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THE THEOLOGIES OF KABBALAH RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly accepted today that Gershom Scholem’s study of Kabbalah was shaped within the framework of his national and anarchic theology (although there remain scholars who dismiss this claim). In this article I would like to expand the discussion on the theological perspectives of the study of Jewish mysticism beyond the discussion of Scholem’s theological positions and their influence on his studies. In the following, I will suggest that the theological nature of the academic study of Kabbalah and Hasidism is not exclusively connected to Scholem’s theological interest, rather it is imprinted within the basic assumptions of the field, and mainly in the use of “mysticism” as the central analytical category in the study of Kabbalah. As I have claimed in the past, the term “mysticism” is embedded in theological discourse and its use as an analytical category entails basic theological assumptions. From this point of view, it is not only Scholem’s research that bears a theological nature, but that of his successors as well, as long as it is based on categorizing Kabbalah as “mysticism.” It should be noted that a few researchers opposed use of the term mysticism to categorize the Kabbalah (and it seems that this opposition has increased in the past few years). Yet, the theological perception that identifies Kabbalah as mysticism is still accepted by most researchers and, to a great extent, this notion shapes and dictates academic research on the Kabbalah and Hasidism. It should be noted that similar theological perceptions shape academic research in other fields of religious studies that use terms such as “mysticism,” “the sacred,” and “religious experience” as analytical categories.

In the following article I will reiterate and elucidate my claim that the category “mysticism” is based on theological assumptions; I will clarify the theological assumptions underlying the research of Jewish mysticism and I will present their affinity to theological perceptions of modern spiritual currents, mainly New Age movements. Finally, I will
claim that nontheological research of the Kabbalah and Hasidism requires demystification of these historical phenomena and abandoning the category Jewish mysticism as the constitutive category of this field of research.

MYSTICISM AS A THEOLOGICAL CATEGORY

Before I present my claim that mysticism is a theological category, I would like to explain my use of the term “theology,” which has recently become quite popular, particularly in the framework of discussions of political theology. In this article, I will use the term theology in its original meaning, as indicating discussion and research of God, his divine nature, and his activities in the world (as Augustine defined this—de divinitate rationem sive sermonem).\(^5\) Theology, in this sense, is a field of knowledge dealing with God and his attributes and which posits the Divine as a casual factor that explains natural, historical, and social phenomena.

Moshe Idel raised criticism against the overemphasis of the theological aspects of Kabbalah by Scholem and his disciples (at the expense of its mystical and experiential elements) calling it the “theologization of the Kabbalah.”\(^6\) I would like to stress that my claim is not that research of the Kabbalah overemphasizes the theological aspects of the Kabbalah, rather that Kabbalah research itself is based on fundamental theological assumptions.\(^7\) These fundamental theological assumptions are entrenched in the use of the term “mysticism” as an analytical term in Kabbalah research.

I believe that mysticism is a theological term not only because it originates (as do many other terms in the modern academic discourse) in Christian theology, but also because its use in characterizing and analyzing historical, social, and literary phenomena assumes that God is the key explanatory factor of these phenomena. As I will demonstrate, the term “mysticism” assumes the existence of God, or a transcendent being, that people—in certain circumstances—encounter, experience, or unite with. The use of the term “mysticism” as an analytical category assumes that the contact with God or the metaphysical entity (i.e., “the mystical experience”) explains the behavior of human beings, the nature of their cultural productions, and their impact on historical events. This is the underlying theological assumption of the category “mysticism” as it was formulated in the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, and how it is used today as well in the research of religion, including that of Kabbalah and Hasidism. Most definitions of the term mysticism repeat the
A theological assumption that phenomena labeled “mystical” are the culmination or result of an encounter between human beings and the Divine (or a nonpersonal, transcendent reality). Scholars of mysticism often speak of the difficulty in defining mysticism and note the numerous definitions that have been given for the term. However, reviewing the definitions that have been proposed for the term and how it is used by scholars, indicates that they define and use the term quite clearly and distinctly. Most of the numerous wordings for the meaning of “mysticism,” from the late nineteenth century through to the present, repeat its definition as a direct experience of contact with God or a transcendent reality. The differences between the various definitions of mysticism center on the designation of the metaphysical reality that the mystic encounters, and the nature of the human encounter with that reality.

Hence, for example, at the beginning of the twentieth century the Quaker theologian, Rufus Jones, defined mysticism as “a type of religion which puts an emphasis on the immediate awareness of a relationship with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence.” During this same period, the well-known American psychologist and philosopher, William James, wrote that, “In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness.” At the end of the twentieth century, the scholar of Christian mysticism, Bernard McGinn, stated that mysticism is the element that concerns “the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.”

All these definitions of mysticism, as do many others, assume that God, the Divine presence, or the Absolute reality, is a casual factor that explains the events labeled as “mystical.” This, as mentioned, is a theological assumption and, therefore, use of the term mysticism as an analytical term in the framework of academic research in itself entails theological assumptions.

It should be noted that there have been attempts to offer nontheological definitions of mysticism. For example, Freud’s perception of mysticism as regression to the infant’s early stage of development where it does not yet distinguish between itself and the outer world; Robert Gimello’s claim that a mystical experience is a psychosomatic intensification of religious belief, or theories that offer neurobiological explanations for religious and mystical experiences. These definitions, which take for granted that all mystical phenomena have a common denominator, but explain this common denominator as something resulting from neurosis, pathology, or hallucination, and not as an encounter with the divine, are in general rejected by scholars of religion, including researchers of Kabbalah.
One can claim that definitions of mysticism are based on a phenomenological approach that only describes the mystics’ beliefs without committing to the reality behind those beliefs; however, the definitions of researchers of mysticism and Kabbalah are not based on a mere phenomenological description of the phenomena, according to emic concepts used by participants in their writings or reports. Scholars of mysticism interpret the reports of their research subjects on hearing, seeing, or feeling divine or supernatural beings as “an experience,” and they describe the object of “the experience” in modern theological terms (such as “the Absolute,” Transcendent reality, etc.,) and not in the terms used by the researched subjects (“Allah,” “Jesus,” “Brahman,” “Metatron,” etc.). Scholars of mysticism accept the reality that stands behind the description of “mystical experiences” (“God,” “the Absolute reality,” etc.), even if they claim that this reality is hidden from ordinary human perception or unattainable through normal modes of consciousness. In most cases, researchers of mysticism reject as “reductive” the assumption that mystical experiences are caused as the result of an error, hallucination, or futile imagination, and they assume that underlying the events they refer to as “mystical” lies an encounter with a divine or metaphysical reality (which some researchers believe is revealed in the depths of the human’s soul).

The theological definitions of “mysticism” are accepted in modern academic research of Kabbalah and Hasidism that adopted the concept of “mysticism” as the founding category of the research field. The adjective “mystical” was first applied to Kabbalah in the second half of the seventeenth century, although differing in meaning from that attributed to the term in later eras. Characterization of the Kabbalah as “Jewish mysticism” first appeared, to the best of my knowledge, in the first half of the nineteenth century, in the writings of the German Christian theologian, Franz Molitor. Following in his footsteps, scholars of Judaism in the second half of the nineteenth century adopted the term, which became a main category in Kabbalah and Hasidism research from the onset of the twentieth century and up to the present. Gershom Scholem, who adopted the categorization of Heichalot literature, Kabbalah and Hasidism, as “Jewish mysticism” and established the modern academic research of the Kabbalah, defined mysticism (in the footsteps of Rufus Jones and Evelyn Underhill) as “direct contact between the individual and God,” or as a merger of the self into a higher union. According to Scholem, mystical experience, “the tremendous uprush and soaring of the soul to its highest plane,” underlies the various mystical movements, from Heichalot literature to Hasidism. These two movements use different sets of terms, “and yet it is the same experience which both are trying to express in different ways.”
Similar perceptions of mysticism govern the Kabbalah research done by Scholem’s pupils and disciples, including scholars who disagreed with many of his major theses. As is well known, from the eighties of the last century, several scholars, foremostly Moshe Idel, Yehuda Liebes, and Elliot Wolfson, proposed new perspectives and direction in the study of Kabbalah that challenged many of the theoretical and methodological assumptions of Scholem and, to a great extent, they changed the field of Kabbalah studies. However, while these new directions and perspectives undermined many of Scholem’s theses concerning the significance of Kabbalah, its historical developments and the methodology of its research, the basic assumption of the field, which categorizes Kabbalah and Hasidism as “mysticism,” was preserved. The theological definition of mysticism as an experience stimulated by direct contact with a metaphysical reality repeats itself in the writings of contemporary Kabbalah researchers. Hence, for example, Moshe Idel defines mysticism as “the search for, and sometimes the attainment of, direct contact with God;” Elliot Wolfson characterizes mysticism as “the immediate experience of the divine Presence;” and Haviva Pedaya speaks of “a deep experience of unmediated contact with absolute reality.”

In the new research there is a considerable tendency to amplify the centrality of the mystical and ecstatic element in Kabbalah. One of the main criticisms of Scholem—from Idel and other researchers—was that he did not put enough of an emphasis on the mystical and experiential element of the Kabbalah. As Moshe Idel said in an interview following the publication of his book *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*:

I wanted to emphasize the elements that turn this literature into mysticism. Not to describe when someone lived, when someone died and if he wrote X number of books or Y number of books. These things are important, without a doubt, and they were done quite well up to now, but this does not touch on Kabbalistic literature as mystical literature, rather as historical literature. This makeover is done to this literature as if it were medieval belles-lettres or poetry. I wanted to deal with the characteristic of this literature as mystical literature.25

While Scholem first and foremost perceived Kabbalah as theosophy, Idel stressed the significance of the ecstatic-mystical trend and described it as one of the two main trends of Kabbalah.26 Other scholars placed an even stronger emphasis than Idel on the centrality of the mystical experience in Kabbalah, and claimed that ecstatic and mystical experiences are also in the background of Kabbalistic trends that Idel described as theosophical-theurgic, including the Kabbalistic school of Gerona and Sefer ha-Zohar.
In contemporary Kabbalah research there is more interest in universal aspects of Jewish mysticism and in comparative research, which aspires to reveal universal traits of the mystical experience. Gershom Scholem, who was mainly interested in the particularistic aspects and the historical expressions of the phenomena he identified as “Jewish mysticism,” claimed that the mystical experience is always formed in a particular religious context and that “there is no mysticism as such.” This approach (known as the “contextual approach”), was further developed by Steven T. Katz, who asserted that not only the literary description of the mystical experience, but also the experience itself is always formed in concrete, cultural contexts. Despite the fact that numerous Kabbalah scholars have asserted that they accept the approach of Scholem and Katz, they also declare that the mystical experience shares common universal elements that can be revealed through comparative study of mystical experiences (Scholem already claimed that it would be absurd to deny that mystical experiences have a common characteristic which is revealed through comparative analysis). In the past few years, some scholars have limited or even rejected Katz’s contextual position, and have adopted an approach that is closer to the perennial approach that claims that the core of the mystical experience is universal and not culture-dependent. Moshe Idel stated that “emphasizing the pre-experiential elements as molding the experience itself is basically an implicit attempt to demystify it.” The culture-dependent elements, according to Idel, have an impact “on the manner of expression rather than on the mode of the experience itself.” Elliot Wolfson claimed that contextualism, “does not however, logically preclude the possibility of underlying patterns of experience or deep structures that may be illuminated through a comparative study of various mystical traditions.” Rachel Elior emphasized that mystical phenomena should be interpreted within the cultural context in which they have been created. Yet, she also recognized: “the conceptual closeness—or the phenomenological resemblance in a few of the essential characteristics—of the mystical phenomenon in different religions and cultures.”

The assumption that phenomenological and comparative research can reveal the common universal traits of the mystical experience which, according to scholars, underlie Kabbalah and Hasidism, enhances the theological propensity of the research field. As I will show later on, according to this approach the academic study of Jewish Mysticism is perceived as a practice that can reveal and lead toward an encounter with the transcendental reality underlying universal mystical phenomena.
THE THEOLOGIES OF THE STUDY OF JEWISH MYSTICISM

While some scholars of Kabbalah and Hasidism in the United States affirm their theological perspectives, and some have published theological works alongside their research activity, in Israel, researchers of "Jewish Mysticism" for the most part refrain from stating and clarifying their ideological and theological stance. Nonetheless, reviewing their studies, and especially their notions concerning the essence and significance of mysticism, reveals their underlying theological perspectives. Kabbalah scholars indeed express different and varied positions regarding the nature of mystical experiences, the reality encountered in such experiences, the influence of these experiences on the literary products and the historical expressions of Kabbalah, as well as concerning the spiritual and religious aims of their research. However, one can discern several common elements that characterize their theological perceptions.

As we saw above, based on the prevalent definitions of mysticism adopted by Kabbalah scholars, mysticism is perceived as an experience of unmediated connection between human beings and a transcendent reality. The transcendent reality in the mystical experiences is described in different ways by theologians and scholars of religion. While many identify the object of the experience as God, or the Divine (as in the definitions of Rufus Jones and Bernard McGinn mentioned above), other researchers and theologians prefer to use nontheistic terms; for example, William James described the object of the mystic state as the "Absolute." Describing the object of the mystical experience in seemingly neutral terms from a religious perspective is common among scholars from the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, Louis Dupree spoke of knowledge of the "ultimate selfhood" and the "transcendent source of the self," and Robert Forman described the object of the mystical experience as "pure consciousness." According to Walter Principe’s definition, mysticism is "a rare but universal and liberating experience of a special relationship with the Deity, whether this remains unnamed or named as God, the Absolute, the Ultimate Reality, the Ground of Being, the Transcendent or the One..."

Similar assumptions are evident among scholars of Kabbalah. As we have seen, Gershom Scholem, followed by Moshe Idel and Elliot Wolfson, identified the object of the mystical experience as God or the Divine, a perception that is repeated by other Kabbalah researchers as well. Other researchers prefer to use nontheistic terms to define the reality encountered through the mystical experience. Rachel Elior claims that mysticism deals with "another reality that exists beyond the perceptible world," and Haviva Pedaya speaks of a "reality beyond the existing reality" and "the ultimate reality," a concept that is found also in Hava Tirosh-Samuelson’s definition of mysticism: "a religious
experience that involves a paranormal state of consciousness in which the human subject encounters or unites with ultimate reality.” Some Kabbalah scholars (similar to researchers of mysticism in other cultures) identify the divine or metaphysical reality experienced by the mystic as an element found within one’s self. Scholem characterized the essence of the mystical experience as “an encounter with the absolute Being in the depths of one’s own soul,” and Arthur Green defined mysticism as a religious outlook that seeks out an inner experience of the divine and to that end cultivates a life of inwardness. Rachel Elior spoke about Mystics delving deep into the psyche to reach “a reality not grasped by means of ordinary human cognition.”

This teaches us that many scholars of Kabbalah are committed to modern theological perceptions, acknowledging the existence of a metaphysical, transcendent reality, often called “god” or “divinity,” but which is not perceived as a personal god but rather as a metaphysical, immanent principle. These theological perceptions often sanctify the Self and locate the divine principle or the “ultimate reality” in the depths of the soul and the inner consciousness. These definitions of the object of the mystical experience differ considerably from the reports given by the Hasidim and the Kabbalists themselves. Concepts such as “the ultimate reality” do not appear in their writings and the divine entities they see or hear, or with whom they unite or attach themselves, are often described as angelic beings, philosophical principals, or aspects of the theosophical system of the Sephirot.

The accepted modern definitions of mysticism characterize in various forms the relationship with god or the metaphysical reality, which supposedly takes place during a mystical experience. Some definitions emphasize the mystical experience of unification (e.g., the definition of William James), while others (e.g., Rufus Jones and Bernard McGinn) speak about awareness of the divine or transcendent presence. Walter Principe defined the mystical experience as a kind of experiential knowledge, differing from other sorts of knowledge and inexpressible: “Mystical experience is an intuitional or experiential knowledge, beyond sense knowledge, beyond reasoning, beyond poetic or artistic intuition. An experiential or intuitional knowledge that is passive, transitory, far less permanent than sense knowledge or reasoning.”

Similar perceptions are repeated in the definitions of Kabbalah scholars. Gershom Scholem (who denied the existence of mystical unity in Judaism) spoke of “direct contact” between man and God, of merger of the self into a higher union, and of “acute awareness of ultimate reality in a human being.” Moshe Idel (who criticized Scholem’s claim that the idea of mystical unity cannot be found in Judaism), spoke of “the sense of union with God” and “unitive relations with supermundane beings.” Many scholars of Kabbalah use
the vague term, “contact,” to indicate the nature of the relation between the mystic and the transcendent reality.\textsuperscript{52} A term which, according to Idel, is preferred over others because it covers a broad range of meanings, from vague feelings of a special presence to experiences that can be understood as mystical union.\textsuperscript{53}

Defining the relationship between the mystic and the transcendent reality as one of union, awareness or contact is also derived from the modern theological perception of scholars of mysticism and Kabbalah who identify the reality experienced by the mystic as an abstract metaphysical and nonpersonal reality with which one is unable to establish contact via regular senses, only through internal sensation and consciousness. It should be noted that this perception is very different from the theological perspectives of the “mystics” themselves, who often perceive the beings with whom they are in contact as concrete and personal beings and describe the relationship with them through the regular senses, mainly sight and hearing.\textsuperscript{54}

According to the theology of Kabbalah researchers, the divine, or the transcendent reality which the mystic encounters, is not perceived as an active agent that becomes involved in history. It is the mystic who is the active agent, searching and striving for contact with the divine/metaphysical/self through broadening, empowering, or altering the regular modes of his consciousness. This perception also stands in line with the modern theological and spiritual perceptions that reject personal theistic perceptions, and ascribe the subjectivity and agency to human beings and not to the divine being or the transcendent reality. This perception is also very different from the theological perceptions of Kabbalists and Hasidim, that perceive God, or the divine powers revealed to them, as having agency and taking the initiative.

Although scholars of Kabbalah (similar to researchers of mysticism in general), do not perceive the Divine/Transcendent reality as a personal and active God intervening in history, they do regard it as creative energy whose revelation through mystical experience initiated by the mystic has an effect on the mystic and his cultural productions, and through these on society and history.

Gershom Scholem, following William James, Rufus Jones, and other modern theologians,\textsuperscript{55} saw in mysticism the creative and vital power of religion, undermining the religious establishment and the institutionalized ritual, and preserving religion through renewing the direct contact with the divine, against degeneration and petrification. Following Leo Baeck,\textsuperscript{56} Scholem identified mysticism as the romantic stage of religion, as opposed to the classical, institutional stage:

\ldots we may call it the romantic stage of religion, in contradistinction to its classical state, which saw the formation of the great religious
systems and their crystallization in social forms. When these tend to become stale and worn out, mysticism sets in, borne by individuals who try to reestablish the immediate contact with the primary source on which institutional religion has based its authority.\textsuperscript{57}

The Kabbalah, as “Jewish mysticism,” was perceived by Scholem as a vital power that preserved Judaism from the degeneration and petrifaction of halachic Judaism. Scholem gave mysticism, that is to say, the contact and strive for direct contact with the divine, a distinct national meaning, and viewed Jewish mysticism as a national power that enabled the existence of Judaism as a national entity in the Diaspora. In an interview with Muki Tzur, Scholem said:

I wanted to enter the world of Kabbalah through my thinking of and believing in Zionism as something alive and as a renewal of a nation that had deteriorated greatly... the question in which I was interested: whether or not halachic Judaism had enough strength to self-perpetuate and to exist. Is halachah possible without a mystical element? Whether or not it has enough vitality of its own to endure without decaying over two thousand years.\textsuperscript{58}

Scholem holds an anarchic and national theology. The mystical basis of Judaism—in other words, the direct encounter with the divine or the Absolute—is an antinomic power that preserved Judaism from deterioration and enabled its national survival in the Diaspora. Hence, the divine, or the Absolute, serves as a central explanatory factor in the theological and Zionist historiography of Scholem.

Contemporary scholars of Kabbalah take less interest in the influence of mysticism on Jewish history and disagree with many of Scholem’s historiographic assumptions. Nonetheless, there are recurring explicit theological claims in the writings of current researchers of Jewish mysticism that explain and interpret historical events and cultural products as the result of the mystical encounter with the divine. Thus, for example, Elliot Wolfson claimed, that the Zoharic texts, “reflect a state wherein the mystic experienced the divine pleroma and reintegrated his soul with its ontic source.”\textsuperscript{59} Correspondingly, Melila Hellner claimed that, “[mystical] states of consciousness and the encounters they engender with the world of divinity, lie at the heart of the Zohar” and “bestow upon the composition its richness and uniqueness.”\textsuperscript{60} According to Rachel Elior, mysticism, that transcends the limits of time and space and relates to a reality that is not grasped by usual modes of consciousness, “is one of the phenomena that generate meaningful cultural changes in the course of history.”\textsuperscript{61}
ACADEMIC RESEARCH AS A SPIRITUAL PATH

The prevalent theological assumption accepted in the scholarship of Jewish mysticism, according to which Kabbalistic theories and literary productions were created following their unmediated encounter with the divine or metaphysical reality, blurs the distinction between academic research and religious and spiritual practice, and sees identity or continuity between academic research and mystical and spiritual renewal. Some Kabbalah scholars, who assume that academic scholarship can reveal (through comparative and phenomenological research) the underlying patterns and deep structures of the mystical experience, view historical and phenomenological research as a means of clarifying, revealing, and coming closer to the transcendent reality underlying mystical phenomena.

Gershom Scholem expressed his wish to reach the mystical truth beyond the historical expression of the Kabbalah and claimed that this goal stimulated his studies. The way to reach this truth, Scholem claimed, is through the philological-historical study of the Kabbalah. Thus, in a letter to Zalman Shochet entitled, “a candid word about the true motives of my Kabbalistic studies,” he wrote:

For today’s man, that mystical totality of “truth,” whose existence disappears particular when it is projected into historical time, can only become visible in the purest way in the legitimate discipline of commentary and in the singular mirror of philological criticism. Today, as at the very beginning, my work lives in this paradox, in the hope of a true communication from the mountain, of that most invisible, smallest fluctuation of history which causes truth to break forth from the illusions of “development.”

As Moshe Idel wrote, this teaches us that:

Scholem began his scholarly activity by attempting to disclose the metaphysical substratum of Kabbalistic thought. Although he never explicitly acknowledged it, he assumed that, on a deeper level, Kabbalah expresses a metaphysical reality that can be grasped by a proper hermeneutics, using historical, philological and philosophical tools. By decoding the symbols and discerning the lines of historical development of key concepts, together with minute biobibliographical work, he attempted to approach the “the mountain,” namely, the core of that reality. He waited, as he himself confessed, to receive a hint coming from that core.

Contemporary scholars of Kabbalah and Hasidism also assert their interest in reaching the mystical element underlying the Kabbalistic texts. However, while Scholem claimed that, paradoxically, the way to reach the “mystical totality” is through the philological-historical study
of the Kabbalah, contemporary Kabbalah scholars view the study of the contents of Kabbalistic writings, not their philological-historical analysis, as a path to spiritual and religious renewal. From this perspective, some of today’s Kabbalah researchers do not regard themselves as merely philologists, historians, or sociologists of the Kabbalah, but rather as spiritual guides, interpreters, and mediators of the Kabbalah’s spiritual and mystical content for contemporary audiences.

This approach is particularly prominent in the writings of Kabbalah scholars in the United States, some of whom engage in teaching theology and training rabbis in Rabbinic institutes of various Jewish denominations. For example, Arthur Green (formerly president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and present rector of the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College), concluded the preface to the first volume on Jewish spiritualism that he edited with the disclaimer that presenting Jewish Spirituality in a historical form is not intended to serve as a barrier between the mystical materials and the contemporary reader (who he refers to as “a would-be practitioner”), who can use these materials as part of the spiritual repertoire of contemporary Jewry.64 A similar position is apparent in the Israeli scholar Ron Margolin’s preface to his book, The Human Temple, in which he proclaims that he is not interested in the historical and sociological aspects of Hasidism, rather in their spiritual potential:

In my opinion, perceiving god as a vitality, understanding the divine powers as powers acting within the human soul, exchanging the superficial Providence for the recognition that the place where man thinks is where he is, emphasizing the importance of the individual tikkun (rectification)…all of these and another series of Hassidic principles can be vital to one who seeks in Judaism a source for structuring a significant spiritual life in the modern world.65

Melila Hellner-Eshed also affirms in her book, A River Flows from Eden, that she is not interested only to engage in the interpretation of the Zohar, but rather to mediate and translate into contemporary language “that which the Zohar conveys in his own words much better than I ever could.”66 Hellner-Eshed, who claims that the Zohar invites the reader to join a way of life that enables the mystical-religious experience it describes,67 does not view the Kabbalistic texts merely as objects of research, rather as the relevant texts for enhancing human consciousness as well as contemporary cultural and religious creativity:

I have a deep, personal interest in mystical experience and the hidden potential of human consciousness. The extraordinary endeavor of mystics across the generations to seek out an enhanced human consciousness—experimentally, sensorially, and emotionally—has long inspired me…. The Zohar is a spiritually inspired work of the highest order, and to mind the world it describes in neither
closed nor lost nor confined to the Middle Ages. I experience its insights as a living invitation to a special religious consciousness, as well as to exegetical, cultural, and religious creativity.  

Alan Brill, a scholar of Kabbalah and Hasidism from the United States, praises Hellner-Eshed’s approach which, in his words, “boldly claims that an academic attempt to understand the text should coincide properly with the attempt to induce a mystical experience.” Other scholars also see a correspondence and continuity between academic research and religious, mystical and spiritual practices. Tsippi Kauffman expressed hope that her book on Hasidism, In All Your Ways Know Him, “will lead its readers to scholarly and perhaps also existential and religious insights.” Haviva Pedaya, in an interview for the newspaper Ha’aretz, claimed that spiritual liberation, consultation and therapy are a natural continuation of the academic research:

My magic word is duplication. There is methodological study of the Kabbalah based on context and history and, on the other hand, there is the question of how the Kabbalah is read as texts that are intended to instruct man on how to become liberated on a spiritual level. There is no contradiction between the two. Pupils come to me with questions and ask for advice and therapy, and this is a natural sequence. Sometimes I think the distance between learning and healing is not so great.

The identification of academic research of the Kabbalah as religious guidance is expressed in the words of scholar and Rabbi, Or N. Rose: “Thankfully, there is a small but growing cadre of American and Israeli religious teachers and scholars, such as Daniel Matt, Arthur Green, Melilah Hellner-Eshed, Haviva Pedaya and Elliot Wolfson, who are engaging in thoughtful explorations of the classical teachings of Kabbalah, asking what of this ancient tradition remains compelling to seekers today and what is better left aside.”

RESEARCH OF THE KABBALAH AND THE NEW AGE

As we saw in the above, the theology of Kabbalah scholars is a modern, ecumenical, and liberal theology that rejects theistic and personalistic perceptions of the divine. Kabbalah scholars see the Divine or the Absolute as a metaphysical immanent reality, which is often perceived as found within the self, and can be experienced through altered states of consciousness. In their opinion, mystical experiences in which humans encounter the Divine, or the Absolute reality, are potentially accessible to all human beings and appear in various forms in every human culture. In their opinion, such experiences and the aspiration to obtain them stand behind, and explain, various historical,
social, and literary phenomena. Academic research of Jewish mysticism, and mainly its phenomenological and comparative research, is perceived as a means to become acquainted with and understand the underlying patterns and deep structures of the mystical experiences that Kabbalists experienced and the means they employed to reach them. As we have seen, some Kabbalah scholars are interested in following these insights in their personal lives and use them to guide their students; they view the research of Kabbalah and Hasidism as a way to achieve religious and spiritual experiences and advance contemporary Jewish spiritual revival.

The theological positions of Kabbalah scholars are, to a large extent, identical to the theological perspectives of the phenomenological and comparative study of religions that perceive religion as an autonomous, sui generis phenomenon, which reflects the “religious reality.” As Timothy Fitzgerald asserted, “phenomenology of religion is also a contemporary style of ecumenical theologizing, which takes as its tenet of faith that there are many religions in the world that are all equally (more or less) responses to the one transcendent God.”

The liberal ecumenical theology of the phenomenological and comparative study of religion, accepted in Kabbalah research as well, is based on the perennial philosophy espoused by many metaphysical, spiritual and esoteric movements at the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Aldous Huxley, who adopted this perennial philosophy (and believed that it is in the foundation of all religions and cultures), defined it as:

\[ \ldots \text{the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical to, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being.} \]

The ecumenical theology and perennial philosophy underlying Western esoteric movements and the academic study of religions became prevalent in the New Age movements that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. From this perspective, contemporary Kabbalah scholarship stands in close affinity with the New Age movements and contemporary spirituality.

The concept of the divine or Absolute reality underlying definitions of mysticism of Kabbalah scholars is in tandem with New Age ideas, which, as Wouter Hanegraaff showed, rarely perceive the divine as a personal god. The perception of God, or the transcendent reality as an absolute source of being, as a unity and totality underlying fragmented reality, and as a creative energy that the mystic encounters via techniques for altering consciousness, prevalent among Kabbalah
scholars, is also typical of the New Age. Positioning of the divinity or the metaphysical tenet underlying reality in the depths of the soul is also characteristic of the sanctification of the self and the psychologization of religion of the New Age, which was characterized by sociologist Paul Heelas as “self spirituality.” The interest in the subjective experience of God and not in the nature of the godhead itself, typical of Kabbalah scholarship today, as well as the interest in mystical experiences and altered states of consciousness, is also a typical feature of the New Age.

Beyond the ideological framework and the basic theological assumptions shared by Kabbalah scholars and the New Age, there are also interesting ties between the academic research of Jewish mysticism and contemporary spiritual movements. Writings of academic scholars of Kabbalah and Hasidism are a central source of information on the Kabbalah among New Age movements and contemporary Kabbalistic movements and, to a large extent, scholars’ perceptions of the Kabbalah influenced contemporary Kabbalistic theories and practices. Academic scholars of Kabbalah and Hasidism, mainly in the United States, take a leading role in the Jewish Renewal movement, a distinctive Jewish New Age movement. The theological writings of these scholars discuss explicitly the theological assumptions that shape and lead their research. The theological interests of contemporary Kabbalah scholars and their self-perception as spiritual guides create tension and competition between them and other contemporary neo-Kabbalist and neo-Hasidic groups. This, to a great extent, explains the hostility that academic Kabbalah researchers show toward these groups and why, until recently, Kabbalah scholarship avoided the study of contemporary Kabbalah and Hasidism.

SUMMARY

In this article I claimed that the use of “mysticism” as the defining category of the academic study of Kabbalah and Hasidism involves a theological assumption according to which an encounter with God or the Absolute reality underlies and explains the ideas and practices of the Kabbalists and Hasidim, their literary output and their historical and social influence. In the above I examined the theological perceptions of the academic study of Jewish mysticism. I indicated the ecumenical and perennial nature of these theologies that view the divine or the “Absolute” as an immanent reality and maintain that the way to experience this metaphysical reality through altered states of consciousness is, in principle, open to all people and underlies all
religions. These theologies, whose roots lie in esoteric and neoromantic philosophies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are central also to the New Age movements and other contemporary spiritual groups, including Jewish Renewal. Furthermore, I showed that some scholars of Jewish mysticism view academic research as a means of revealing the mystical truth discovered in the Kabbalist and Hasidic texts, and strive to interpret and mediate the spiritual and mystical contents of the Kabbalah to the contemporary audience, and contribute to a religious and spiritual Jewish revival.

The theological perception categorizing Kabbalah and Hasidism as “mysticism” separates the phenomena identified as “Jewish mysticism” from history and presents an essentialist theological notion of mysticism as a meta-physical meta-historical force. The assumption, according to which “mystical” cultural practices are the result of experiences of an encounter between humans and transcendent reality, sets phenomena categorized as “mystical” apart from “regular” cultural practices and products, and regards them as belonging to a different sphere, which is inherently detached from political and social reality. Hence, for example, Haviva Pedaya recently claimed: “Religion and mysticism... are a way of life and an unceasing source of inspiration. We must examine the processes of degeneration and disruption of these phenomena upon their entering the socio-political sphere.”\(^{85}\) The employment of comparative and phenomenological methodologies borrowed from the religious studies in researching Jewish mysticism, which assumes that mystical and religious experiences are \textit{sui generis} phenomena which cannot be reduced to social, economic, and political factors, the aspiration to reveal through comparative research the imminent element common to mystical experiences in various cultures, and binding contemporary research of Jewish mysticism for spiritual renewal, together reinforce a specific a-historical tendency in the academic research of Kabbalah and Hasidism.\(^{86}\) As Ron Margolin diagnosed, in connection to Moshe Idel’s phenomenological approach: “Idel’s phenomenological approach emphasizes inquiry into different manifestations of phenomena such as theurgy, Unio Mystica or magic, within the entire Kabbalistic-Jewish body of works, on all its periods. In his research, the historical-diachronic aspect is used as a secondary aid, and the focus is on the actual spiritual phenomenon.”\(^{87}\)

Theology, queen of the Middle Age sciences, was pushed aside in modern academia and in modern theological claims, and the claim that God is a causal factor that explains physical, biological, historical, or social phenomena, is not accepted in academic disciplines today.\(^{88}\) However, as we saw in the above, theological assumptions are still accepted in the study of Jewish mysticism, as well as in other fields of religious study that use terms such as “religion,” “mysticism,” “sanctity,” and so on, as analytical terms and assume that phenomena
labeled as “mystical” and “religious,” including Kabbalah and Hasidism, are the outcome of a direct encounter with a divine or transcendent reality. Nontheological study of the Kabbalah and Hasidism that interprets and explains these as part of the historical, social and political fabric, and not as an expression of a metaphysical phenomenon that defines a category of its own, requires demystification of the Kabbalah and Hasidism and relinquishment of the category “Jewish mysticism” as the founding category of this field of study.

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NOTES

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3. Itamar Gruenwald preferred the term spirituality over the term Mysticism (however he gave both a similar theological meaning). See Itamar Gruenwald, “Reflections on the Nature and Origins of Jewish Mysticism,” in, *Gershom Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 50 Years After*, (ed.) Peter Schafer and Joseph Dan (Tübingen, 1993), pp. 28–29. A critique on categorization of the Kabbalah as Jewish mysticism was also expressed by Joseph Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 7–9. Despite his criticism, the category “Jewish mysticism” and the assumption of the existence of a significant common denominator for phenomena labeled as such are central to his studies. Ron Margolin, also disagreed with the use of the term mysticism and instead proposed using the term “internal religious life.” See Ron Margolin, *The Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in Early Hasidism* (Jerusalem, 2005), pp. 52–53 [Hebrew]. Yehuda Liebes also claimed that the choice of “mysticism” to describe the Kabbalah is not appropriate. See Yehuda Liebes, *Makor Rishon*, October 20, 2006, p. 6 [Hebrew]; Idem, “Contemplations of the Religious Significance of the Study of Kabbalah,” in *The Path of the Spirit, Eliezer Schweid’s Jubilee Volume*, (ed.) Yehoyada Amir (Jerusalem, 2005), pp. 203–4 [Hebrew]. Instead, Liebes proposes using the term ‘myth’ as best suited for understanding Jewish esotericism. Recently, Peter Schafer raised reservations regarding use of the term mysticism and expressed his willingness to accept the claim that the category mysticism has no true use or meaning in the framework of the history of Jewish religion. See Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen, 2009), pp. 1–4, 24, 353–55. See also Amos Goldreich’s reservations regarding use of the term: Amos Goldreich, *Automatic Writing in Zoharic Literature and Modernism* (Los Angeles, 2010), pp 20, 34, note 36 [Hebrew]. It should be noted that these scholars have reservations regarding the non-Jewish source of the term “mysticism,” its unsuitability to the Kabbalah, or its vagueness, but not the theological assumptions involved in its use. For a detailed critique opposing use of the term “mysticism” as an analytical category see: B. Huss, “The Mystification of the Kabbalah.”

5. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Vol. VIII, No. I, the term appears in this meaning, in Greek, in Plato’s *Republic* 379a, and in additional sources. See Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, in the entry: \( \text{θεολογία} \).


7. M. Idel, “On the Theologization,” p. 162, emphasizes that he does not claim that the scholars he critiques are theologians or “that they actually believed in the theologies they described.” My claim, on the other hand, is that Kabbalah scholarship involves theological positions, although, these differ from the theologies of the Kabbalist they research.

8. For example, Gershom Scholem said: “when I come to define the term mysticism I have to say that no one knows what mysticism is. The number of definitions of the term mysticism in philosophy or the science of religion, amounts to the number of authors or sages who have written about it. Each has his own definition.” Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah and the Book Bahir* (Jerusalem, 1966), p. 2 [Hebrew]. Gershom Scholem stated that it is curious that although there is almost no doubt regarding what constitutes the phenomena called mysticism, “there are almost as many definitions of the term as there are writers on the subject,” G. Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 3–4. See also: P. Schafer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, p. I. Many scholars refer to the book by the Anglican theologian William Ralph Inge, who enumerates twenty six different definitions of mysticism. See: William R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (London, 1899), pp. 335–48.

9. For an attempt to characterize mysticism without theological assumptions, see Shaul Magid, “Is Kabbala Mysticism? Another View,” *Zeek* (March 2008). In my response to Magid I argue that the new definition that he proposes involves not only a radical change of the conventional definitions of the term, but also of the phenomena the term usually refers to, see: B. Huss, “Paying Extra.”


I would like to thank Nathan Ophir (Ofenbacher) who brought this article to my attention.

16. For a critique of this assumption underlying the naturalist explanations of mysticism, see B. Huss, “Mystification of the Kabbalah.”

17. In one place Gershom Scholem does indeed speak about how the direct mystical experience of the mystic “is real in his eyes” (G. Scholem, Chapters in Understanding the Kabbalah and its Symbols (Jerusalem, 1981), p. 9 [Hebrew]). However, as we will see later on, Scholem identifies this subjective reality as the absolute, divine reality found in the depths of one’s soul. Rachel Elior speaks of visions of the imagination and entities perceived to transcend the natural order of things that the Mystics perceive as real. But she does not relate to these experiences as imaginary or hallucinatory, rather as “another reality...that is revealed to visionaries when the veils obscuring everyday consciousness are lifted,” Rachel Elior, Jewish Mysticism: The Infinite Expression of Freedom (Oregon, 2007), p. 3.


41. Moshe Halamish defines mysticism as, “direct and intimate contact between the two extremes: man and god. The Mystic makes an effort to directly feel the divine presence.” Moshe Halamish, *Introduction to Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 17–18 [Hebrew]. See also Arthur Green’s definition in his “Religion and Mysticism,” p. 68.
42. R. Elior, *Jewish Mysticism*, p. 3.
46. A. Green, *Religion and Mysticism*, p. 68, and see also p. 90.
55. See, for example, M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, p. XXXR.
64. Arthur Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages* (London, 1986), p. XXV.
67. Ibid, p. 11.
68. Ibid, p. 9.


78. Ibid., pp. 187–86, 205.

79. Ibid., pp. 205, 224.


