one ultimate truth, the correct meaning.[10] The notion of multiple, different, and even conflicting meanings does not conform to the attitude toward language prevailing in a world dominated by the Christian conception of semantic language. The awareness of this difference in the concept of language and scriptures is essential for the understanding of Jewish traditional culture. One has every right to ask, "What did Christ really mean when he said that?" but one cannot ask, "What did Moses really mean when he said that?" because the first question may have an ultimate answer, whereas the second has an infinite number of equally correct ones.

Furthermore, whereas Christian exegesis may use the words of the scriptures and their possible meanings, the Hebrew midrash treats the verse as a full semiotic phenomenon. Midrashic interpretation may take into account not only the different meanings of the words in different contexts, but also the letters of the alphabet that constitute it, the shape of the letters, their names, their "crowns," their numerical value, the shapes and names of the vocalization marks, the shapes and names of the musical signs, and numerous other elements.[11] It is no wonder that when Christian scholars were exposed to Hebrew midrashic methodologies in the Christian kabbalah of the late fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries,[12] they regarded them as highly mysterious and representing ancient esoteric wisdom. They used the term *kabbalah* to describe all postbiblical Jewish culture, including the Talmud, the midrash, and medieval rationalistic exegesis, and this meaning persists in European languages to this day. Whereas inside Hebrew culture it is rather easy to distinguish between traditional midrashic methodologies and the unique, medieval ideas of the kabbalah, in a Christian context the distinction is lost; thus, numerology has become a most representative constituent of the "kabbalah," even though it is an unavoidable method in a language that has no immanent system of numerals. In fact, the earliest such computation—called in Jewish tradition by the Greek term *gematria*—known to us is found not in the midrash or kabbalah, not even in a Hebrew text, but in the Greek text of the book of Revelations in the New Testament, where the "number of the beast," 666, is the result of the computation of the Hebrew letters of the name of the Emperor Nero.[13]

How does Jewish mysticism fit into this picture? Actually, it does not. The mystic is the rebel, the nonconformist, he cannot accept the midrashic-exegetical monopoly on divine truth. The mystic craves for a closer relationship, for a direct spiritual contact, with divine truth, a craving that midrashic scriptural exegesis cannot satisfy. Some Jewish mystics—especially the early ones, the "descenders to the chariot," openly rejected the dominant midrashic methodologies and claimed to ascend spiritually to the divine world and envision God and his surroundings in an unmediated fashion. Others, especially the kabbalists of the Middle Ages, used the midrashic form as a convenient cover. The midrash allows, after all, an infinite number of correct, legitimate interpretations. A mystic who pretends to be a midrashic exegete can easily present his own truth as if it were one more midrashic interpretation, without danger of exposure and sancture. It is he alone, or together with a few pneumatics in his closed circle, who know that what he presented was not "one more" interpretation—(*davar aher*) but the result of a unique experience, a spiritual meeting with the divine realm. The mystical truth gleaned by him in this experience cannot be presented fully in words, but it can be hinted at, for the cogniscanti, using the midrashic methodologies. He cannot be accused of breaking the rule of "the end of prophecy" when he writes "one more" midrashic commentary, nor can he be accused of hubris, pretending to know what others do not, placing himself in a superior rung of the spiritual religious ladder. Yet he knows that the other, nonmystical exegetes, when they present the fruit of their work, are far away from the true knowledge of divine secrets, which were opened to him in his spiritual experience. That experience cannot be shared, because it is metalinguistic, but it can be hinted at, in obscure and enigmatic ways, using the midrash as a cover. Indeed, a perfect case of two worldviews separated by a common language.

IV. Historical Outlines: Late Antiquity

It is very difficult to indicate a particular point in which Jewish mysticism began. Several sections in ancient Jewish religious texts can be charac-

terized as mystical—some psalms, for instance, or some visionary chapters in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Hellenistic period. Such characterization, however, may often be just an exercise in the implementation of a preconceived definition of the subject. One decides first what are the characteristics of mysticism, and then proceeds to search for them in the texts before him. If we wish to understand the historical development of a religious culture, we should look for phenomena that represent definite historical outlines: a group of people, a group of texts, distinct terminology, dynamic practices, and all other expressions of a historically active religious group. Such a phenomenon did present itself in ancient Judaism; it is known as the mysticism of "the descenders to the chariot," *yordey ha-merkavah*, who flourished between the third and seventh or eighth centuries.

The mystical texts that reached us from this ancient school of mystics are incorporated in a library of esoteric treatises, about two dozen works, known traditionally as the literature of *Hekhalot* and *Merkavah*—"celestial palaces and the chariot." This appellation reflects the frequent occurrence of the words *hekhalot* and *merkavah* in the titles of several treatises in this literature.[14] These treatises cover a wide range of subjects, which can be grouped in four categories:

1) Cosmogony and cosmology, treatises and parts of treatises dealing with the process of the creation, the structure and nature of the universe, the celestial bodies, astronomy and astrology, and the ways in which God conducts the universe. A prominent example of such a work in this library is the *Seder Rabba de-Bereshit*, "The Great Design of Genesis,"[15] but almost every work includes sections and chapters dedicated to this subject. Some works of a more midrashic nature can be included in this category, like the *Midrash Konen* and *Midrash Tadsheh*. A special position in this context should be given to the *Sefer Yezira*, the ancient "Book of Creation."[16]

2) Magic. Almost all the treatises in this library include an element of magical information, incantations, and lists of potent angelic names by which earthly purposes may be achieved. A major treatise dedicated exclusively to a list of magical formulas—hundreds of them—is *Harba de-Moshe*, "The Sword of Moses." Another is *Sefer ha-Razim*, "The Book of Secrets," which is divided between magical information and descriptions of the celestial realms and the angelic powers governing them.

3) Merkavah exegesis. The first chapter of Ezekiel was regarded as the most detailed revelation of celestial and divine secrets in the Hebrew bible, and it seems that the tradition of expounding it and using it as a starting point for the description of angelic and divine realms is an early one. It has even been suggested that the "second chariot" (Ezek. ch. 10) is the first such exegesis.[17] Hekhalot and Merkavah treatises deal with this subject extensively. An example of a work dedicated to it is *Reiyot Yehezkel*, "The Visions of Ezekiel,"[18] in which Ezekiel is described as standing on the bank of the river *Kevar* and envisioning a series of chariots in the various heavens, as they are reflected in the water in front of him. Discussions of the nature and number of the holy beasts and the other powers surrounding the chariot, the throne of glory and the wonders above and below it and similar subjects abound in most treatises of this literature.

These three subjects exhaust almost all the material in the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature that reached us. They are all traditional, well-established subjects of spiritual speculation in Jewish culture; all of them can be found, for instance, in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, as well as in the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Christian literature. Particular details may reflect new concepts, but the subjects themselves are constant ones in Jewish religious writings. None of them can be characterized as "mystical"; exegetical speculation about the chariot, for instance, is midrashic activity that does not necessarily reflect mystical experience.

4) The mystical component in this literature, which also represents the first distinct mystical historical phenomenon in Judaism, is the fourth subject, found in several treatises in this literature. It is the practice of the "descent to the chariot," a subject that is found for the first time here, and it is different from the traditional subjects in that it includes a dynamic element, an activity, that is not found in any previous source: the ascension of the sage from heaven to heaven, from "palace" to "palace," overcoming difficulties and dangers, until he reaches the supreme palace, the throne of glory, "faces God in his beauty," and joins the celestial powers in their hymns of praise to the creator.

The sections dealing with this practice are found in four of the treatises of this literature: *Hekhalot Rabbati* ("The Greater Book of Divine

Palaces"), which is the most extensive work in this group, at the center of which is the ascension of Rabbi Ishmael;[19] *Hekhalot Zutarti* ("The Lesser Book of Divine Palaces"), which is probably the oldest work in this group, at the center of which is Rabbi Akibah's ascension;[20] *Ma'aseh Merkavah* ("The Work of the Chariot"), which is an anthology of hymns and practices of the "descenders";[21] and *Third Enoch* or the *Hebrew Book of Enoch*, describing the revelations given to Rabbi Ishmael by Enoch in his ascension to the divine world.[22] These four treatises are characterized by several elements, all of them new, that are not found in the talmudic and midrashic literature nor in the other treatises of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature:

1) They describe a group of sages, headed by Rabbi Akibah, Rabbi Ishmael (the two principal sages of the mishnah), and the head of the school, Rabbi Nehunia Ben ha-Kanah (a rather obscure sage who owes his prominence here to his being the teacher of Rabbi Ishmael). This group is described as convening in Jerusalem and holding common rituals. An extensive description in one of these treatises attributes to these mystics unmatched magical powers that enable them to overcome all their opponents and vanquish all enemies.

2) Distinct, unparalleled terminology, like the term *hekhalot* in the plural as signifying the seven layers of the celestial realms within the seventh heaven. The word *hekhal* may refer either to the temple or to a kingly palace (see below).

3) A systematic angelology that may have developed into a concept of pleroma of eight angelic-divine powers.[23] These higher powers are distinguished by the addition of the title "Lord God of Israel" to their angelic names, a title not found anywhere in previous literature as applying to anyone but God himself.

4) The distinct, paradoxical terminology describing the mystical practice itself, the "descent" and "ascent" to and from the chariot.[24]

5) Another element that is found in a fifth treatise: the concept of the *Shiur Komah*, "the measurement of the height," describing the magnitude of God and his limbs in stark anthropomorphic terms and mysterious names. This concept may be the most important one that ancient Jewish mysticism introduced into Jewish thought, and it became a central one in all subsequent Hebrew mystical and esoterical literature. The concept of the *Shiur Komah* is not found explicitly in the other four treatises describing the mysticism of "descent to the chariot," but it may be assumed to be a part of the concept of God of these early mystics.[25]

6) A new interpretation of the biblical book of Song of Songs as a self-portrait of God. The *Shiur Komah* concept is based on Song of Songs 5:10–17, the physical description of the (male) lover, and other elements in this literature seem to be based on an identification of the Song as a self-expression of God. The meaning of the term *hekhal* is dependent on this new concept: It can be conceived as a reference to the celestial temples,[26] or, if the stronger influence is that of the Song of Songs, it should be understood as the divine counterpart to Solomon's palace.[27]

7) A unique concept of history, which deviates in a meaningful way from the traditional historical narrative of talmudic-midrashic literature. Thus, for instance, Rabbi Ishmael, who was born about the time that the second temple was destroyed in 70 C.E., is described as a "high priest the son of a high priest" who officiates in the temple in Jerusalem. The circle of mystics is described as convening in the temple itself, and the names of the participants include some that could not be together in the same age. It is difficult to understand this concept, and the authors of these treatises seem to have had a unique attitude toward history to which we have no key.[28]

8) A treatise close in some of its characteristics to the literature of the "descenders to the chariot" is the *Sar Torah*, "The Prince of the Torah," which describes the mystical experience of the builders of the Second Temple who had just returned from Babylonian exile, headed by Zerubavel ben Shealtiel. The treatise is centered around the revelation of a mnemonic magical formula that enables people to retain in their memory all that they have studied.[29]

The most important distinctive element of this mystical literature is its departure, or it may even be described as rejection, of the norms of the midrash. The authors of these treatises seem to have rebelled against the concept that divine truth can be reached only by tradition and exegesis, and demanded a direct experience of God, an actual spiritual meeting with him, and an experiential awareness of the divine realms. This literature is completely visionary and experiential, and the sages often present their visions in the first person. It includes numer-

ous hymns that the mystics heard in the divine world or have sung themselves in the context of their spiritual journeys. There are harsh and cruel descriptions of the terrible fate awaiting those who failed in the mystical enterprise. The combination of all these elements serves as basis for the claim that this literature represents a distinct mystical phenomenon, a novel and to some extent a revolutionary one, within Jewish religious culture.

It is very difficult to present the chronological development of Hekhalot mysticism. We do not have in all these texts even one personal or geographic name, or a reference to an event, which may serve as a chronological starting point. Yet it seems that the phenomenon had it roots in the late second century C.E. or the beginning of the third, probably in Palestine, and it continued to exist as a closed, marginal circle or circles till the seventh or eighth centuries; it is probable that the later phase of its existence occurred in Babylonia. The earliest treatise in this small library may have been *Hekhalot Zutarti*, in which only Rabbi Akibah plays a part, following the talmudic parable of the Four Who Entered the Pardes. The peak of creativity of this school may be represented by *Hekhalot Rabbati* and the *Shiur Komah*, in which both Rabbi Akibah and Rabbi Ishmael participated, and the circle is portrayed as being led by Rabbi Nehunia ben ha-Kanah. *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is close in character to these two, while *Third Enoch* and *Sar Torah* seem to represent a later, Babylonian stratum.

It should be mentioned that this period is parallel chronologically to that in which Christian mysticism began to flourish, first among the Greek church fathers and somewhat later among the Latin ones. Such chronological proximity naturally raises the question of a possible influence in one direction or another, but there seems to be no basis to that. If the list of eight main characteristics of Hekhalot mysticism is reviewed, it is obvious that only one of them may be relevant to a comparison between Judaism and Christianity—the new interpretation of the Song of Songs, but even concerning this the details are radically different.[30] On the other hand, the dominant factors in the emergence of Christian mysticism, namely the beginnings of desert monasticism, the concepts of virginity and celibacy are very far from the worldview and the experience of the Jewish mystics. It is meaningful to note that Jewish mysticism first appears when Judaism was about a millennium and a half old, whereas mysticism in Christianity began when this religion was hardly a century and a half old.

A similar problem is presented by the chronological-geographical proximity of Hekhalot mysticism to Christian Gnosticism, which peaked in the Middle East in the second and third centuries. Gershom Scholem pointed out some aspects of typological resemblance between them, yet no historical point of contact between the two religious phenomena has been established. Neither do we have any evidence that there was a Jewish Gnosticism that preceded and served as a source for Christian Gnosticism. It is a matter of taste and semantics whether one is inclined to use this term as an adjective describing ancient Jewish mysticism; historically, we do not find any contact between it and the other major religious movements that flourished at the same time.

The Hekhalot texts do not seem to have had a meaningful impact on Jewish religious culture during the many centuries of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. They are hardly mentioned in late midrashic collections, and their characteristic terminology cannot be discerned in subsequent texts. There are a few compilations that included Hekhalot material, like the *Alphabet of Rabbi Akibah*, but the actual mystical practice of "descent to the merkavah" did not express itself in later texts. The concept of the divine figure as the gigantic *Shiur Komah* made more of an impression, and we have evidence of that both in internal sources and in external ones.

Another important Jewish esoterical work that was written at the same time that the Hekhalot mystical treatises first appeared was the *Sefer Yezira*, "The Book of Creation," which had very little impact during late antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages, but later became one of the most influential texts of medieval Jewish mysticism and, subsequently, of the Christian kabbalah. *Sefer Yezira* cannot be described as a mystical work in the usual sense of the term, because it is clearly oriented toward an investigation of cosmogony and cosmology. It achieved its unique place in the history of mysticism and esotericism by its development of the concepts of the power of the letters of the alphabet and of the harmony between God, the cosmos, and man.[31]

Sefer Yezira does not use the terminology and concepts that characterize Hekhalot mysticism, and should not be regarded as belonging

to that school. It developed a unique terminology, to which we do not have any parallel, including the term *sefirot*, which was destined to play a central role in the medieval kabbalah a millennium later. It is similar to the Hekhalot texts in that it represents a rejection of the dominant culture of midrash, of oral tradition and biblical exegesis. Unlike the Hekhalot it did not present experience as a substitute to midrash, but speaks authoritatively without relying on any source (it has been later attributed to Abraham the Patriarch, but this is not found in the ancient text itself). It uses only a handful of biblical verses, and does not mention the traditional rabbinic commentaries on the creation. Not only that, but it seems to ignore the creation narrative in the book of Genesis itself, using only a few terms (especially those in Gen. 1:2).

It is impossible to describe here the enigmatic and complex ideas of this small treatise. Suffice it to say that the main concept is the development of the idea of creation by language into a scientific system. The author claims that if God created the universe by language, then the laws of the universe are those of language. Natural science is identified with grammar. Every linguistic element is identified in this work as representing divine power that is expressed in the world on three levels: cosmic (planets, elements, constellations); time (days, weeks, months); and man (limbs, orifices, senses). They are all operated by letters and groups of letters governed by the laws of grammar, and including, in a way not clarified in the text, the first ten numbers, 1–10, called here *sefirot* and given roles in the creation of the universe.

This enigmatic treatise, probably frowned upon by rabbinic culture, was discovered by Jewish scientists and rationalistic philosophers in the tenth century, who found in it a source for Jewish authentic scientific tradition that could be used when they tried to integrate Judaism with the prevailing rationalistic-scientific civilization of medieval Islam. They wrote many commentaries on the treatise from this point of view, but in the end of the twelfth century and during the thirteenth they were replaced by medieval Jewish mystics and esoterics who developed new, sometimes mystical, interpretations of the ancient text.

It is impossible to point out a central, dominant Jewish mystical phenomenon during the Gaonic period (sixth to eleventh centuries). We have evidence that esoteric speculation continued on the margins of Jewish culture, dealing mainly with holy names, angelology, magical formulas, and possibly merkavah and genesis speculations, which were not incorporated in definite worldviews and treatises. There are Hebrew manuscripts from the High Middle Ages that contain scattered material, brief treatises, and notes, which may have originated in this period. It is evident, however, that medieval Jewish mysticism was a new phenomenon, a new beginning on different premises, even though it relied heavily on the traditions of ancient Jewish mysticism.

The Sufi mystical circles had a marked influence on Jewish thinkers in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, even though they did not coagulate to create a distinct Jewish Islamic-inspired mysticism (as did Jewish rationalistic philosophy from the tenth century onward, which created a full-fledged Jewish religious-philosophical culture that dominated Jewish intellectual life in southern Europe for several centuries). Yet works like those of Bahya Ibn Paquda in the eleventh century and Rabbi Abraham Maimon, the son of Maimonides in the thirteenth, may be regarded as chapters in the history of Jewish mysticism. The medieval chapters in this history took shape in the second half of the twelfth century, in Christian Europe.

V. Historical Outlines: The Middle Ages

Jewish esoterical speculations had a second resurgence in the High Middle Ages, after being relatively dormant for several centuries, and this happened in two parallel centers in about the same time. One was centered in the Rhineland, the participants known mainly as *Hasidey Ashkenaz* or the Jewish Pietists in Medieval Germany, and the other, in Provence and northern Spain, is known as the Kabbalah.

A. *The Esoterics of Medieval Germany*

The term *Hasidey Ashkenaz* is a traditional one that was adopted by modern scholars as well to denote Jewish esoteric, mystical, and pietistic groups mainly in medieval Germany in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It is not a very good term, because it tends to hide the independence and divergence of these schools, which often did not know even of the existence of each other, so that combining them into one phenomenon is highly misleading. Some of these are represented by isolated, anonymous treatises, like *Sefer ha-Hayim* and *Sefer ha-Navon*.

Others are distinct schools that produced numerous treatises (though most of them are anonymous), like the school that attributed its traditions to the fictional figure of Joseph ben Uzziel (known also as the "unique cherub" circle, the name of the main divine figure in their theology), and based its teachings on the ancient *Sefer Yezira*. The most prominent school was that which flourished mainly in the Rhineland, and most of the scholars associated with it belonged to the Kalonymus family, the dominant family in German-Jewish culture in that period.[32]

Like the parallel circles of the kabbalists, the Kalonymus family esoterics did not follow the ancient Jewish mystics in presenting experiential, visionary mystical texts. Their avenue of expression was exegesis—including the interpretation of the Hekhalot and Merkavah texts that reached them. A perplexing problem is presented by their attitude to the practice of the "descent to the chariot." The texts of this mystical activity reached us mainly from thirteenth-century manuscripts, or copies of such manuscripts, which were studied, edited, and paraphrased by Jewish-German esoterics of that period. Yet in none of the numerous original volumes of their writings that reached us do we have any reference to the mystical practice of the "descent." From a textual-historical point of view, this is quite incomprehensible. All other aspects of this literature are presented and discussed, but the mystical practice seems to be nonexistent. This can be explained by one of two possibilities: Either by a mysterious textual history the "descent" texts did not reach them, and were added to the manuscripts somewhat later, or they were familiar with these texts but decided to ignore and hide this practical aspect completely. The first possibility is very difficult to accept on textual grounds, and the second seems to be nearly impossible. How could several writers hide so completely a central subject in such a consistent and perfect manner? Was it because they disregarded it, or was it because of its importance, relating to their innermost religious experiences? The subject of the meanings of the tetragrammaton was regarded by them as sacred and dangerous, yet Rabbi Eleazar of Worms wrote a comprehensive monograph on it; could the descent be regarded as even more holy and esoteric? This is one of several historical-philological enigmas that haunt our understanding of the emergence of Jewish mysticism in medieval Europe.

The leaders of the Kalonymus school were the most prominent sons of this family in three generations: Rabbi Samuel ben Kalonymus, known in the unusual title "the saint, the pious, the prophet," who flourished in the middle of the twelfth century; his son, Rabbi Judah, who moved from the Rhineland to Regensburg, and their relative and disciple, Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah ben Kalonymus of Worms. The main contributions of this school to the development of Jewish mysticism can be presented in the following subjects:

1) The Development of the Concept of a Multiple-Powers Divine Realm. At the center of the Kalonymus circle's theology stands the figure of the divine glory (*kavod*), which is different from the supreme Godhead, often called "the creator" (*ha-bore*). This divine glory is conceived as a divine emanation, which is indicated in the Bible by the tetragrammaton, and whose main function is the revelation to the prophets and being the subject of all anthropomorphic references in ancient texts. Rabbi Judah the Pious presented this theory in the context of a paraphrase of Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the revelation to Moses in Exodus 33,[33] as an exegetical response to the textual-theological problems raised by those verses. It is clear that in this case it was not a spiritual experience or a vision that gave birth to the concept but the pressure of theological needs, the necessity to preserve divine infinity that does not allow any change or form, and the need for preserving the divine nature of the revelation to the prophets. Both Ibn Ezra and Rabbi Judah found in that concept a response to the problem of the stark anthropomorphism of the *Shiur Komah*; what Rabbi Ishmael described in that ancient treatise was the image of the glory, not that of the infinite creator. The functions of the *kavod* were extended to include response to human prayers and revelation to the righteous in the next world. Another circle, the "unique cherub" school, developed the concept further (even though there is no evidence that they were familiar with the Kalonymus concept), and distinguished between two emanated powers: the glory, which responds to prayers, but has no anthropomorphic features, and the "unique cherub," which sits on the throne of glory(!) and is revealed to the prophets and serves as the subject of the *Shiur Komah* speculation. Again, theological drives seem to have been dominant in the evolvement of these concepts rather than experiential-visionary ones. It is

clear, however, that in this historical juncture, in the late twelfth century, the concept of the unity of God underwent a dramatic change, and it allows from now on the existence of emanated powers besides the supreme Godhead, which have their distinct functions and serve as subjects of worship in religious rituals.

2) Prayer. Interpretation of the prayer book was one of the main esoteric concerns of the writers of the Kalonymus school. Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Eleazar wrote extensive commentaries on the prayers that are the earliest such works known to us (Rabbi Judah's was lost, Rabbi Eleazar's was preserved in several manuscripts). Rabbi Eleazar's disciple, Rabbi Abraham berabbi Azriel of Bohemia, wrote a voluminous commentary on the synagogue hymns (*piyyutim*), Arugat ha-Bosem.[34] They conceived of prayer as the spiritual everyday approach to God and contact with him, and made the subject central to their spiritual activity.

Rabbi Judah the Pious developed a unique, original concept of a mystical prayer in his lost *Commentary*, from which we have only quotations. He believed that the text of the prayers represented, in every letter, word and name in it, a universal numerical harmony that extended to every realm of existence—history, anthropology, the celestial realms, and every passage in the holy scriptures. This harmony becomes apparent when the numerical value and other semiotic characteristics of the text are analyzed. Therefore, it is forbidden to change even one letter from the traditional wording, because the most minute change destroys the whole harmonious structure. It seems that Rabbi Judah did not find adherents to his concepts even among his closest disciples, and his original mysticism, viewing all existence as a harmonious divine text, remained a dead end in the history of Jewish mysticism.

In an opposite direction, some writers of the Kalonymus circle, most prominently Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, developed religious expression in the form of individual prayer, a direct address delivered by a person to God, either in the context of repentance or even without a particular cause. The sanctity of the prayer, so strongly emphasized by these writers, helped place this ritual in the heart of Jewish mysticism, and the attitude of the kabbalists was very similar to theirs despite the different surrounding structure. It should be remembered that on the surface, prayer and mysticism seem to be markedly distant and even antagonistic toward each other. Mysticism requires an individual relationship with God, segregated from society and seeking unique, experiential circumstances, whereas traditional prayer was a public ritual, constantly repeating exactly the same words and phrases, representing a communal relationship with God. The Kalonymus circle's varied attempts at spiritualizing and personalizing the ritual of prayer had an impact on subsequent Jewish mystical phenomena.

3) Pietism. The writers of the Kalonymus circle expressed the terrible trauma of the vast persecutions of the Jews in the period of the Crusades in Europe, which started in the mass murder of Jews in 1096 and was repeated in several waves in subsequent generations. They developed, in response, a system of ethics and pietistic way of life, extremely harsh and demanding, which was intended to prepare the faithful for the ordeal of having to sacrifice their lives for the "sanctification of the Holy Name" and be martyred (*kiddush ha-shem*). This system was presented in several of Rabbi Eleazar's works, and especially in Rabbi Judah the Pious's "The Book of the Pious" (*Sefer Hasidim*), which probably includes, in its first chapters, a presentation of that system written by Rabbi Samuel ben Kalonymus, Rabbi Judah's father.[35] It seems that Rabbi Judah even tried to organize a movement or a sect that will follow this way of life and be separated from other Jewish communities, but this endeavor did not become a reality, and was not supported even by Rabbi Judah's most faithful disciples.

B. The Emergence of the Kabbalah

In many respects, the appearance of the kabbalah in Provence and northern Spain in the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth resembles the flourishing of the schools of esoterics in central Europe at almost the same time. Both are recognized, first and foremost, by the new concept of God that is centered around a system of emanated divine powers with specialized functions to participate together in the new conception of divine unity. Both gave new emphasis to the element of prayer in Jewish ritual and endowed it with renewed spiritual power. Both presented themselves in the garb of exegetical works, some of them pseudepigraphic and anonymous, while others were written by well-known scholars. Both relied on narratives—

mostly fictional—of ancient sources and roots that connect them to biblical and talmudic times. Both used these new esoteric concepts to solve current theological problems, mostly arising from the adoption of the basic contentions of rationalism and neo-Platonism. Most of all, both of them expressed themselves in terminology and images derived to a very large extent from the Hekhalot and Merkavah texts and especially from the *Sefer Yezira* (though again, the specific terminology of the "descent to the chariot" is absent from both of them).[36]

The kabbalah is different from the Ashkenazi esoteric circles by the power of the new myths that it introduced into its literature. The most potent ones—found already in the book *Bahir*, the first text of the kabbalah (written about 1185)—are those of the ten divine emanated powers that are portrayed anthropomorphically as the *Shiur Komah*, the image of the divine world as a huge tree (upside-down, its roots above and its branches toward the earth), and the tenth divine power, the *shekhinah* (identified with the *kavod*, which is revealed to the prophets), which is conceived as a feminine power, in juxtaposition to the other nine powers that constitute the male figure. The scope and power of these and other relevant images far acceeded the theological needs that were raised by the domination of the relatively arid rationalistic thinkers. While most of the ideas of the Kalonymus and related circles can be understood in the immediate medieval cultural circumstances, the emergence of the kabbalistic myths is very difficult to confine in such boundaries.

Historians in the nineteenth century, and some later ones, tried to explain the appearance of kabbalistic mythology in the heart of medieval Judaism as an expression of a reaction against the rationalists, a resurgence of the powers of darkness against the light of reason engulfing Jewish culture. There is indeed such an element in the early kabbalah, though it is accompanied by other elements that try to reconcile and combine philosophical concepts and terminology with the kabbalistic myths. The dominating component of this new religious phenomenon is its insistence on tradition rather than reasoning (or mystical experience), and its endeavor to reinterpret all previous Jewish texts in the light of the new world of images, which claims to be the oldest and most authentic Jewish conception of the divine realms. The midrashic form was adopted by several early kabbalists, most notably

the author of the book *Bahir*, who not only used the midrashic methodologies and language, but by presenting Rabbi Nehunia ben ha-Kanah as the speaker in the first paragraph, claimed to be the direct continuation of Hekhalot traditions.

Where did these new myths come from? Several scholars, including Gershom Scholem (but also others before and after him), tended to assume that there may be some justice in the claims of the kabbalists, and that some components of the new myths may be derived from ancient traditions that were transmitted orally or in lost treatises. Some even identified these lost sources as Gnostic, being the result of the influence of early or late Christian Gnosticism, or a continuation of ancient Jewish Gnosticism that may even have been the original source of Christian Gnosticism. Elaborate speculative systems have been developed in the attempt to find such internal or external sources for kabbalistic terminology and imagery.

From a methodological point of view, it seems that such speculations have reached a dead end. After nearly 150 years, no meaningful source of the new kabbalistic concepts has been identified. While it is impossible to prove a negative, namely that there were no ancient sources, it is time now to accept the current state of affairs and say that as far as we know today the ideas of the kabbalah were developed by the early kabbalists themselves, especially by the author of the book *Bahir* and the first known kabbalist in the Provence, Rabbi Isaac ben Abraham "the blind." If tomorrow some new material will be discovered, this conclusion should be reconsidered, but until that happens, it seems that we have to describe the new kabbalistic myths as the result of intense new speculations by the medieval writers who authored the new kabbalistic treatises. Reliance on "oral traditions" as a source is actually a declaration of ignorance. When someone says, "They may have received it by oral tradition," one actually says, "I do not have any idea where this came from, nor shall we ever know," because oral tradition is a postulation that can never be proved right or wrong. As far as we know today, the kabbalah is a combination of ancient, known, Jewish sources, especially Hekhalot texts and the *Sefer Yezira*, contemporary philosophical terminology and ideas, and original contributions of writers of the High Middle Ages in Provence and Spain, some of which may have been the result of mystical experiences.[37]

The early kabbalistic circles in the end of the twelfth century and during most of the thirteenth were very small: The author of the *Bahir* probably was an isolated individual mystic, whereas in Provence we know about two generations of a handful of kabbalists. The first meaningful center of kabbalistic study was established in the Catalonian small town of Gerona, near Barcelona, where several scholars were active in this field in the first half of the thirteenth century; the most prominent figure among them was Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman (Nahmanides), who was a leader of Spanish Jewry and wrote an extensive, influential commentary on the Pentateuch, using sometimes esoteric kabbalistic terminology and ideas.

In the second half of the thirteenth century there is a surge in kabbalistic creativity in Spain, represented first by a circle of kabbalists in Castile, headed by the brothers Rabbi Jacob and Rabbi Isaac, the sons of Rabbi Jacob ha-Kohen, and later by the circle of Rabbi Shlomo ben Adrat (known by the acronym Rashba). Parallel to them, a lone mystic, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, tried to spread his experiential-alphabetical system that rejected the mythical concepts adopted by most other kabbalists.[38]

The kabbalah in Spain reached its peak near the end of the thirteenth century in the circle from which the book *Zohar*, the most important and influential work of the kabbalah, emerged (this monumental work is presented and discussed in several selections in this anthology). It was written by Rabbi Moshe de Leon, possibly in some collaboration with a close colleague, Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla (who was previously a disciple of Abulafia), and several other people may have contributed to the work of this circle.[39] This was the only age in the three centuries of the kabbalah's existence in Spain in which several scores of kabbalists may have been at work at the same time; it declined swiftly in the fourteenth century, and the kabbalah remained closed in very small and scattered circles until nearly the end of the fifteenth century.

These kabbalistic circles were marginal in Jewish culture in Spain, having very small impact. Some kabbalists became famous because of their leadership positions, like Nahmanides and the Rashba; others composed popular works of ethics, like Rabbi Jonah Gerondi and Rabbi Bahya ben Asher. The kabbalists may have had some impact on the several waves of antirationalistic polemics and controversies that influenced Jewish discourse in Spain and Provence in this period. In all their activities they exhibited an adherence to tradition, insisting that the ancient sources, when properly interpreted, include the correct answers to contemporary problems. From the second half of the thirteenth century and the early fourteenth, some kabbalists are found in other countries, first in Italy (Rabbi Menachem Recannati), Near East and North Africa, and the Byzantine empire. In the last decades of the thirteenth century the kabbalah began to penetrate the esotericists' centers in central Europe, and scholars tended to fuse together the new kabbalistic terminology with that of the esoteric doctrines of the Kalonymus circle. Their impact, however, was minimal. If it were not for what happened later, the kabbalah would have been remembered as a minor, almost marginal, component of Jewish culture in southern Europe.

C. The Expulsion and Safed

The dramatic change occurred when the long and mostly prosperous sojourn of the Jews in Spain was approaching its end, beginning with the mass persecutions of 1391 and culminating with the expulsions of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and their forcible conversion to Christianity in Portugal in 1497. A large part of the Jews of that period were converted to Christianity, the others went into exile, completely impoverished and dispirited; many perished in their hazardous journeys seeking refuge. The geography of Judaism in Europe was completely transformed: the Jewish population in Italy increased meaningfully as did that of North Africa and the Near East, and numerous new communities were being established and expanding in the relatively tolerant and vigorously spreading Ottoman Empire, in the Balkans, in Turkey and in the Holy Land, Syria and Egypt.[40]

This upheaval had also spiritual and cultural consequences. Jewish philosophical rationalism, the dominant worldview for half a millennium, was discredited: it was blamed for weakening the Jews' adherence to the practical, ritualistic aspects of Judaism, and by emphasizing the spiritual-intellectual aspects made it easier for many—especially the more affluent and educated parts of society—to convert to Christianity. This brought to an end a long and illustrious

chapter in Jewish philosophy and theology, which was gradually replaced, during the sixteenth century, by the increasing interest in the kabbalah, and especially in the *Zohar* (which was printed twice, in Mantua and Cremona) in the 1560s, after an emotional controversy whether it is permitted to make the secrets of the kabbalah public. Schools of kabbalists appeared in various centers in Italy, in Greece, and elsewhere. This was integrated with a new surge of messianic speculations and expectations that began in the second half of the fifteenth century, and most of the writers of apocalyptic and messianic works, which abounded in this period, used the terminology and used the myths of the kabbalah. Within a short period—two or three generations—the kabbalah has been transformed from a marginal component of religious culture into a central worldview, supporting and giving expression to the cravings of individuals and communities, and the nation as a whole. Kabbalah became the language of Jewish culture, used in sermons and commentaries, ethical treatises, and messianic speculations.

This process was accompanied by the establishment of a great center of kabbalistic learning in Safed, a small town in the Upper Galilee. Safed attracted to it kabbalists from all over the Jewish world because of its proximity to a site that was believed to be the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, the second-century talmudic sage to whom the *Zohar* was attributed. Its atmosphere of isolation from the real world contributed to the flourishing in it of radical ideas and extreme, demanding ethical practices. Here Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, one of the greatest kabbalists of all generations, wrote his classical summary of the Zoharic kabbalah, *Pardes Rimonim* ("An Orchard of Pomegranates") and his extensive, voluminous commentary on the *Zohar*, *Or Yakar* ("Precious Light"). Another mystic, who believed that a divine presence is revealed to him frequently and directs him in all his deeds, wrote the most important legal work of modern Judaism that directs Jewish law and ritual to this day—the *Shulhan Arukh* ("Laid Table") by Rabbi Joseph Karo, a great lawyer and mystic. Messianic expectations abounded here, and there was even a concerted attempt by Safed kabbalists and scholars to enhance the arrival of the messiah by reenacting the lost line of rabbinic *semichah*, divine ordinations, which was lost in the early Middle Ages.

In this atmosphere the kabbalah underwent a revolutionary transformation, brought about by the new kabbalistic myth that was developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (d. 1572; known by the acronym ha-Ari, "the Lion") and his closest disciples, especially Rabbi Hayim Vital. Luria arrived in Safed from Egypt in 1570, when he was thirty-six years old. About a dozen of Safed's kabbalists assembled around him and heard his sermons and commentaries, which he never wrote down. Two years later he died in a plague. This brief episode, however, changed the character of the kabbalah and transformed it into the dominant religious worldview of traditional Judaism in the next three centuries. Subsequent major developments, like the messianic fervor of the Sabbatian movement, or the emergence of the Hasidic sects, were all based on Lurianic concepts.[41] To this day, there is no other Jewish orthodox system of thought that rivals Lurianic kabbalah.

In Gershom Scholem's words, what Luria did was to turn the kabbalah around, from a nonhistorical quest for the secrets of the primordial process of creation, to the historical quest for ultimate redemption. The Lurianic myth of divine, cosmic, and human history contains the blueprint for the achievement of messianic deliverance, in which each individual participates and each has to contribute his spiritual and physical powers to its successful accomplishment. The uniqueness of this worldview can be discerned even from this basic starting point. Earlier kabbalists, like almost all other theologians, assume that before the creation, before the beginning of cosmic or divine history, there was a state of perfection, which should be reinstituted in the redemption. Luria, however, postulated that there was never a state of perfection, even when the Godhead alone existed; there was an innermost, hidden, potential crisis within the eternal Godhead, which the emanation of the divine powers and the creation of the universe and humanity were intended to resolve. Perfection, therefore, will be achieved for the first time in the future, as a result of the endeavors of all the participants in the process. A seeker of perfection should not withdraw from history and try to unite himself with eternal unity of God as it existed before everything, but should rather turn forward, into history, and take part in the spiritual struggle which it represents, which is the only vehicle for the achievement of perfection.

Luria introduced into the kabbalah a series of terms that represent

his concepts of drama and myth that characterize divine and earthly processes. The first occurrence, before everything, was the *zimzum*, the divine withdrawal from a certain segment of space in order to allow the emergence of other beings, thus making evacuation and exile of the infinite divine power the characteristic of all existence. Into that empty space then flowed divine light intending to create the divine entities, the *sefirot*, as they were described in the early kabbalah. This process, however, failed, because some elements, always hidden in a potential manner within the Godhead, rebelled and refused to assume the constructive function designed for them. This primordial catastrophe is described in Lurianic kabbalah as "the breaking of the vessels," the *shevirah*, which caused the emergence of a dualistic divine existence, in which the lower part is dominated by the rebellious elements that now have assumed the character of the powers of evil, a demonic realm that strives to destroy the holy realms in the higher parts of the formerly empty space. This myth, which is described in great detail in the writings of Hayyim Vital and other of Luria's disciples (especially Rabbi Joseph Ibn Tabul), contains dramatic new concepts hitherto unknown in Judaism, like the limitation of divine omnipotence and the postulation that the roots of evil existed potentially within the eternal Godhead.

The most powerful concept introduced by Lurianic kabbalah is that of the *tikkun*, the "mending" (of the broken vessels). Everything that happened from the *shevirah* to this day, and everything that is going to happen in the future until complete redemption is achieved, is part of the process of the *tikkun*. After the "breaking of the vessels," the emanation of the divine realms, the creation of the universe, the creation of humanity, the choice of Abraham, the giving of the torah to Israel, the building of the temple in Jerusalem—all represented divine attempts to bring about the *tikkun* using different tools, and all have been in vain up to now; in several cases such attempts ended with a crushing new catastrophe, another "breaking," like Adam's sin in paradise or Israel's worship of golden calf near Mount Sinai. The process, however, goes on, and the Lurianic circle was confident that the time of final success was at hand: Many believed that the sacred year *shiloh* (1575), would see its culmination. Rabbi Hayyim Vital was absolutely confident that he himself was destined to be the messiah, to be crowned the king of the universe once redemption is completed and revealed.

The Lurianic myth is revolutionary and innovative, using terms and images that seemed to be foreign and impossible in a Jewish context. Yet its practical message was highly conservative. Immersion in the project of the *tikkun* meant complete dedication to the performance of Jewish commandments, precepts, and ethical norms, in the most traditional and conservative manner. During the shevirah sparks of divine light were captivated by the powers of evil. These should be set free and returned to their original place in the divine realms. The way to liberate such sparks is the performance of the commandments. Each righteous deed frees a captive spark, while every sin condemns another spark to captivity. The dedication to the process of the *tikkun* did not demand understanding and knowledge of the myth of which it is a component; just by doing it—praying on time in the prescribed circumstances, helping the poor, eating kosher, and observing the sabbath are enough, even without any inclination concerning the wider context and meaning of these deeds. In this sense, Lurianic doctrine is both conservative and democratic: It does not demand a change in behavioral religious norms, and it allots the power of redemption to every individual. While redemption is the paramount concern of this kabbalah, it is not messianic in the narrow sense of the term: Redemption is not dependent on the messiah and his employs, but on the religious performance of every individual. The messiah is the result of the completion of the tikkun rather than its cause. Because of this, the disciples of Luria did not try to publicize their revolutionary teachings; to the contrary, they tried—especially Vital—to keep them in strict secrecy. Good people were contributing to the tikkun even if they knew nothing about this term and its context. Orthodoxy was the important factor rather than spiritual awareness of the cosmic Lurianic myth. In this sense Lurianism is not Gnosticism, even though some other aspects of this doctrine may seem to be surprisingly close to some traditional Gnostic concepts and terms. Redemption did not depend on knowledge and understanding, but on a conservative, traditional way of life.

Luria's teachings did spread widely in the first half of the seventeenth century, being disseminated not only by kabbalistic monographs but mainly by hagiographic narratives concerning Luria and his disci-

ples and many ethical popular works that presented or hinted at the new revolutionary concepts. It did, however, lay a very difficult burden on the shoulders of every single believer. The redemption of the whole universe, even that of the divine realms, depended on every single deed of every single person in every moment of his life. Each prayer, each ethical deed, might be the clinching one, releasing the last spark and bringing forth the messianic salvation. Each sin, each impure thought, may, on the other hand, plunge the universe into another catastrophe, strengthening the powers of evil and delaying the redemption. Individual responsibility knew no bounds. This system was probably suitable for the select group of dedicated pneumatics assembled in Safed, but it was very difficult to adopt as a way of life for normal, average communities all over the world. This may have been the reason why the democratic, egalitarian Lurianic theology gave rise to the first Jewish systems of religious, even mystical, leadership.

VI. Historical Outlines: The Modern Period

A. The Sabbatian Movement

The year 1666 marks a crossroad in the history of the kabbalah and of Judaism as whole. In this year the kabbalah broke the last barrier between its early origins as a marginal, esoteric spiritual phenomenon and became the dominant factor not only in religious worldview but in Jewish history as well. Three major events occurred during that one year: Nathan of Gaza proclaimed himself to be a prophet and identified Shabbatai Zevi as the messiah; the belief in Nathan the prophet and Shabbatai the messiah engulfed most Jewish communities, from London to Poland and from Amsterdam to Yemen; Shabbatai Zevi, threatened by the Ottoman Sultan, converted to Islam, forcing Judaism to confront the paradox of a converted messiah. In the next century and a half, up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, numerous sects of believers in Shabbatianism flourished in most of the major centers of Judaism, many of them esoteric and hidden, but together they constituted a major unsettling force, which caused—together with other historical changes—a radical upheaval in Judaism and gave it the diverse character it has today.[42]

The history of the Shabbatian movement has been studied in great detail, and its implications, spiritual and historical, were masterfully presented by Gershom Scholem. Three great mystics of this movement are portrayed in the selection presented in this volume—Nathan of Gaza, Jacob Frank, the archheretic who converted to Christianity in 1760, and Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, who used some Shabbatian ideas in the formulation of his own messianic mission. One point, however, should be stressed because of its importance to the position of mystics in modern Judaism.

The messianic teachings of Nathan of Gaza were completely based on the Lurianic myth. The main theme was the duty of each individual to participate in the process of the uplifting of the scattered sparks, the result of the breaking of vessels, the primordial catastrophe, this enhancing the redemption. He presented one meaningful deviation, which was the source of major historical consequences. According to Nathan, the process of *tikkun* as described by Luria has been completely accomplished by 1666, and the universe was on the verge of redemption. There remained, however, one point, one inner core in the realm of evil, which was so tough that the usual procedure of correction could not overcome it. In order to transform this core of evil a divine emissary was sent, the messiah, who is destined to overcome it, but even he cannot accomplish it on his own: He must have the assistance of the whole people to support him. This they can do by putting their faith in him, enabling him to serve as the focus, concentrating the spiritual power of the nation in order to overcome evil. Faith in the messiah was therefore the added theological demand that Nathan introduced into the Lurianic system. By doing that he inserted into Judaism an idea that was almost completely absent for many centuries: the concept of mediated spiritual activity, a relationship between the believer and God that is not direct but is mediated by another personentity, in this case the divine incarnation of one of the sefirot in the image of the messiah Shabbatai Zevi. A new concept of religious leadership thus emerged within Judaism, that of the mystical mediator between humanity and God, the mystical-messianic leader.

The numerous sects and groups of the Shabbatians during the generations following Shabbatai Zevi (d. 1676) were led by people who claimed to be the reincarnation of the messiah or his heirs in various forms. The new concept of leadership was thus exercised and diversi-

fied, to become a comprehensive phenomenon characteristic of the period. It was destined, however, to have its maximal impact in the new resurgence of Jewish spirituality and mysticism associated with the Hasidic movement, the most powerful expression of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah in modern times.

B. Modern Hasidism

Rabbi Israel ba'al Shem Tov (1700–60), known by his acronym, the Besht, who is regarded as the founder of the Hasidic movement,[43] may be regarded as a paradigmatic Jewish mystic. He did not introduce a new system of thought, nor did he deal with traditional kabbalistic theosophy. His ethical teachings do not constitute a system of hierarchical values. He was an autodidact (though several legendary figures were described as his teachers—the prophet Ahia ha-Shilony, for instance, and Rabbi Adam Ba'al Shem), who did not write any treatise. His teachings are known to us from quotations preserved by his disciples, especially Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonoi, the first writer of the Hasidic movement, whose works were published more than twenty years after the Besht's death. The one document that reached us which may be regarded as authentic—a letter he wrote to his brother-in-law Rabbi Gershon of Kutov—is clearly a mystical document in form and content. It describes an "ascension of the soul," an experience in which he was visiting the celestial realms, and conveys a mystical message concerning language and religion. These facts had an impact on the vast movement that was established by his followers, and some of the most distinct mystical phenomena in the last few generations took shape within its context.

Hasidism has been portrayed, in scholarly works and in literature, as a redeeming social movement, representing a refreshing new pietism that replaced the single-minded immersion in talmudic, legalistic study. No wonder that such presentations, most notably by Martin Buber, described Hasidism in a manner that appealed to nonorthodox Jews and to Christians. It seemed to represent the denial of those aspects of Judaism that the nonorthodox and non-Jews detested, and made Hasidism accessible to spiritually inclined, socially and humanistically motivated people in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. In brief, Hasidism was conceived as a "less Jewish" and more human and humane phenomenon. In this context, the term *mysticism* in its more benign connotations was appropriate: It expressed the image of Hasidism as emphasizing the spiritual rather than the legal, the internal rather than the external aspects of worship.

One condition was necessary if one wished to preserve such an attitude toward Hasidism: It must come to an end in the beginning of the nineteenth century, somewhere around 1815. It must be conceived as a movement that flourished in the early modern times, and then replaced by Enlightenment, Reform, Emancipation, Assimilation, Socialism, and Zionism. If it is allowed to continue to exist in the later nineteenth and twentieth century, notwithstanding the early twenty-first century, it must be recognized as a power that fiercely opposed Enlightenment, Jewish integration in modernity, Socialism, and especially Zionism, and become the most strictly orthodox element in Judaism, rejecting and denying the study of mathematics and English, throwing stones at cars traveling on the sabbath in Jerusalem, and voting in the Israeli parliament against the Oslo agreements with the Palestinians. Indeed, many histories of Hasidism stop at 1815 including S. Dubnow,[44] and even Gershom Scholem's portrayal of the movement in the concluding chapter in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* reads more like a eulogy for a lost past than a confrontation with contemporary religious-mystical phenomenon.[45] Almost all of Buber's monographs are dedicated to the Besht, the Great Maggid, Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezeritch who died in 1772, and Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav who died in 1811, and his masterpiece, *Gog und Magog*, ends in 1815. Many tales in his *Tales of the Hasidim* quote Hasidic teachers who lived later, but they are denied any historical context, and are described as ancient sages who do not participate in later events.[46]

Hasidism, however, did not perish in 1815, but continued and continues to flourish, despite cataclysmic events and catastrophes that could destroy anything—the pogroms in eastern Europe after 1880, the First World War, the Russian Revolution and civil war, the persecutions by Stalin's regime, and above all, the Holocaust, which decimated it and seemed to have put an end to its physical existence. When the movement was uprooted from its places of origin in southern Russia, the Ukraine and eastern Poland, it moved west, and reestablished itself in Warsaw, Romania, and Hungary. When the Holocaust destroyed

these new centers, contemporary Hasidism crossed the seas and built new habitats around New York and in Jerusalem and Enei Brak in Israel. They still preserve the names of the old towns in Eastern Europe as identifying their communities, while becoming integrated in a world of satellite television, videotapes, software, and diamond commerce. It grew very fast since the 1950s, and can be regarded today as the most dynamic social groups in contemporary Judaism, its influence growing not only in Israel but also in New York and in American politics.

What is the source of this unbelievable regenerative power? The answer cannot be sought only in the teachings of the Besht and his direct disciples. It has to be found in the forces that held it together for two and a half centuries and continue to be active and dominant today. This cannot be attributed to a specific religious idea; attempts to identify Hasidism as a whole by a certain body of ideas have all failed.[47] The answer can be found in its new concept of leadership, the establishment of mystical leadership, as a hereditary power inherent in the families of the founders. These leaders, the Zaddikim, are conceived as intermediaries between man and God, being themselves entities that are essentially divine in nature, the incarnation of the kabbalistic sefirah, the ninth one, called yesod or zaddik in the classical texts of the kabbalah.

Hasidism is meaningful not only in its encouragement of the mystical element in the kabbalah, but also in its designation of a class of leaders that is characterized by mystical contacts with both its community and the divine realms—the Zaddik, the leader of a Hasidic community. The early teachers of Hasidism, in the two generations following the Besht, were charismatic leaders whose influence over their followers was the result of their own spiritual power. But very soon Hasidism was transformed into a dynastic system, in which dozens of families of Zaddikim directed the lives of the families of their adherents generation after generation. The Zaddik was understood in Hasidism as intermediary between his community and God, and as a representative of the divine on earth, essentially different from ordinary human beings. They are endowed with mystical powers by heredity, and they are bonded with their adherence in a connection that cannot be described by any other term but *mystical*. Here we find, for the first time, a class of Jewish leaders who are conceived—independent of their personal character and inclination—as mystics. It is ironic that Judaism had to wait until the postenlightenment period in order to produce a class of mystical leaders who lead segments of it in the postmodern era.

One of the best-known contemporary expressions of Hasidism has been the fierce messianic outburst surrounding the leader of Habad, Lubavitch Hasidism, which came to believe that its recent leader, Rabbi Menakhem Mendel Shneersohn, was the messiah; this movement peaked in the late 1980s and early 1990s and did not perish when he died in 1996. It is wrong, however, to assume that this Hasidic sect, one of the largest, was inclined toward messianism from its beginnings in the late eighteenth century. Quite to the contrary, the first teachers of Lubavitch, the founder, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, his great disciple Rabbi Ahraon ha-Levi of Stroszila, and Rabbi Shneur's son and heir, Rabbi Dov Baer, developed the most intense and radical mystical worldview in modern Judaism.[48] According to them, all existence is an illusion, a deception; what is real only seems to be so, and reality itself can be achieved only by complete withdrawal and rejection of sensual and intellectual perceptions into the realm of the *ayin*, nothingness, which is the true being. They showed the way for an individual to sever all contacts with the world and immerse himself in the pure spirituality of the divine realm. This mysticism negates historical activity, and does not encourage messianism. A legend that prevailed in Habad circles insisted, however, that there will be seven successive leaders in the Lubavitch dynasty, and the seventh will be childless and he will be the messiah. Rabbi Menakhem Mendel Shneersohn, the seventh in this line, was thus expected to redeem the world. It should be noted that his extensive writings, or at least those that were published to date, lack any experiential element, nor did he or any of his followers publish anything that could be regarded as a record of a mystical experience.

C. Contemporary Judaism

The twentieth century may be described as a period of decline of Jewish mystical creativity, yet the urge for a direct, metalinguistic approach to God manifested itself in numerous ways and directions. Traditional kabbalistic writing is most prominently represented by the great *Commentary on the Zohar* by Rabbi Ashlag, in nearly thirty volumes. Based on the teachings of Isaac Luria, it was written in the first

half of the twentieth century. One should not ignore the unprecedented surge in the printing of kabbalistic works, many of them never published before, like the great *Commentary on the Zohar* by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, written in Safed in the middle of the sixteenth century, also in numerous large volumes. Some circles of kabbalists continued to flourish in Jerusalem in the first half of the twentieth century, though they did not publish any distinct, unique new approaches to the classical kabbalistic subjects.

Hasidism remained the main representative of the living tradition of kabbalah and mysticism, even though no prominent figures in either of them emerged in this period. Hasidism expressed its spiritual power by its resurgence after disasters, by the adherence to the traditional leaders, by preserving its traditions in a fast-changing world.

A new mixture of kabbalistic traditions, worship of leaders, and especially magic took shape in Israel in the last few decades. Parallel to the Western New Age, Israelis, especially those of Asian origins, developed new reverence to "kabbalistic" leaders, who were in most cases magicians and writers of amulets. Numerous "gurus" are presently operating in Israel, healing spiritual and physical ailments and offering ways of confronting the hardships of modern existence; they are routinely called "kabbalists," even though there is hardly any element of the authentic traditions of the kabbalah in their teachings. Celebrations are held at the tombs of old sages, in Safed and Netivot, attracting sometimes tens of thousands of adherents; as usual in such circumstances, this popular quest for heroes, saints, and healers is sometimes commercialized and used or abused by impostors. On the whole, the situation is not different from the contemporary surge of interest in magic, astrology, and gurus that characterizes contemporary Western culture.

Modern Hebrew literature, which followed the Enlightenment and Zionism, was initially posited as an opposition to mysticism, kabbalah, and traditional life in general. Some important works of the Hebrew writers of the first half of the nineteenth century represented attacks on traditional way of life in general and Hasidism in particular. This, however, was replaced by the end of that century by a complex mixture of nostalgia and criticism, expressed in the classical works of Mendele Mocher Sefarim, Hayim Nachman Bialik, Michah Yosef Beryzchevski, and Shmuel Yosef Agnon, among many others. None of the modern Hebrew writers can be described by any stretch of the term as inclined toward mysticism. They were, however, deeply immersed in Jewish traditional literature, including the kabbalah, so that they often used terms and phrases derived from such sources. In a few cases they did express experiences that can be described as mystical; this is especially true concerning Bialik, whose views concerning the nature of language and the meaning of poetry were very close to those current among mystics; an example, the poem Heziz va-Met, is included in the selection below.

The emerging Jewish community in the Land of Israel produced a vibrant, dynamic literature in Hebrew, both in poetry and prose, which was regarded as central to the emerging Jewish culture in the Holy Land, and therefore was highly respected and even revered. This attitude did not change when the State of Israel was established in 1948; rather, despite deep changes in social and cultural circumstances, Hebrew literature preserved its dynamism and its centrality in Israeli culture. The number of poets and novelists publishing in Israel far surpasses the norms of other countries, and their works are read with more dedication and attention than is customary in most contemporary cultures. Even the current revolutionary, and sometimes destructive, postmodern and post-Zionist cultural trends did not diminish the energy and the impact expressed by contemporary Hebrew writers.

Israeli literature is withdrawing very fast from direct, meaningful contact with the traditional Jewish literature, including the Bible, the Talmud, and the kabbalah. Following the transformation of Hebrew into a spoken, "normal" language, the reliance on the literary sources is diminishing. It is very rare, therefore, to find in contemporary Hebrew creative writing elements that represent a direct continuation of the past, including past mystics. Yet there is a distinct mystical aspect in current Israeli culture that should not be ignored in this anthology. It can be explained in part by the impact of secondary sources, especially the works of Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, and Isaiah Tishby, which had and have wide readership in Israel and have become part of the intellectual discourse. Tishby's translation of parts of the *Zohar* in Hebrew,[49] Scholem's monograph on Shabbatai Zevi, and Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* integrated sections of the mystical tradi-

tion within contemporary culture. The influence of Western trends, imported from Europe and America, revering Hindu and Buddhist mystics, also encouraged some writers—especially poets—to turn to what they regarded as the Jewish counterparts of such expressions. In several cases one can discern authentic, original expressions of mystical experiences in the works of Israeli poets, often completely detached from older traditions. This is not a central characteristic of contemporary Israeli literature, yet mystics seldom view themselves as standing in the center of a culture. It is sufficient proof, however, to the fact that the varieties of Jewish mysticism have not been exhausted.

VII. The Christian Kabbalah

Since the sixteenth century, the term *kabbalah* (in different spellings, including cabala, for example) has become a common word in European languages. It denotes a secret lore that was preserved by the Jews, which is closely associated with magical powers. It brings to mind methodologies like numerology and the mysterious powers of the alphabet, and it also has become a reference to a secret society, a group of rebels (*cabal*). It has spread in the last generation and became a central term in the various manifestations of the New Age, and numerous groups and schools in the United States and Europe teach something they call kabbalah as a remedy for all modern ailments, spiritual and physical. It seems to be occupying today the place that Zen Buddhism held a few decades ago, it is closely associated with astrology and alchemy, and it is believed to contain the power to bring peace of mind and fortify contemporary men and women for a successful life. The roots of this phenomenon, which is radically different from the Hebrew kabbalah, lie in a unique religious phenomenon of the late fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth.

The school of humanists in Florence that was led by Marcilio Ficino was the origin of this movement. Ficino, a protégé of the great Medici house, was the translator of Plato's works from Greek to Latin, but his most important contribution to European culture in early modern times was the translation into Latin of the Hermetic corpus, a collection of treatises that was believed to have been authored by the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, who was a contemporary of Moses in Egypt and whose writings were believed to have been the source of Greek esoteric tradition, most often associated with Pythagoras. Today it is believed that the Hermetic treatises originated in Egypt in late antiquity, reflecting the last stages of Egyptian Hellenistic culture, probably influenced also by Gnosticism, before it was taken over by Christianity. Ficino and his disciples became deeply committed to assembling and analyzing the "mysteries of the East"—Egyptian hieroglyphs, Coptic and Arabic scripts, ancient alchemy and astrology, and all the manifestations of magic old and new. They believed that these mysterious sources included in them the early, true philosophy, which is the real source of Christian truth.

The leading figure in this school after Ficino was a young Italian count, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who at a very young age distinguished himself in the knowledge of languages, courageous writing, and charismatic personality. He learned Hebrew, and became fascinated by the kabbalah as presented to him by several Jewish scholars and Jewish converts to Christianity (though there were Jewish scholars who tried to dissuade him from this field, like his teacher of Aristotle's philosophy, Rabbi Eliyahu del Medigo, who later wrote a Hebrew philosophical treatise against the kabbalah, identifying the *Zohar* as a medieval work). Among his teachers were Rabbi Johannan Alemano, a known kabbalist, and Flavius Mithridates (known by several other names as well), a Jewish convert who translated for Pico from the Hebrew numerous treatises of kabbalah and writings of the Kalonymus circle of esoterics.[50] Pico's studies, summarized in his famous *Nine Hundred Theses*, led him to the conclusion that the truth of Christianity can be best demonstrated by kabbalah and magic.[51] This and other statements caused Pico to be severely criticized by the church. He died very young (1494), but his intellectual legacy had great impact on subsequent generations of humanists and esotericists. He himself summed up his attitude by saying: Truth can be better gleaned from what is not understood than from what is understood.

As far as the kabbalah is concerned, the most important disciple of Pico was the German theologian Johannes Reuchlin, who published in 1494 his first treatise on the subject—*De Verbo Mirifico*—but his masterpiece was published many years later—in 1517, *De Arte Kabbalistica*.[52] This work served as a basis for the numerous treatises that followed in