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JEWISH MYSTICISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY MAJOR TRENDS

Kabbalists, that is to say, experts in Kabbalah, are few and far between in our generation (you could count them on your fingers).

—HILLEL ZEITLIN

In a lecture published in 1941 in his monumental work on the main currents in Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem described the status of contemporary Kabbalah as follows: “What it was at the beginning: the esoteric wisdom of small groups of men out of touch with life and without any influence on it.”¹

This description reflects Scholem’s perception of Religious Judaism as being obsolete.² Based on this approach, Scholem and some of his students studied Jewish mysticism as a literary, philological-historical phenomenon rather than as a vital and dynamic phenomenon. However, as anyone involved in public life in the past few decades knows, Scholem’s perception could not have been further from the truth.

In contemporary Israel, Kabbalah has a political dimension (for example, R.

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Yizhaq Kaduri and R. David Batzri), a socioeconomic dimension (for example, Philip Berg's Kabbalah Center), and sometimes even a quasi-military dimension (for example, kabbalist Yeshu'a Ben Shushan's participation in underground activities and R. Yitzchak Ginsburgh's support of similar activities). Therefore, before we even consider the issue of the dissemination of Kabbalah, we should discuss changes in its sphere of influence. These changes cannot be attributed solely to the growing influence of the religious world on the Israeli public, especially after the Six Days' War in 1967 and the displacement of the ruling Labor party by the right-wing Likud party in 1977. Over the last two decades of the twentieth century, we witnessed a more specific transformation in the status of mysticism, as not only Jewish mysticism but also non-Jewish and even non-religious mysticism and magic penetrated broader sections of Israeli society.³

A few of the more salient examples of this growing interest in mysticism are the fascination of many young Israelis with Indian spirituality, leading to the proliferation of Indian themes in entertainment, literature, fashion, and advertising; frequent visits to Israel by masters from a large variety of mystical cults, often leading to the establishment of local followings;⁴ television series such as *Cosmic Optimism* or *The Secret of Inner Happiness*, featuring Israeli stars with adopted Indian names (for example, Rafiq and Ujas); publishing houses (Astrolog, Or-'Am, etc.) that specialize in the translation and publication of mystical literature;⁵ bookshops, such as Ha-'Idan Ha-Ḥadash in Tel Aviv or 'Olam Qatan in Jerusalem, that specialize in the distribution of Israeli or imported mystical literature; journals (especially the popular magazine *Ḥayyim Aḥerim*, or *Alternative Living*) devoted to mysticism, as well as articles in the general press;⁶ festivals devoted to mysticism ("Shantipi" festivals, "rainbow gatherings"); and religious and secular bands (for example, Isbei Ha-Sadeh and Sheva') specializing in "spiritual" lyrics.⁷

The changing status of Kabbalah is not only a result of the changing status of mysticism in general but also a cause of it, since Kabbalah in its more or less popular forms is an integral part of the new Israeli spirituality. This trend has found concrete expression in a number of ways: the establishment of settlements, mainly in Judea, Samaria, and the Galilee, by students of Kabbalah (such as Bat 'Ayin by Ginsburgh's followers and Or Ha-Ganuz by the followers of the Ashlagian kabbalist R. Mordekhai Sheinberger); popular Kabbalah courses (precise data on the number of participants is lacking, but I estimate there to be tens of thousands); books popularizing Kabbalah (such as Yigal Arikha's *Practical Kabbalah*); the infiltration of kabbalistic themes into literature, art, pop songs, and movie scripts;⁸ the existence of a pirate radio station devoted to Kabbalah (*Pnimitiyut Ha-Torah*, or *The Inner World of Torah*, also under the auspices of Sheinberger) and radio programs of the "Ask the Kabbalist" kind; and the mass influx of

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pilgrims to the tombs of kabbalists, particularly to Meron in the Galilee and to the grave of the Baba Sali (R. Israel Abuḥatzeira) in Netivot, as well as the *hilulot* (celebrations marking the anniversary of the Tzaddiq's death) that take place there.⁹

Needless to say, this situation is not unique to Israel. All of the aforementioned phenomena exist—sometimes to an even greater extent—in various centers in the West. In the United States, for example, mysticism is flourishing because of the expansion of experiential Christian groups, such as the born-again Christians, in public life there. In Europe, by contrast, the decline of Christianity has been offset by the revival of more pagan trends.¹⁰ Kabbalah plays a large part in the revival of mysticism, particularly within the virtual reality afforded by the Internet. Research into twentieth-century Kabbalah, research into the science of religions, or even sociological research are all very far from exhausting or even mapping out the full scope and significance of these phenomena.

In mapping the spread of Kabbalah in the twentieth century, I focus first on the qualitative dimension—namely, innovative, creative, and radical doctrines. I also, however, briefly discuss more quantitative issues, such as the mass dissemination, influence, and institutionalization of Kabbalah, which are significant from an external and sociological perspective. In addition, the mapping focuses on four main trends: the Hasidic world, the Lithuanian world (by which I mean the spiritual movement that originated in Lithuania before spreading to other centers), the Oriental-Sephardic world, and the Religious-Zionist world. Most of the trends presented here will be dealt with in greater depth in the course of the book. This introductory mapping, although far from exhaustive, is extremely important for obtaining an overall picture, before embarking on a more detailed description of each particular trend.

HASIDIC TRENDS

On the qualitative plane, several trends emerged in the twentieth-century Hasidic world that produced outstanding and creative writers. In the mystical context, two groups deserve special mention: Toldot Aharon, originating in the group founded by R. Aaron Roth (author of *Shomer Emunim*) that exists to this day, albeit on a smaller scale, and Piasecszna Hasidism, which existed until 1943 under the leadership of R. Qalonymus Qalman Shapira.¹¹ Shapira established a fraternity dedicated to intensive mystical activity, known as the *Bnei Maḥshava Tova*, whose members perished with him in the Holocaust.¹² Today, some elitist groups still base their spiritual journey on his doctrine.¹³ (R. Shlomo Carlebach, the “Dancing Rabbi,” a pioneer of the kabbalistic orientation within the New Age movement was also influenced by Shapira.)¹⁴

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The Izbicha-Radzin branch of Hasidism, originally founded by R. Mordekhai Yosef Leiner, author of *Mei Ha-Shiloah*, in the nineteenth century and upheld through the twentieth century by rebbes of this dynasty espoused a more radical doctrine. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, this doctrine was spread through the works of R. Zadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin.¹⁵ This brand of Hasidism has made a major comeback in recent decades. (Carlebach was one of its major proponents.)¹⁶

A further branch worth mentioning is that of the Bratzlav Hasidim, which, from its origins as a small and persecuted group, has become a significant social and cultural phenomenon, comprising mainly the newly religious.¹⁷ This form of Hasidism comprises a large number of subgroups, including the main stream (known also as *Ziqnei Bratzlav*, or *Bratzlav Elders*) in the Mea Shearim neighborhood of Jerusalem, under the leadership of R. Ya'aqov Meir Schechter; R. Eli'ezer Shick's branch in Yavniel;¹⁸ the followers of R. Yisro'el Odesser, known as *Ba'al Ha-Peteq* (the recipient of a disputed revelation from R. Naḥman of Bratzlav that supposedly took the form of a note containing the famous "mantra" "Na, Naḥ, Naḥma, Naḥman Me-Uman"), whose main proponent is R. Israel Isaac Bezançon; the followers of R. Shalom Arush of the *Ḥut Shel Ḥessed Yeshiva* in Jerusalem (with a branch in Rishon Le-Tziyon); the followers of Arush's teacher, R. Eli'ezer Berland, in the *Shuvu Banim Yeshiva* in the Old City;¹⁹ and the followers of R. Gedaliah Qenig in Safed.²⁰ Sometimes, these groups are characterized by inter-cene tension.

From a quantitative perspective, the swift rehabilitation of the larger Hasidic courts (such as Belz, Ger, Tsanz, and Vizhnitz) after the Holocaust is noteworthy. This phenomenon, while on the whole failing to contribute to the pool of innovative thought, is highly significant from a sociopolitical perspective. Moreover, at least two of the classical courts that enjoyed great influence also generated a corpus of innovative thought that is extremely interesting from a research perspective: the prolific works of the two last Habad rebbes, R. Yosef Yizḥaq Shneurson and R. Menaḥem Mendel Shneurson, and the writings of the Satmar rebbe, R. Yo'el Teitelbaum (author of *Va-Yo'el Moshe*, inter alia).²¹

From a sociological angle, these two warring courts, Habad and Satmar, are radically different. Habad Hasidism spreads mainly through the recruitment of the newly religious. It uses advanced technology and effective organization to address the "world at large," thereby attracting a wide variety of sympathizers, both Jewish and gentile. (Sympathy for Habad Hasidism has been considerably eroded, however, by supporters of the "Messianic Faction," who upheld their beliefs even after the rebbe's demise.) Satmar Hasidism, by contrast, tends to be segregationist. Its growth can be attributed mainly to natural increase and to the

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political influence it wields within the ultraorthodox community as a result of its uncompromising fundamentalist stance.

Finally, this survey would not be complete without a reference to R. Hillel Zeitlin, a unique personality operating on the fringes of the Hasidic world. Zeitlin, who underwent a certain process of secularization before returning to the Hasidic world, was an extremely influential publicist and was largely responsible for the infiltration of kabbalistic ideas into pre-Holocaust literary and cultural discourse. The intense mystical content of his works, as well as his contact with other mystics of his time, such as R. Avraham Yizḥaq Ha-Kohen Kook, have been extensively dealt with in Jonatan Meir's work.²²

NON-HASIDIC ULTRAORTHODOX TRENDS

An interesting phenomenon that emerged in the course of the twentieth century and peaked toward the end of the century was the convergence of Hasidic and non-Hasidic trends in the ultraorthodox world. The adoption of Hasidic patterns of leadership and thought by Lithuanian Jews who formerly opposed these patterns contributed to this process. For example, Lithuanian "Torah luminaries" such as R. Ya'akov Kanievsky (known as the Steipler) and his son R. Ḥayyim Kanievsky became rebbes of sorts, handing out blessings and remedies, and preserving a "dynastic" structure that originated in Hasidism. This process was facilitated by the adoption of the Hasidic model of total belief in the sages (*emunat ḥakhamim*) and their rulings (*da'at Torah*) by the rabbis' adherents, even on secular issues.²³ Moreover, the status of Kabbalah, which in the past had been the heritage of a select few, gained ground among the Lithuanian public.²⁴

For example, although some notable ultraorthodox leaders, such as R. Avraham Yes'ayahu Karelitz (known as the Ḥazon Ish) and R. Eli'ezer Menachem Shach, paid little attention to Kabbalah or disregarded it altogether, others, such as Kanievsky, incorporated kabbalistic themes into their writings.²⁵ One of the important halakhic experts (*posqim*) of this world, R. Yo'el Klufit of Haifa, was known to explore esoterica—a proclivity that largely accounted for his influence. And the prolific output of the kabbalist R. Shlomo Elyashiv (known as the Ba'al Ha-Leshem, after his four-volume book *Leshem Shvo Ve-Aḥlama*) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was probably a factor in propelling R. Shalom Elyashiv, his grandson, the current leading authority on Torah law (*poseq hador*), to a position of prominence. (Ba'al Ha-Leshem's influence on Kook is discussed in Chapter 3.)

One final point worth mentioning is the infiltration of kabbalistic themes into the literature of the Mussar school, an ethical movement that dissociated itself from Kabbalah at its inception in the late nineteenth century.²⁶ In Lithuania in the

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early twentieth century, the *mashgiaḥ ha-ruḥani* (moral mentor) of Telz Yeshiva, R. Yosef Leib Bloch, introduced kabbalistic themes into his Mussar talks fairly openly.²⁷ Later, R. Yizḥaq Hutner also (albeit more covertly) introduced a strongly kabbalistic conceptual element into his talks, which later became the basis of the series *Paḥad Yizḥaq* (which began to appear in various forms during the 1950s and is still being published).

At the end of the twentieth century, the *mashgiaḥ mussari* (ethical mentor) of Ponevezh Yeshiva (the flagship school of the Lithuanian world), R. Ḥayyim Friedlander, actively disseminated the teachings of the great eighteenth-century kabbalist R. Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto (“Ramḥal”). Likewise, R. Shlomo Wolbe, who studied with Klufit and Hutner, laced his talks and books with kabbalistic motifs (despite assertions that “esoterics do not concern us”).²⁸ A possible explanation for these developments is that while the Mussar movement originally minimized overt kabbalistic discourse, instead advocating psychological self-improvement, in the twentieth century many members of the Mussar movement used these themes to formulate complex psychological doctrines.

There are other ultraorthodox schools that have not been included in the typology proposed here. One important school that I will discuss in the course of this book is the kabbalistic circle founded by R. Yehuda Leib Ha-Levi Ashlag, author of *Ha-Sulam*, a multivolume commentary on the kabbalistic classic the *Zohar*, among many other works.²⁹ Although Ashlag’s roots were Hasidic, he was not, in my opinion, a Hasidic thinker. (On the contrary, I shall show the influence of the anti-Hasidic R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna [Hagra] and his followers on Ashlag’s thinking.) The Ashlag circle continued to exist qualitatively under the leadership of Ashlag’s son R. Barukh Ashlag and his mystical circle, Bnei Barukh.³⁰ This school enjoyed a huge quantitative boost thanks to Berg’s Kabbalah Center, which succeeded in recruiting top-tier celebrities, such as Madonna.³¹ Finally, we must note the influence of R. Aryeh Kaplan, a prolific ultraorthodox writer and thinker from the United States, some of whose books focus on kabbalistic meditation.³²

THE ORIENTAL-SEPHARDIC WORLD

The qualitative dimension of Sephardic kabbalistic works, which have enjoyed a revival in recent decades, has been almost completely overlooked by academic research. Until recently, scholarship, with the exception of sociological studies, has failed to assess the contribution of Sephardic Jewry to medieval and modern kabbalistic output.³³ (This “distribution of labor” reflects a certain research assumption that the Oriental-Sephardic world belongs to the quantitative rather than the qualitative dimension.)³⁴

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Although I will focus on the more ideological aspects of the Sephardic Kabbalah in the course of this book, it is first worth considering the quantitative aspect, which is more familiar and evident. This quantitative dimension is reflected in the emergence of quasi-Hasidic dynasties of kabbalists with magical powers (such as the Abuhatzeira family); the widespread participation in mystical-magical events and rituals, such as the pilgrimage to Meron; and the proliferation of kabbalistic Yeshivas, which have become, inter alia, Yeshivas for the newly observant and successful publishing houses.³⁵ Among the heads of kabbalistic Yeshivas, the most influential is R. Ya'aqov Moshe Hillel, dean of the Ahavat Shalom Yeshiva, who wields significant political and economic power in addition to being a prolific and extremely erudite writer. The Shas movement—recently the subject of much research—has played an important role in the cultural and political empowerment of the Sephardic ultraorthodox world, and naturally also of Sephardic Kabbalah, largely thanks to the glorification of R. Yizhaq Kaduri, known as *Zeqan Ha-Mequbalim* (the Eldest Kabbalist).³⁶ This process in turn has had consequences for the Shas leadership, so that even relatively “rational” *posqim* such as R. ‘Ovadia Yosef have begun referring to doctrines of reincarnation and messianic aspirations, as anyone with even a fleeting acquaintance with the Israeli media can testify.³⁷

Kaduri himself—like the Sephardic Kabbalah he represents—is identified in the public consciousness with magic, because of his distribution of amulets, or “blessed oil.” Many Sephardic kabbalists, such as Kaduri and the “X-Ray Rabbi,” R. Ya'aqov Yisra'el Ifergan, deal with “practical Kabbalah,” providing magical answers to many personal, economic, and social problems (which the petitioners feel that the modern State of Israel has failed to resolve satisfactorily). A panegyric literature of sorts has grown up around these kabbalists, and the fact that they are wooed by politicians who are aware of their public influence has enhanced their image as miracle workers. (It is a known fact, for example, that Kaduri's support contributed greatly to Benjamin Netanyahu's marginal victory in the 1996 elections.)³⁸ Ironically, Hillel's comprehensive pamphlet condemning magic, *Faith and Folly*, was endorsed by none other than Kaduri.³⁹

THE RELIGIOUS-ZIONIST WORLD

The history of Religious Zionism in the twentieth century reflects a growing transition—both quantitative and ideological—from rationalist perceptions to mystical patterns of leadership and thought. Undoubtedly, the main force behind this development was R. Avraham Yizhaq Ha-Kohen Kook. Although Kook has been the subject of considerable research, his doctrine has generally been viewed in a philosophical context, so much so that knowledge of Kabbalah has not been considered a prerequisite for understanding his works.⁴⁰ Similarly, existing stud-

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ies have not come close to exhausting the mystical elements in the writings of his students and followers, such as R. David Kohen, known as *Ha-Nazir* (the Nazarite), author of *Qol Ha-Nevu'a* and many other works, some of which are still in manuscript form, and R. Ya'aqov Moshe Ḥarlap, author of the multivolume *Mei Marom* and other works, some of which have recently been published and others of which are still in manuscript form.⁴¹ As we shall see, the ongoing publication of the manuscripts of Kook and his followers is in itself an indication of the hold that the mystical dimension has on this circle, and of a hunger for the mystical dimension in the thought of Kook and his followers.

As is well known, members of the Kook circle wielded substantial political, social, and cultural influence from the 1950s on (predominantly among the *Ze'irei Ha-Mafdal*, or NRP [National Religious Party] Young Guard), particularly after the Six Days' War.⁴² Recent decades have seen the rise of the third and even fourth generation of Kook's students, who have effectively assumed the leadership of a substantial portion of the National-Religious camp.⁴³ It is worth noting that members of this leadership (such as R. Tzevi Yisra'el Tau, R. Yehoshu'a Zuckerman, R. 'Oded Vilensky, R. Shlomo Aviner) achieved this status thanks to their dissemination of the works of Kook and his son, R. Tzevi Yehuda Ha-Kohen Kook ("Ratzia"), and not because of their familiarity with classical Halakha.⁴⁴ This phenomenon was part of a lengthy sociological transformation, including the introduction of "philosophical thought" programs into the classical Yeshiva curriculum. Thus, in several new Yeshivas (Ramat Gan, 'Otniel, premilitary academies, and the like), the study of Hasidic works, the writings of Kook, and other non-halakhic material has begun to significantly encroach upon the traditional study of the Talmud.

Finally, some Hasidic teachers, such as R. Yitzchak Ginsburgh, exerted a strong influence on radical Religious-Zionist circles, such as the "hilltop youth." The Religious-Zionist public's increased interest in mysticism is matched by a growing focus on magic. The Religious-Zionist public, particularly its Sephardic element, increasingly seeks blessings and amulets from kabbalists and miracle workers, such as, respectively, the former chief Rabbi Mordekhai Eliyahu and "The Prophet," Nir Ben-Artzi.⁴⁵ In the concluding chapter, I discuss the sociological implications of this metamorphosis against the broader context of the changes that have overtaken the Religious-Zionist public in recent decades.

KABBALAH OUTSIDE ISRAEL

So far, this brief survey has focused on mysticism in Israel—the book's main focus. Nevertheless, I believe it important to include some discussion of the mystical scene abroad, aspects of which will be discussed in the course of the book in various contexts (particularly in Chapter 6, in connection with the rise of

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neo-Hasidism). First and foremost are the works of Abraham Joshua Heschel, a thinker of Hasidic extraction who was instrumental in introducing kabbalistic and Hasidic discourse both into the Conservative Judaism movement in the United States and into Christian theology there. As Arthur Green suggests, his description of the mystical experience was based in part on his personal experience.⁴⁶ Heschel's writings on Hasidism, together with those of other thinkers such as Green, Martin Buber, Elie Wiesel, and Jacob Samuel Minkin, contributed to the incorporation of Hasidic stories into twentieth-century Western culture.⁴⁷

Another influential actor in the kabbalistic scene abroad was Eli'ezer Mordekhai Théon, whose thought influenced Jewish and Christian circles in Europe and North Africa. Théon, who was associated with Madame Blavatsky's theosophist movement, was succeeded as leader of its kabbalistic branch by Pascal Temnys, who set up the Argaman Center, still active in Israel today. This is not the place for an in-depth exploration of the history of twentieth-century Christian Kabbalah, from the theosophist movement and Aleister Crowley's Golden Dawn movement at the start of the century to the psychological interpretation of Kabbalah by Ze'ev ben Shim'on Ha-Levi (also known as Warren Kenton) at the end of the century. A more thorough discussion of this phenomenon, which is currently expanding (thanks mainly to the Internet), would no doubt distract readers from the main thrust of this book—Israeli, or at least Jewish, mysticism. It is my hope, however, that growing research interest in Christian Kabbalah in Israel and Europe will not neglect its recent history.⁴⁸

Some kabbalists began their work abroad, later moving to Israel as part of the general demographic trend of *aliya*, especially in the second half of the century. Some of the leaders of the third generation of Kook's followers, such as Zuckerman or Tau, are of European extraction, as is R. Avraham Zagdon of Bratzlav. Others, such as Carlebach and Ginsburgh, emigrated from North America. This phenomenon is not merely of biographical interest. Rather, it reflects the flow of knowledge that contributed to the fusion of kabbalistic doctrines with Western perceptions—one of the salient features of twentieth-century Kabbalah.⁴⁹

Among those kabbalists who immigrated to Israel, one outstanding personality is R. Yehuda Léon Ashkenazy, also known as Manitou.⁵⁰ Ashkenazy obtained his kabbalistic training in Morocco (then under French rule) during the Second World War. He subsequently taught many students in France and was largely responsible for the revival of Jewish study and ritual there after the war. In his Paris period, Ashkenazy had contacts with other outstanding French Jewish thinkers, such as Emanuel Levinas and André Neher, who were also influenced by Jewish mystical works.⁵¹ In 1956, Ashkenazy met Ratzia, as well as other kabbalists such as R. Barukh and R. Mordekhai 'Attiya, thus triggering the association of

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French Jewish intellectuals with the Kook circle—an association that continued with Ashkenazy's follower R. Shlomo Aviner. After the Six Days' War, Ashkenazy immigrated to Israel, where he became the revered spiritual leader of many French immigrants.

In discussing the relationship between the development of Kabbalah in Israel and abroad, we must not lose sight of the fact that kabbalistic discourse and activity in the United States enjoys a certain degree of autonomy. Thus, for example, some classical and new kabbalistic works are distributed in the United States only. In general, the term *Jewish world* is helpful, since a flow of information certainly exists between various Jewish centers (particularly since the emergence of the Internet). However, the existence of the Jewish world does not negate the unique features of each center, which should be studied in its local context, as we have done with Israeli Kabbalah.

In discussing Kabbalah outside the confines of the Jewish world, we cannot fail to mention the great interest that Kabbalah has elicited among top-ranking intellectuals in the West, including the postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida, the author and researcher of semiotics Umberto Eco (in particular in his book *Foucault's Pendulum*), and the literary critic Harold Bloom.⁵² This phenomenon proves, yet again, that the dissemination of Kabbalah should be perceived not as an expression of popular or superficial culture but rather as a true transformation of the literary and ideological structure of contemporary Western culture.⁵³