A Study of the History of Jewish Meditation: Theory and Practice

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"I have but one request; may I never use my reason against truth." –Rebbe Mikhal of Zlotchev

Introduction

Pop Jewish Mysticism can easily be seen in our twenty-first century culture, perhaps even more so than more conservative forms of Judaism. From Michael Berg's Kabbalah Center in New York City to Madonna, Demi Moore and Britney Spears' claim to mystical interpretations, Jewish mysticism has become the new hot topic. And yet there is little if any mention of the practice of mediation in contemporary Judaism. The late scholar, Orthodox rabbi and author of over fifty books on the subject, Aryeh Kaplan explained this as a product of the Jewish Enlightenment during the late eighteenth century in his book *Jewish Meditation*. Kaplan argues that meditation was once an inherent part of Jewish life and that evidence for this claim may be found in the Bible, commentaries and Kabbalah texts. The first Jewish Mysticism scholar at Hebrew University, Gershom Scholem criticized historians of Judaism for imposing rationality on Judaism in the late nineteenth century, and ignoring the non-rational force of myth and mysticism in the foundation of Judaism. Famed Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides described what Gershom Scholem deems as non-rational force of Judaism, stating in the twelfth century, "The whole object of the Prophets and the Sages was to declare that a limit is set to human reason where it must halt." The problem, however, lies in the fact that meditation is rarely directly discussed in Jewish sources, but rather examples and side notes about meditative experiences are given. That is to say, within Jewish texts there is little actual direction for meditation as there is commentary on meditative experiences. Moreover, to those who have never experienced meditation, discussion about meditation may feel like an average sighted person who has never learned Braille to feel Braille on paper. To him, it may feel like random bumps on a paper, but to the blind, however, not only are there tactile bumps on the paper, but there is an active experience of reading. Similarly, meditators and nonmeditators alike may go through the same occurrences or readings, but it is the nature of the

experience that changes. To deepen and expand knowledge about Judaism, it is necessary to explore meditation within the Jewish religious tradition.

As president of the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies and author David S. Ariel has said about the whole of Judaism, "Judaism is not a religion of fixed doctrines or dogmas but a complex system of evolving beliefs. Despite its diversity, there is an overarching rubric that unites Jews of every persuasion."[1] Similarly, the practice and techniques of Jewish meditation are a complex system full of diversity throughout the centuries with an overarching practice of Judaism uniting them. What is meditation? In Jewish writings and commentaries, the word used to denote meditation is *Hitbodedut* and the verb "to meditate" is *Hitboded*. These words are derived from the root *Baded* which means "to be alone."[2] Thus, Jewish meditation's foundation is in isolation from physical isolation to self-isolation, that is, isolation of the meditator's essence. Another word frequently used to denote meditation in the Torah is *Suach* and its close derivatives. Traditionally, the Talmud accepted this as intense prayer, however, classical commentators insisted on the meditative connotation. In addition, the root *Hagah* is also associated with speech, repetitive phrases or prayers, and meditative states. Moreover, just like in prayer or performing a *mitzvah*, Jews should have the proper *kavanah* (concentration or intention), during meditation a high level of *kavanah* is necessary. To do this, various schools of Judaism engage in meditation differently – meditating on the Chariot of God (*Merkava*), Hebrew letters, names of God, permutations of Hebrew letters, music, and spiritual ascent – all discussed in detail to follow.

Meditation was not something practiced without deliberation and prior commitment to the Jewish faith. From the fraternities of *Merkava* meditation to the whole Hasidic communities engaging in meditative acts, Jews were expected to follow Jewish laws and customs at the very least. Moreover, as seen in cases of the Prophets and later meditations techniques, a certain level of purification was

[1] Ariel, David S. *What Do Jews Believe?* New York, NY Schocken Books, 1995. Pp. 4
[2] Kaplan, Aryeh. *Meditation and the Bible*. York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1988. Pp.2

needed. Sometimes isolation from the general population was enough by encouraging internal isolation through external isolation. In other cases, practitioners engaged in long fasts which could last from twelve to forty days, or used music as a way to clear their minds to produce the meditative state. What is the goal of such meditative states? A term used consistently throughout commentaries is *Ruach HaKodesh* or the Holy Spirit. According to the commentaries of Moses Maimonides and Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, there are lower and higher states of *Ruach HaKodesh* ranging from general perception to clear, unequivocal, previously unavailable perception. Kaplan writes, "The level of enlightenment implied by *Ruach HaKodesh* involves clarity of understanding, an enhancement of perception, an awareness of the spiritual, and often, a complete change of personality."[3] It is important to note, however, that *Ruach HaKodesh* is not exclusively mentioned with meditation, but is also associated with intense devotion and prayer nor is it exclusive to those of the Jewish faith. As stated in the Midrash by the Prophet Elijah, "I call heaven and earth to bear witness that any person, Jew or Gentile, man or woman, freeman or slave, if his deeds are worthy, then *Ruach HaKodesh*, will descend upon him."[4] Despite the apparent universality of *Ruach HaKodesh,* only the initiated were taught meditative techniques which remained generally open exclusively for Jewish men of some wellbeing. The Prophet Elijah's statement may be seen as an emphasis on intention or *kavanah* than a statement of who could receive the special instruction. Also important to note, in the time of the prophets, a spiritual power derived from meditation and a degree of *Ruach HaKodesh* was prophecy. Prophecy would play an important role in the Torah and the commentaries as a spokesman for God and setting standards for the community.

According to respected Jewish scholar Adin Steinsaltz, Jews "undertake a greater burden with the acceptance of the Torah as an inner way of life, as an inner map. They encumber themselves with

[3] *Meditation and the Bible*. Pp. 18
[4] Tana DeBei Eliahu 9, see *The Classic Midrash.*

the responsibility and obligation of a priesthood not confined to a particular time or place, but for all of life." Kaplan estimates that as many as 75 percent of those seeking meditation instruction in ashrams are Jewish. [5] And yet, many Jews are still uncomfortable at best and completely ignorant at worst in regards to meditation. As Kaplan writes, "They feel that it is something from another culture, tacked onto Judaism."[6] Still, daily services may be viewed as meditative generative experience especially the Amidah, "the standing prayer." Moreover, meditation may simply be viewed as controlled thought directed by will or *kavanah*. The work of Kaplan and others stress experience and experiential knowledge over simply reading meditative or traditional texts. Gershom Scholem criticized historians for treating Judaism as a dead organism rather than a continuing body of people of faith. For Scholem and Kaplan, being a Jew therefore is more than inheriting a tradition about God from ancestors, it suggests a personal spiritual connection to God. A Jew needs to go beyond simply reciting prayers or following rituals or reading spiritual texts since "no matter how much a person may have heard about God, he must also have his own personal experience of God. Unless a person has experience God for himself, he will never have any true idea of what God is."[7] Moreover, there are hundreds of books revolving around Jewish Mystical Theology or Jewish magic or the Kabbalah (some less scholarly than others), suggesting a strong interest in non-rational Jewish history has been suppressed within the last centuries. For these authors, experience is held above mere knowledge of a subject, though mysticism should not exclusively be associated with personal experience as warned by Scholem.[8] Mysticism in a particular faith is a historical phenomenon, and within Judaism "concentrates upon the idea of the living God who manifests himself in the acts of Creation, Revelation and Redemption."[9]

[5] Kaplan, Aryeh. *Jewish Meditation*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1985. Pp. vii
[6] *Jewish Meditation* Pp.99
[7] *Jewish Meditation*, Pp. 112
[8] Scholem, Gershom. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1941. Pp. 5
[9] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Pp. 10

There are several major movements in the development of meditation and meditative experience within the history of Judaism. The most studied movement comes from modern understanding of the Kabbalah, and revolves around the enigmatic figure Isaac Luria, also known as the Ari of the sixteenth century. However, even before the Kabbalah there are meditation experiences. The earliest statement regarding meditation methods comes during the early Talmudic period in the first century. What is known of these methods comes from *The Greater Chamber* (*Hekhalot Rabatai*), and other literary artifacts of the *Merkava* tradition, where use of divine names and concentration on transcendental spheres are mentioned. What is often called "Jewish Gnosticism" flourished in this time, and *Merkava* based meditation was an obsession of mystical fraternities who studied the Torah. These fraternities, particularly during the period of the Second Temple, focused their study on the first chapter of Genesis or the story of Creation (*Maaseh Bereshith*) and the first chapter of Ezekiel or the vision of the throne-chariot of God (where the name *Merkava* meditation comes from). Also popular during the time of the Second Temple were apocalyptic texts and magical tendencies. The time of Jewish Gnosticism is the largest time frame for meditation techniques and is also the most understudied period for Jewish mysticism. During this time, the texts of the Kabbalah were being formed, schools of thought were being defined, and techniques for meditations were refined.

Though the Kabbalah popularized the idea of meditation within Judaism, many fail to recognize the schools present within the study of the Kabbalah. This is due to the different understandings of the Kabbalah, that is, the meditative study, the practical study and theoretical study. One key figure is Rabbi Abraham Abulafia (1240-1295) who spent time in meditation and wrote prophetic books post-meditation, one such being *Book of the Sign* (*Sefer HaOt*). Abulafia received his meditation techniques through secret societies that persevered after the close of the Talmudic period. Abulafia employed divine names and their permutations for meditation, though he also used contemplation and the levels of mysteries. In 1290, the Zohar was published and while meditation techniques were not described,

the experiences and information derived from meditation were explicated. After the Zohar's publication, most Kabbalists were busy with intellectual and theoretical understanding, yet during the sixteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Luria (known as the Ari) showed that letter combinations within the Zohar were meant to be used as meditative devices. Luria remains a popular figure in the study of Jewish mysticism.

Hasidic Rebbes (or Masters) and Hasidic communities each take up the subject of how to treat Jewish meditation as the next major movement for the development of meditation practices. Founder Rabbi Israel (commonly known as the Baal Shem Tov) employed meditation techniques from earlier meditative Kabbalah texts. During the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, members of the Hasid community regularly practiced meditation and often described the states in which they reached. As a general rule throughout all the meditative traditions in Judaism, however, individual experience descriptions were not as valued as descriptions of the realms and of God. The Jewish Enlightenment and its focus on theoretical and intellectual pursuits, contributed to the decline of use of meditation. One final figure to emphasis the use of meditation was Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov who regularly employed *Hitbodedut* (self-seclusion) meditation, or inner directed meditation. Rabbi Nachman also wrote numerous meditative and contemplative stories that will be used to enhance understanding of experiences in meditation.

The Prophets

The first place where there is mention of meditative states is in the Torah almost exclusively associated with prophecy. Throughout the Bible, the prophets are also associated with madness and commentators have suggested that this has to do with the lack of concern for mundane affairs. Commentators throughout texts raise a stark difference between those who achieve madness through intense devotion and those who were interested in the occult and magical practices. Kaplan writes, "One thing that we see clearly is that the forbidden idolatress and occult practices very closely

resembled the mystical practices of the prophets. This may have been on reason why the prophetic practices were concealed as hidden mysteries, restricted to relatively small societies."[10] According to Jewish tradition, though many may have practiced the prophetic mysteries, there are only fifty five accepted prophets. Among these according to tradition, Moses was the most perfected and achieved the highest state of *Ruach HaKodesh*.

The first reference within the Bible to meditation (the word *Suach* is used) is in chapter 24 of Genesis when Rebecca was brought back to marry Isaac (the second prophet mentioned in the Bible, after Abraham) before they meet. After "Isaac came from the way of Beer Lachai Roi … and Isaac went out to meditate (*suach*) in the field toward evening."[11] Upon first inspection, it appears as though Isaac went to the field to pray remembering that *suach* refers to intense prayer in addition to meditation. However, the metaphor of going to the field near the evening is a popular one throughout Jewish literature regarding meditation. Even more importantly, the place of Beer Lachai Roi denotes a special understanding. Beer Lachai Roi was the place where the angel had appeared to Hagar after she and Ishmael had been driven away by Sarah, and since an angel had appeared there, Beer Lachai Roi had become a shrine. Further, a much later commentator of the nineteenth century Rabbi Meir Lebush Malbim suggests that Isaac was engaged in a classical form of meditation repeatedly. Malbim writes, "This was a holy place at the time because an angel had been seen there, and Isaac went there each afternoon to meditate (*hitboded*)."[12]

Throughout Psalms, believed to be at least 1,500 years old, traditionally attributed to the prophet David, and an orthodox accepted text, there is reference to meditation in all three senses which have been outlined – self-seclusion, intense prayer, and formulaic repetitions. Common associations throughout the Psalms along with meditation are music and light which reference certain elevated

[10] *Meditation and the Bible*. Pp. 151
[11] Genesis 24: 62-63
[12] *Meditation and the Bible*. Pp. 102

states and realms that meditators may achieve through meditation. An example of nonverbal meditation in the Psalms is, "I recall my melody at night, I meditate (*siyach,* closely related to *suach*) with my heart, and my spirit (*ruach*) seeks."[13] Kaplan states that two things may be articulated from this verse, "First, it is evident that *Siyach* is a process that can involve thought alone, where one communes with his own heart. More important, we see it related to the *Ruach*-spirit, the level of the soul involved in enlightenment, when it is a seeking mode."[14] Within Psalms there is no mention of formal meditation so within this context, it appears that *Siyach* and *Suach* refer to inner directed, unstructured meditation with attention to a centrality. At least this is suggested within certain verses context like, "I will meditate *(siyach*) on Your wonders" and "I meditate (*siyach*) on your decrees."[15] Much later, prominent Hasidic master, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov will use the term *Siyach* while speaking about his system of spontaneous prayer reminiscent of internally-directed unstructured outwardly verbalized meditation.

Also important to note is the meaning of the Hebrew word for prophet, *Navie*. Some early commentary by classical Jewish commentators, Rashi and Rashbam, suggest that *Navie* has the root of *Niv* as stated in Isaiah 57:19, He created the fruit (Niv) of the lips." This suggestion would fall into traditional understanding of the prophets as being a mouthpiece or spokesperson for God. Other interpretations question the traditional understanding and challenge that the connotation is that of a channel through which a force may flow. [16] In this light, the prophets channel the spiritual force associated with wind and blowing where and when it is needed. Perhaps the clearest example supporting this interpretation, comes in Ezekiel, a book that has surmounting influence on the Jewish meditative tradition. During Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, God tells the prophet Ezekiel, "Prophesy to the spirit, prophesy, son of man, and say to the spirit: Thus says the Lord God, 'From the

[13] Psalms 77:7
[14] *Meditation and the Bible*, 102
[15] Psalms 119:27 and 119:48
[16] *Meditation and the Bible*, 28

four winds, come O spirit, and blow into these corpses that they should live."[17] Here, more than just a spokesperson or a person concerned with the future age, but to channel some force into the dead bodies of the Valley of the Dry Bones. The philosopher Moses Maimonides takes note that prophecy usually only happens in a dream or vision at night or else a trance is needed during the day as outlined in Numbers 12:6, "If there be a prophet among you, then I, God, will make Myself known to him in a vision – I will speak to him in a dream." Maimonides continues, "Prophecy is also a very traumatic experience. The prophet's limbs tremble, his body becomes faint, and he loses control of his stream of consciousness." Here the link to madness is clearly illustrated as loss of control demonstrates, and the prophet may only experience clear understanding which then must be interpreted. The only prophet who did not feel bodily agitation in the Bible was Moses since his acquired level of prophecy was so high that he was able to discern clear understanding and certainty about his experiences.

These elements of prophecy are distinctly mentioned in the cases of Abraham and Daniel. In Genesis, it is written that "Abraham fell into a trance, and a great dark dread fell upon him."[18] The author of Daniel describes a power-disabling experience, describing his vision as, "I saw this great vision and I became powerless. My appearance was destroyed and my strength deserted me. I heard the sound of His words, and I fell on the ground in a trance." [19] Here, the prophets are experiencing a form of *Siyach* meditation, but the most frequently discussed prophet for vision and meditative states is Ezekiel who actually goes through a sequence of meditation to culminate into what would be called the *Merkava* tradition. Preparation for the *Siyach* meditation would include purification and *Hagah* meditation or the repetitions of some formula. Kaplan explains, "Since the purpose of repeating a mantra is to release the mind, so that it can ascend and explore the transcendental realms."[20]

[17] Ezekiel 37:9
[18] Genesis 15:12
[19] Daniel 10:8
[20] *Meditation and the Bible*. Pp 116

The association between prophecy and meditation is the most speculative, and little is actually known about the secret circles alluded to which practiced forms of meditation. The Talmud makes reference that there were "millions" of individuals involved in the prophetic mysteries during the time of Solomon's Temple.[21] Despite the limited resources for more explicitly understanding the meditative elements within the tradition of prophetic mysteries, there are important ingredients within this tradition that make their way not only into the contemporary *Merkava* meditation movement but also into the metaphors used in Kabbalistic texts. These ingredients such as the power and use of Hebraic letters, formulaic names and permutations on the letters, an outline and timeline for discipline and purification, levels of achievement and on provide critical insights to later developments.

Merkava Meditation – Ezekiel's vision

The first chapter of Ezekiel describes an image consisting of a chariot made of angels driven by cherubs with the "likeness of a man." Estimated to be roughly in the early sixth century B.C.E., the heavens were opened up to Ezekiel and saw visions of God near the Chebar river. The account of Ezekiel begins with a sense of danger as a stormy wind (the word used is *ruach*, also translated as spirit previously) from the north brining a glowing great cloud and flashing fire. In the midst of this vision and fire, Ezekiel sees the vision of the Speaking Silence (*Chashmal*). Out of this, a chariot formed out of four living creatures (*Chayot*) flashes forward and back like lightening. These creatures had a human form, but with each having four faces (including the face of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle) and every one had four wings. Shining like polished copper and feet like calves feet, hands were under each wings even thought all the wings were joined to each other. The faces never turned or moved from their place, and always moved in the direction in which they faced. Below the feet of the *Chayot* (described as on the earth) are other angelic creatures called *Ophanim* (wheels or cycles) forming a kind of wheel within a

[21] *Megilah* 14a, *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 4:22, *Ruth Rabbah* 1:2

wheel. When the *Chayot* moved, their wings made the sound of many waters, like the voice of the Almighty (*Shaddai*). When the angels stopped moving, the firmament above them could be heard and seen since their wings would come down. Now, the vision of the throne on a sapphire with the Man-like form on the throne was able to be seen. This Man-like form is the Speaking Silence with an intense glow like a vision of fire. Ezekiel sees the intense vision of fire, and realizes, "This was the vision of God's Glory. I saw it, and I fell on my face." The Speaking Silence tells Ezekiel to stand up on his feet so that he can speak to Ezekiel. A spirit (*ruach*) comes to Ezekiel and stands him up to listen.[22]

Kabbalists and modern Jewish scholars like Adin Steinsaltz understand Ezekiel's vision on one level as an understanding of the four supernal universes – action, creation, formation, and emanation – as there are four levels to his vision – the *Ophanim*, the *Chayot*, the firmament, and the Man-like figure of the throne. These universes play a critical role in understanding the structure of emanation for the creation of the world in Kabbalistic terms which will also be supplemented with the *Sefirot* later in the mystic tradition. The creation universe (*Beriyah*) is also known as the Universe of the Throne or chariot. Kabbalist and Talmudic scholar Steinsaltz describes, "the world of creation is also the crossroads of existence. It is a focal point at which the plenty rising from the lower worlds and the plenty descending from the higher worlds meet and enter into some sort of relation with each other. Hence an understanding of the 'way of the Chariot' […] is the highest secret of the esoteric doctrine."[23] According to this tradition, though the four worlds may be seen in Ezekiel's vision, it is said that Ezekiel was only able to clearly see the *Ophanim* and the *Chayot*, and the Throne and God Himself are only mentioned as a reflection from Ezekiel's vantage point. Thus, there is the "likeness of a throne" and "a likeness of the appearance of a Man." Clearly the later Kabbalistic tradition would derive much from Ezekiel's vision, but also reveals information about the mysteries of the prophets since Ezekiel was a prophet.

[22] Ezekiel 1:1-2:3
[23] Steinsaltz, Adin. *The Thirteen Petaled Rose*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2006. Pp. 13

Moreover, this vision would serve as the basis for the *Merkava* tradition, and reference would continue in biblical and *maaseh Merkava* (workings of the Chariot) writings.[24] Overwhelmingly present within this literature is the description of heavens, palaces, chambers which the initiate progresses through with time, effort, and fulfillment of all requirements.

Though Ezekiel's vision appears to be a spiritual ascent, all writings regarding the *Merkava* tradition refer to the descent to the chariot. Those who practiced *Merkava* mysticism were called "riders of the Chariot." While *Merkava* is most readily translated as "chariot" it comes from the root word *Rakhav,* which means to ride, so that the *Merkava* is a riding vehicle through which God reveals Himself. Another important issue to be raised is that the vision of God sitting is also referenced in commentaries since sitting is deemed as an act of lowering. Kaplan writes, "He 'lowers' Himself to be concerned with the world. The Throne is where God 'sits,' and therefore, it is the vehicle of this 'lowering' and concern, which is the sum total of the Forces involved in His providence."[25] This is a distinctive feature of Jewish mysticism. Rather than the accustomed mysticism which moves from below to above, Jewish mysticism moves from above to below with emphasis on the Other. In this way, theologian Rudolf Otto's sense of the holy is fulfilled as "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self." Otto sums up Gershom Scholem's drive to view the Jewish religion as partly non-rational and also the distinctive aspect of mysticism of movement from above to below.

Like the experience of the prophets, the vision of Ezekiel begins with great agitation manifest as the stormy wind (*ruach*). And as dread fell upon Abraham, Ezekiel falls on his face in light of the Glory of God. The descriptions of the stormy wind, the great cloud, the lightening effect of the Chariot, and the fiery nature of the vision are reflections of the danger that Ezekiel is encountering throughout his

[24] References to the throne, for example are found in 1 Kings 22:19; Isaiah 6:1-8, Daniel 7:9-10.
[25] *Meditation and the Bible*. Pp. 37

prophetic vision. Only after attempting to describe his whole vision from the lengthy description of the wheels and the living creatures driving the chariot to the meager likeness of the firmament to the man-like form, does Ezekiel fall on his face and finally hear the voice. Though commentaries say that all prophets had the vision of the *Merkava* before prophecy, Ezekiel was said to be the only one to explicitly outline his vision. As Kaplan points out, Ezekiel's vision happens in a particular sequence reflecting possible meditative techniques used. Kaplan explains, "First the prophet experiences *Nogah*, the meditative Light, which results from *Hagah*-meditation setting the mind in a state of Directed Being. Only after this does he experience the *Chashmal*, the Speaking Silence, which is the gateway into the transcendental Universes […] another case where *Hagah* precedes *Siyach*."[26]

Out of Ezekiel's vision, however, came the Hekhalot literature revolving around journeys to the chariot and throne of God. Early Jewish Studies Professor James R. Davila describes the literature as a "bizarre conglomeration of Jewish esoteric and revelatory texts produced sometime between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages."[27] These texts describe techniques and experiences that initiates who practiced *Merkava* meditation, though there also was a strong influence on controlling the angels of the Chariot. For control of the angels, use of names was important. The Greater Hekhalot is one of the most ancient of all mystical texts dating back to the First Century. It is also one of the few ancient tracts that explicitly describes the methods through which one enters the mystical state. The key appears to be a type of mantra meditation where a series of Divine Names is repeated 112 times. Through the repetition of this formula, one enters the threshold of the mystical Chambers, and then one must then proceed from one Chamber to the next. This idea of chambers and names would become particularly popular among early and late Kabbalists. Kabbalist and philosopher Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (Ramban) believes that the account in Ezekiel contains the Names which are the keys in to the

[26] *Meditation and the Bible*. Pp. 117
[27] Davila, James R. 'Hekhalot Literature and Shamanism" 1998. http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/divinity/rt/otp/dmf/hekhalot/ (12 Feb 2009)

chambers. Through the repetition of the sacred names of God, the hold of the material world over the adept's soul was lessened, "thus free their souls to experience the Chariot of light that carries the mystical traveler from level to level. This ascent necessarily involves successfully passing by the fierce Angels (*Malakhim*)who guard the entrances of each heavenly level […]Having successfully traversed the heavenly levels, the adepts may then aspire to the highest of all sacred realms, that which houses the Throne of Glory, where they may, if so blessed, experience the vision of God's countenance that Ezekiel describes."[28] The path of the initiate, though he may eventually be blessed with the experience of the vision of God, is and was considered a dangerous one. In fact, Kaplan notes that "the Bahir [an anonymous mystical text attributed to the rabbinical period] states that it is impossible to become involved in the *Merkava* without falling into error, but that one should pursue it nonetheless, since it leads to the 'way of life.'"[29]

From Ezekiel's vision, the *Merkava* tradition begins in the period of the Second Temple during the sixth century BCE, and eventually falls into complete decline (like the prophetic mysteries) with the rise of the Kabbalah. During the time of the Second Temple, esoteric doctrines with favorability toward the first chapters of Genesis and Ezekiel were already taught in Pharisaic circles.[30] With Palestine being the cradle of the mysticism movement, *Merkava* mysticism flourished through the late Talmudic period through post-Talmudic times. There appear to be three stages in the *Merkava* tradition – anonymous contributions of apocalyptic revelations, the speculation of mysticism within the *Mishnah* (the major work produced by Rabbinical Judaism), and mysticism in the post-Talmudic period as reflected by texts like the Book of Enoch. Though it is doubtful that the letter was compiled by him, St. Jerome of the

[28] Samuel, Gabriella. *The Kabbalah Handbook: A Concise Encyclopedia of Terms and Concepts in Jewish Mysticism*. New York, NY: Jeremy Tarcher, 2007. Pp. 188-189
[29] Kaplan, Aryeh. *Meditation and Kabbalah*. San Francisco, CA: Weiser Books, 1985. Pp. 35
[30] *Meditation and the Bible*. Pp. 42

fourth century mentions that an individual would not be able to study for the first and last chapter of Ezekiel until at least the initiate's thirtieth year.[31]

The emphasis here is not mystical union or states of bliss that Kaplan sometimes suggests is the result of these forms of meditation, but rather there is a deliberate focus on God as the king. This metaphor would continue to be popular in later texts and interpretations. In Psalms this metaphor is popular, like, "Lift up your heads, O Gates, and be lifted up O eternal thresholds, that the King of Glory may enter! Who is this, the 'King of Glory'? It is Yahweh, strong and mighty, Yahweh, mighty in battle."[32] Here is illustrated a deep concern with the perception rather than the contemplation of God. That is to say, the experience of the glory of God and the seeing of the heavens, palaces, and eventually the ascent to the throne of God become critical. Though Scholem calls the *Merkava* tradition "Jewish Gnosticism" this distinction between experience and perception in the texts reveal a difference between the *Merkava* tradition and Hellenistic Gnosticism. Though Scholem does write that, "The aspects of God which are really relevant to the religious feeling of the epoch are His majesty and the aura of sublimity and solemnity which surrounds Him."[33] Distinctively in the texts used to describe the perception of God are divine immanence and there is almost no discussion of the love of God – the Creator and His creation remain apart. After descending through all the gates and braving dangers, the initiate stands before the throne of God of which he can see and hear. This is the end of the initiate's journey.

Elements of magic are clearly evident in abundance throughout the *Merkava* tradition. As the individual progressed on the ascent (or descent as seen prior), the journey got progressively more dangerous and rigorous. To fight off fear and danger, magic seals of secret and sacred names were given to initiates which caused demons and hostile angels to leave the initiate alone. Scholar Davila believes that these magical elements are present so much that rather than calling it *Merkava* mysticism, he calls

[31] See Letter 149.
[32] Psalm 24:7-8
[33] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Pp. 55

it *Merkava* shamanism. Scholem describes some magical rites that were also used in the *Merkava* tradition in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, including the "putting on, or clothing, of the name." This highly ceremonious act is where "the magician impregnates himself" "with the great name of God" by performing some act wearing a garment in which the name had been woven.[34] Like the mysteries of the prophets, however, scholars and historians are left to speculate about the relationship between the intellectual, magical, and meditative aspects of the Jewish faith. It appears that despite effort to monitor the amount of magical elements in the *Merkava* tradition, there is no doubt that there must be some relationship between the two.

Medieval authoritative commentators like Sa'adia, Maimonides and others sought to challenge the mystical theology and deemphasize the sense of pantheism to combat the dangerously occult and magical practices. [35] The rise of influence of Maimonides (also called Rambam) escalated the prioritizing of reason in the Jewish tradition despite Maimonides frequent writings and support of meditative elements of Judaism. One can remember Maimonides' quote that "The whole object of the Prophets and the Sages was to declare that a limit is set to human reason where it must halt." Here, reason has set limits, but the tradition is aligned with the Prophets and Sages and not necessarily with contemporaries. Emphasis on the intellectual, philosophical tradition lead to the decline of *Merkava* literature and already secret fraternities became even less frequent. During the same time, a new text called the *Zohar* was making its way around Jewish communities. Though the *Zohar* was not accepted by the orthodox until much later, the *Zohar* would have a large influence on the counter-culture emerging against the emphasis of philosophical treatments of Judaism that would reach its peak with Hasidism. The *Zohar* is the most widely known text of the Kabbalah that would be central to the Kabbalistic tradition, and like the Bible, we see references to meditative states throughout Kabbalistic texts and

[34] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Pp. 77
[35] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* Pp. 38

commentaries. In addition to the text and commentaries, however, explicit instructions from teachers like Abraham Abulafia and Isaac Luria have survived. Scholem believes that the *Merkava* tradition developed and formed the crystallization of the medieval Kabbalah.[36]

The Maimonides Family and the Early Kabbalah

Before the explosion of work and writings on the Kabbalah began and the *Merkava* tradition was on the decline, during the Middle Ages great philosophers reigned in intellectual Judaism. In one of Moses Maimonides' greatest work, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides addresses the *Merkava* tradition, the names of God, prophecy, among a variety of issues. [37] Despite being known for his contribution to philosophy, medicine, and the deemed rational intellectual tradition of Judaism, Moses Maimonides was also heavily interested in topics revolving around prophecy and meditation. In a letter to his son, Abraham Maimonides who also was an intellectual head during his time, Maimonides writes, "The first two covenants (circumcision and the Torah) are upheld through the third, which is the Sabbath. The goal of all three is the purification of the soul, methodology, withdrawal, as well as meditation (*hitodedut*) toward God."[38]

Moses Maimonides is considered to be the greatest Sephardic rabbinic scholar and philosopher who introduced a new codification of Jewish law called the *Mishneh Torah* (Repetition of the Law) and continued to declare God's absolute transcendence in *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Concerned that contemporary scientific knowledge and philosophical ideals were contrary to Jewish beliefs about God, he tried to emphasize and prove that Jewish beliefs were compatible with both prevailing Aristotelian and Arabic thinking of the twelfth century. To do this, he tried to mend the paradox of God being wholly Other and remote and at the same time near and knowable as described in metaphors in the Bible by

[36] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Pp. 40
[37] See chapters LXI-LXIV in Part I, XXXII-XLVIII in Part2, I-VI in Part 3.
[38] *Iggeret HaMusar* (Warsaw, 1927) p. 7

declaring to the rabbinic extreme that God is ultimately unknowable and removed.[39] Outwardly, this seems to devalue the meditative and magical traditions present within early Judaism, but his writings and letters to his son reveal a more positive, optimistic outlook toward these traditions as seen . Despite warning that attempts to interpret the *Merkava* vision are erred and that "to give a full explanation of the mystic passages of the Bible is contrary to the Law and to reason," Moses Maimonides still continues to write on these subjects as does his son.[40]

Following in his father's footsteps, Abraham Maimonides became a key philosopher of his area and time, and eventually took up defense for his father against critics. For the most part, however, it appears that Abraham Maimonides enjoyed writing about mysticism among legal issues. Abraham is one of the first to denote two types of isolation (*hitbodedut*) – external and internal. External isolation is mere physical isolation which the prophets often described, but internal isolation refers to the meditative process.[41] Physical isolation, however, can help clear thoughts from one's mind to more accurately perform meditation. In his great work, *Kifayat al-'abidin* (Compendium for the Servants of God) originally written in Arabic, he spends the first few chapters responding to the critics of his father, and then moves into details of how to practice meditation via special names of God. Abraham resided in Egypt during a time of reign for Muslim mystics, and Abraham Maimonides admits interactions with Sufi mystics. Most notable emphasis from Abraham's interaction was inclusion of contemplation where divine names were used in seclusion in addition to the traditional Jewish collective prayer services. For Abraham, these practices were not limited to a few initiates, but to the men who attended services. This is not to say that seclusion was not already an important part of Jewish mysticism previously, but that it came into the spotlight due to interactions with the Egyptian Sufis.

[39] See short or longer biographies on Rambam such as *What Do Jews Believe?* Pp.34-37
[40] Maimonides, Moses *The Guide for the Perplexed*. New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1956. Pp. 251
[41] *Kabbalah and Meditation*. Pp 16

More research needs to be done regarding Abraham's relationship with the Muslim mystics to more fully understand the dynamics and effect on Jewish worship and also the effect on Muslim mystic worship.[42] *Kifayat al-'abidin* is as much a legal work as a mystical work. Some reference is made to Abraham Maimonides as being the Jewish Sufi openly admitting his admiration for the Muslim mystics whom, Abraham claims, derive their teachings originally from the prophets. Abraham writes, "Do not regard as unseemly our comparison of that to the behavior of the Sufis, for the latter imitate the prophets (of Israel) and walk in their footsteps, not the prophets in theirs."[43] Though scholar Kaplan often quotes the *Kifayat al-'abidin* in his *Meditation and the Bible* he does not cite it anywhere in the text. Moreover, Kaplan only states that Abraham Maimonides "was apparently quite familiar" with the Muslim dervishes or Sufis, but fails to mention the depth of his relationship with the Sufis.[44]

Gershom Scholem, though he does not make reference to Abraham Maimonides in his comprehensive *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, discusses his father in great length. Scholem believes that the medieval Jewish philosophers like Maimonides, in attempt to preserve Judaism from prevailing Aristotelian philosophy and Islamic philosophy, removed the non-rational force of Myth and tried to change conceptions about God. Due to this attempt to rationalize, Scholem believes that mysticism became even more prevalent and prominent in the Jewish tradition – a prime example being Moses Maimonides' son, Abraham. Moreover, the religious and philosophical stage was set for the introduction of a new mass movement within Jewish mysticism – Kabbalistic mysticism.

The term "Kabbalah" comes from the Hebrew root *kabal* which means that which is received. Along with the Torah, the higher levels of Kabbalah are traditionally believed to have been given at the time of revelation at Mt. Sinai, although scholarly estimations declare the physical texts comprising the

[42] The basis for this research has been started with some books that recognize the delicate relationship between Jewish mysticism and Muslim mysticism. See *Judaism in practice: from the Middle Ages through the early modern period* with the chapter by Lawrence Fine through Princeton University Press.
[43] *Kifayat al-'abidin. II* p. 320, trans. P. Fenton in *The Treatise of the Pool*, p. 8
[44] *Meditation and the Bible*. Pp. 8

Kabbalah to be written between the eleventh and twelfth century. Sometimes Jewish mysticism, particularly in contemporary understanding, is equated with Kabbalah, but this identification is neither accurate, nor helpful to understanding the Kabbalah or Jewish Mysticism. The Kabbalah would find its peak study during the time of the teacher Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century, though writers began to comment as early as the twelfth century. It still is a major force in the Jewish tradition. As the late scholar and rabbi Louis Jacobs writes, "The Kabbalah was indeed produced by mystics, and it contained the fruit of profound religious meditation and the instruments used by later mystics to attain their aim of encountering the Divine. However, there were many mystics who flourished before the "kabbalistic era," and the Kabbalah deals with many matters that are not mystical."[45]

The main text of the Kabbalah is *Sefer Ha-Zohar*, commonly known as the Zohar, The Book of Splendor, was written in Spain in the late thirteenth century. Although its origins are still somewhat academically disputed, the Zohar is primarily attributed to Rabbi Moses de Leon who seems to have been fully aware of medieval philosophers' works like Maimonides as well grappled with an understanding of previous Jewish mysticism. Though the Zohar took some time to be publically accepted, it is now a famed text and was later placed as a canonical text among post-Talmudic literature. A shift in interest occurred. For a growing number of leading Jewish philosophers and mystics, the older *Merkava* mysticism with its celestial throne, and its heavenly household and palaces through which the traveler passes, was no longer of utmost importance. The new interest in Kabbalistic groups was a more focused concern with God Himself. Kabbalists then (and even non-religious philosophers such as the self-described ecstatic rationalist of the seventeenth century, Baruch Spinoza) were deeply interested in such questions as why God (*Ein Sof* in Kabbalistic terms) created the world. Issues of temporality (how does eternality interact with temporality?), relationship between God and the Creation, and the nature of the universe and others beyond physical sight became important.

[45] Jacobs, Louis. *Jewish mystical testimonies*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1997. Pp. 3-4

With creation myths and the nature of the universe now in the forefront of mysticism thinking, interest flourished in attempts to penetrate the celestial glory discussed. To do this, external inquiry was not only employed, but internal inquiries through meditation and contemplative practices were developed to delve into the hidden, inner worlds where the divine light is mysteriously refracted into itself. A new set of symbols develop, foremost of which were the ten *Sephirot* of which the *Zohar* and the *Sefer Yetzirah* (The Book of Creation) discuss. For the most part, early Kasbbalists accepted Moses Maimonides' idea of a remote and unknowable, philosophical God with few exceptions. But if God was so remote, whom could a Jew pray to? To resolve this issue, Kabbalists suggested the difference between the revealed and hidden aspects of God. The infinite, hidden aspects of God are called *Ein Sof* literally without end. *Ein Sof* has no relationship with creation, but the ten *Sephirot* are the mediation of *Ein Sof* as ten infinite yet knowable aspects of his being. As such, the *sephirot* are qualities of God which are manifest in both the physical and metaphysical levels. The first reference to the *sephirot* is in the *Sefer Yetzirah* in reference to numbers, which suggest its root in *sephirah,* literally meaning counting. These *sephirot* are the bridge between the remote Creator and his creation. The most accessible of the ten is the last *Sephirah*, Kingship or *Malkuth,* since it sits on the bottom of the Kabbalist "tree of life."

At the human level, the ten s*ephirot* may symbolically be configured in the form of a "Tree of Life" reflecting the obsession with creation in Kabbalistic knowledge. They can be seen as an ascending ladder, with each level corresponding to a certain quality of the Divine. The lower seven *sephirot* here represent aspects of the physical universe where an ordinary person's consciousness resides, and the remaining three represent aspects of the divine attempted by initiates. Again, even in the image of the "Tree of Life" God is lowering himself to humanity.

If there is any surviving text that may be considered an outright "meditation manual", the *Sefer Yetzirah* would be the key in understanding. The text is traditionally linked to the prophet Abraham

though commentaries and the peak of its popularity began after the eleventh century. The text recalls Ezekiel's vision particularly in reference to the lightening effects of the *chayot*.[46] The *Sefer Yetzirah* is also heavily laden with discussion of Hebrew letters, permutations, seals and names of God. Though these elements were already present within the prophetic and *Merkava* traditions, they are most manifest in the Kabbalah tradition and later mystic leaders would regularly employ methods described in this text. After describing the ten *sephirot* for seven verses, instructions begin for understanding them and the unspeakable name of God (YHVH, the tetragrammaton). Verse 8 begins, "Bridle your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking."[47] A level of purification, preparation and readiness is suggested here, before beginning any of engravings, carvings or permutations. Explicitly mentioning *Ruach HaKodesh* as Voice, Breath and Speech, the text describes a mental process of "engraving and carving" Breath with specific Hebrew letters, chaos, and even the "Throne of Glory." Instructions continue, "With it [Breath] engrave and carve twenty-two foundation letters – three others, seven Doubles, and twelve Elementals – and one Breath is from them."[48] Following, instructions continue with the element of water to carve chaos, void and clay and finally the element fire for the Throne of God and accompanying angels. With the Hebrew letters, chaos, and the Throne of God engraved, the letters of God's name (*yud, hay, vav or* יהו*)* "seal" the "above" through permutation of God's name.[49] Later in the text, each Hebrew letter is discussed to denote the secret, mystical properties.

The *Sefer Yetzirah*, like the *Merkava* tradition, is also closely linked to the magical or practical side of Jewish faith. Sometimes claims of Hellenistic Gnosticism elements are used to explain the *Sefer Yetzirah* as a more magical text, but elements of magic names and contemplation were already previously seen in the *Merkava* tradition. In *Meditation and Kabbalah*, Kaplan states that the

[46] See 1:6, 1:8. Kaplan, Aryeh. *Sefer Yetzirah*. San Francisco, CA: Weiser Books, 1997.
[47] *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:8, Pp. 261
[48] *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:10 Pp. 262
[49] *Sefer Yetzirah* All references from 1:10-1:14.

intellectual, the meditative, and the magical or practical are three traditional interpretations of the *Kabbalah*. To be sure, the *Sefer Yetzirah* contains elements of all three interpretations. Thus, because of its universal appeal, the *Sefer Yetzierah* appealed to many Kabbalists in both the early and late periods. Abraham Abulafia would be intrigued by the subject and create his own school revolving around the permutations of Hebrew letters, and Isaac Luria offered his own interpretation of how to meditate with the instruction of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

Abulafia and the Ari

"Prepare your mind and your heart to understand the thoughts whose matters are to be brought to you by the letters you have thought of in your heart." –Abraham Abulafia

"Before these four worlds came to be
There was one infinite,
One name,
In wondrous, hidden unity.
That even for the closest of the angels
There is no attainment in the endless,
As there is no mind that can perceive it
For He has no place, no boundary, no name." –Isaac Luria

Perhaps the most well known aspect of Jewish mysticism is the study of the Kabbalah, though this study is also wildly misunderstood which requires a deeper understanding of the Jewish tradition as a whole. Modern trends such as the Kabbalah Center focus on the practical or magical dimension of the Kabbalah and previous serious studies within and without the Jewish tradition focus exclusively on the intellectual or theoretical dimension regarding philosophical questions. Unfortunately, the meditative dimension of the Kabbalah often gets trampled by other understandings, largely due to its own secretive nature. The thirteenth century teacher Abraham Abulafia and the sixteenth century teacher Isaac Luria, also known as "the Ari," were two prominent Kabbalah scholars that taught their disciples to take up meditation to more fully understand Judaism, themselves, and their relationship to God. Though both Abulafia and the Ari were well versed in Hebraic scripture and commentaries, they also placed emphasis on Kabbalistic writings such as the Zohar and the Bahir. Within these Jewish texts there is little actual

direction for meditation as there is commentary on meditative experiences. Abraham Abulafia and Isaac Luria sought to provide insight into direct experiences and created schools of meditative thought in Jewish understanding. Though the two are similar in numerous ways and Isaac Luria was no doubt influenced by Abulafia's work, Abulafia and the Ari emphasized different aspects of meditation and more out rightly noticeable, Abulafia published a great deal of works on meditation where Isaac Luria contributed a few ecstatic poems. In order to more fully understand the depth and insight of Kabbalah and meditation it is important to study these two prominent figures and to fairly compare their methodology and following.

Abraham Abulafia had a strong background in Jewish literature and philosophy. His father tutored him in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud until he died when Abulafia was eighteen, and then devoted himself to the study of one of his favorite writers Moses Maimonides under philosopher Hillel. Though Abulafia was infatuated with Maimonides (in particular he loved Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*), he was not satisfied with the knowledge acquired from philosophy. Abulafia began to study and write thoroughly on subjects related generally to the Kabbalah. At the age of 31 upon arriving in Spain, Abulafia began to have spiritual visions and devoted himself to letters of the Hebrew alphabet, divine names, symbols and numerical values. He continued to study the *Sefer Yetzirah* ("Book of Creation") and commentaries, and began to write even more extensively. Abulafia studied with Rabbi Baruch Torgami who wrote a commentary on the *Sefer* Yetzirah involving intense gemataria (numerical manipulations) that would influence his writing and studies. Though Abulafia was clearly authoritative on the subjects which he wrote about, his manuscripts were rarely published due to controversy surrounding him. Abulafia's method of meditation taught that if certain practices were observed and techniques observed, that man could be the highest form of existence, a prophet.

Ideas revolving around becoming a prophet is where the main source of controversy came from for Abulafia. Because in his writings Abulafia hints at being a prophet on a special mission, Rashba (Rabbi Shlomo ben Adret of Barcelona) became one of Abulafia's greatest opponents. [50] Rashba supported theoretical understanding to the developing works of the Kabbalah (the Zohar had not yet been published and the Bahir was not universally accepted as of yet), and found Abulafia's focus on meditation and divine names to be potentially threatening to general support for learning the Kabbalah. Rashba started his attack with a series of letters to prominent scholars and rabbis disgracing Abulafia and his studies. Rashba's unfavorable letters stuck, and most of Abulafia's manuscripts were pushed aside, not published and placed under a ban.[51] It was not until the late eighteenth century when Chida (Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai) quoted attacks on Abulafia, but wrote that Abulafia's works were accepted by the greatest Kabbalists – including the Ari, Isaac Luria.[52] With this in mind, though his works began to be highly accepted and continue to be accepted, Abulafia's methods to achieve ecstatic states of meditation are considered to be advanced and dangerous.

One of Abraham Abulafia greatest strengths is his ability to fuse the human intellect, this world, and the divine intellect together. Combining his philosophical training and drive for divine experience, Abulafia produced a combination of meditation techniques to reach states of ecstasy. For Abulafia, only the highest part of humanity, the intellect, was engaged during meditation and physicality and emotionality were pushed aside. In this way, Abulafia's methods of cleaving to God "can be perfectly exercised only in complete solitude."[53] This method is radically different from other Kabbalistic studies which aim for divine harmony involving the ten sephirot over the urge to immerse oneself in divine experience. Where rabbinical Judaism promoted common divine worship (prayer) as the center of

[50] Kaplan, Aryeh. *Meditation and Kabbalah*. San Francisco, CA: Weiser Books, 1985. 57-58
[51] Idel, Moshe. *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988. 1-2
[52] *Meditation and Kabbalah*. 59
[53] Idel, Moshe. *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988. 18

Jewish religious life, and events like prayer, Torah services, circumcision, marriage were social religious acts performed in a society, Abulafia emphasized the solitude of the Sacred. In many ways, Abulafia called back to the solitude of Moses on Mount Sinai and Elijah in the desert as a reference to the Jewish heritage of communication with the divine. [54] More than just referencing the Jewish past, Abulafia set out a meditation system where the experience of solitude could be had by everyone, not just the prophets of the past.

To achieve divine experiences, Abulafia focused on permutations. As Moshe Idel writes regarding Abulafia's focus, "The purpose of meditation and letter combination is to bring the spiritual abundance into the intellective soul or the intellect."[55] Instead of employing a kind of mantra meditation where a word or a series of words are employed to produce a state, Abulafia instead advocates the permuting and cycling of letters in a single word (most prominent divine names) in every way possible. At first the initiate would write out the letters, but once more advanced stages were reached, they would be able to permute verbally or even mentally. Strong emphasis was placed on Hebrew letter since they are the most basic building block of creation. [56] Kaplan describes the intention behind this "Method of Letters," "When an individual looks into these permutations in a proper manner, he can see all of creation. He is like a person looking into a glass mirror, who sees both his own face, and the faces of all who pass by."[57] Abulafia believed that the actual use of rearranging the Hebrew letters of the divine names would bring about revelation and prophecy, for the permutations of the divine names requires intense concentration on God.

Abulafia hints at other forms of meditation in his writings, yet chooses to influence permutations of divine names and once that is mastered, pronunciation of the divine names. The

[54] *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 103
[55] *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*. 115
[56] *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 78
[57] *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 78

ultimate goal of the "Method of Letters" prescribed by Abulafia is to achieve a state of ecstasy and reveal mysteries of enlightenment. The highest mysteries are alluded to by the Garden of Eden which, after Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, is protected by "the flame of a rotating sword."[58] When the permutations and the pronunciation of the Divine Names have been mastered, then initiates are allowed to enter into the "Garden of Eden" or paradise. The allusion of the Garden of Eden is used extensively throughout Judaism, and is commonly discussed in many parts of Abulafia's manuscripts and writings.

A classic example of Abulafia's writings, emphasis on letters and pronunciation, and teachings may be found in *The Light of the Intellect*. First Abulafia explains that consonants do not have any sound without vowels. In this way, God provided vowels and gave the mouth the power to express the letters. Abulafia writes, "The vibrations of these sounds must also be associated with space. No vibration can occur except in a definite time and place…One must therefore know how to draw out the sound of each letter as it is related to these dimensions." Abulafia demonstrates the need for the world outside the infinite so that the vibrations of sound may be heard. Jumping right into technique, Abulafia states that the following is the mystery of how to pronounce the Glorious Name:

> *Make yourself right. Meditate (*hitboded*) in a special place, where your voice cannot be heard by others. Cleanse your heart and soul of all other thoughts in the world. Imagine that at this time, your soul is separating itself from your body, and that you are leaving the physical world behind, so that you enter the Future World, which is the source of all life distributed to the living. [The Future World] is the intellect […] Your mind must then come to join His Mind, which gives you the power to think. Your mind must divest itself of all other thoughts other than His Thought. This becomes like a partner, joining you to Him through His glorious, awesome Name. You must therefore know precisely how to pronounce the Name.*[59]

[58] Genesis 3:24
[59] *Meditation and Kabbalah* Pp. 102

Abulafia then continues to give the technique on pronouncing Hebrew letters beginning with Aleph along with breathing and head movement techniques. Here, it is easy to see Abulafia's emphasis on immersing oneself in divine experience through Divine Name permutations and pronunciation.[60]

One of Abulafia's students is the anonymous author of the *Shaare Tsedek*, (Gates of Justice). This student reveals that Abulafia produced books for him made up of combinations of letters, names, and mystic numbers which "nobody will ever be able to understand anything for they are not composed in a way meant to be understood."[61] Later, he describes his first mystical experience as

> The third night, after midnight, I nodded off a little, quill in hand and paper on my knees. Then I noticed that the candle was about to go out. I rose to put it right, as oftentimes happens to a person awake. Then I saw that the light continued. I was greatly astonished, as though after close examination, I saw that it issued from myself. I said: 'I do not believe it.' I walked to and fro throughout the house, and behold, the light is with me. I lay on a couch and covered myself up, and behold the light is with me all the while.[62]

After this experience, Abulafia's student takes the names and permutations with more seriousness, and describes how he was able to "touch" the name of God. The next morning, the student went to Abulafia and Abulafia informed him that he was reaching prophetic stages, though God alone could endow someone with prophecy – it is never something one can achieve. Published after Abulafia's death, the *Shaare Tsedek* reveals that even when banned during his lifetime, Abulafia had some following interested in preserving Abulafia's teachings.

Nearly three hundred years later, Isaac Luria was born in Jerusalem, but when his father died as a child he moved to Egypt to live with his rich uncle where he was placed under prominent Jewish teachers including Rabbi Bezalel Ashkenazi. The Ari married his cousin, but continued to study since he had a stable financial situation. Married at the age of fifteen, he soon became engrossed in the study of

[60] *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 88-89
[61] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Pp. 150
[62] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Pp. 150, originally translated by Scholem

the Zohar, now recently published, and continued to learn more from teachers – including meditation techniques from Rabbi Bezalel. Though Isaac Luria attempted a career in business, at the age of twenty-two he secluded himself in a cottage on the Nile to meditate and study. After years of seclusion (with visits to his family on Shabbat), he left for Safed in his mid-thirties where he quietly acquired discipleship. One of his main students, Rabbi Chaim Vital, took over the methodology of study when Isaac Luria died only two years after arriving in Safed.

During and after his death, the Ari was greatly revered and continues to be studied extensively in modernity. Unlike Abulafia, the Ari's teachings were not banned in his lifetime and he was generally accepted by the Jewish community since there were already established Kabbalah meditation schools though not prevalent. Isaac Luria wrote down very little, and rather chose his instruction to be solely oral. Moreover, the Ari emphasized aspects of Jewish life and the mystical side of Jewish mitzvot – every commandment had a mystical dimension. In this way, religious observance was key to the furthering of spiritual achievement. Since the Ari was not writing manuscripts for the masses, he focused on individual disciples and played the role of the "physician of the soul." [63] It was said that Luria could read the forehead of his disciples, tell them what they needed to atone for, and how to go about the cleansing process. Luria believed "his disciples had first to mend their own souls, to cleanse and purify them of all imperfections. No one whose own soul had failed to achieve a certain level of perfection could hope to engage successfully in the intricate and elaborate contemplative rituals Luria devised."[64] While Abulafia stressed a holy life, the Ari became intricately involved with his disciples' lives and prescribed instructions individually. Where, Abulafia chose to focus solely on the intellect as the highest aspect of human life and his meditation system, the Ari included the emotional aspect and the body of the initiate into his meditation practice.

[63] Fine, Lawrence, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003
[64] *Physician of the Soul*. 150

The Ari's meditation techniques are most importantly based solely on the Zohar which was previously unpublished even for Abraham Abulafia. In this way, the basic elements of his meditation system were the ten Sefirot, the Four Universes, and the Five levels of the Soul. [65] The Ari became famous for his interpretation and commentary on the creation of the world regarding *Ein Sof* (literally, without end or infinite) originally filling space, but light bursting to create shattered vessels of light during the first stage of creation, the Universe of Chaos. Each Sefirot were originally simple points where they receive light with no interaction between each other. Kaplan explains, "after having been shattered, the Vessels were then rectified and rebuilt into the Partzufim. ..These Partzufim were then able to interact with each other. More important, they then resembled both man and the Torah. They were therefore able to interact with man through the Torah…"[66] Fulfilling Jewish commandments are here, again, critical to being able to experience in the divine. Though the technique of *Yichudim* is not explicitly stated in the Zohar, the Ari extracted this meditative technique of unification and held it in the highest esteem. Where Abulafia focused on the rearranging of the letters of Divines Names, the Ari instead chooses to focus on the unifying of two or more names. Described as "the essence of the Ari's meditative system", *Yichudim* is the manipulating of the letters of various names of God to unify them. [67] Luria's disciple Rabbi Chaim Vital wrote down most of his teacher's teachings in an eight volume set called the "Eight Gates." The seventh volume delves into the practice of *Yichudim* though the unification of names are not necessarily meant solely for divine encounters, but for specific purposes like rectification of sin or esoteric rites.[68] As it is written in *The Gate of the Holy Spirit*:

> *There is another* Yichud *that you must constantly keep before your eyes. Meditate on the name Elohim, with the letters spelled out, (and the Heh spelled) with a Yod… Meditate that Malkhut-Kingship is called Elohim and includes thirteen attributes. These parallel the thirteen letters in the expansion of Elohim. The Thirteen Attributes are*

[65] *Meditation and Kabbalah*. 210
[66] *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 213
[67] *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 218
[68] *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 222

> *introduced with the Tetragrammaton (YHVH), as they are spelled out, "YHVH, YHVHm a merciful and loving God…" (Exodus 34:6) The letters YHVH are then transformed into MTzPTz. (These are the qualities that a person must cultivate in order to attain Enlightenment.) When a person prays, studies Torah, or observes a Commandment, he Must be happy and joyful..*[69]

Rabbi Chaim Vital emphasizes *Yichudim* and the fulfillment of Commandments with joy and promotes the constant meditative state here.

Rabbi Luria lived during a lifetime of messianic fervor after centuries of persecution for Jews, and his creation allegory of light shattering would be of particular importance. With his interpretation of the creation story, the Ari attempted to answer the question, Why does God permit human suffering to occur? In Luria's process of the Creation, good elements of the emerging cosmic order became mixed with negative ones. It is a tale of a shattering—the *shevirah*. The divine light entered into the ten vessels that were waiting to receive it and some were shattered, the shards fell into the abyss from where the physical world would come from, carrying sparks of the light that were trapped within. From the very beginning then, the conceived world was not entirely as it ought to have been. Moreover, the exile of the Jews, which was foreshadowed by the mythic expulsion from Eden, was seen as the symbol of the light that was scattered by the disruption and displacement brought about by the *shevirah*. The restoration of the original wholeness and the mysteries of this reintegration—this divine *tikkun*, meaning binding up or healing of the wound—became the chief theoretical and practical concern of the Ari's philosophical and theological system. Over time and with Luria's concern for people in general, a belief grew that collaborative religious activity and positive social conduct could help fix the shattering of the universe that had occurred from the start. In this way, the historic notion of exile became a cosmic symbol. Moreover, when all is restored to its rightful place, it was believed that the Messiah will come.

[69] *Meditation and Kabbalah,* 225-226

The Ari, Isaac Luria, in contrast to Abraham Abulafia, did not write books and only contributed a few poems to the literature of Jewish meditative experiences. Though the Ari was influenced by Abulafia, the Ari altered his meditative technique instructions based on each disciple. Despite not publishing major works, Isaac Luria still has an impact on modern Judaism particularly in Orthodox Spanish and Portuguese Jews and the Hasidic Lubavitch movement. Luria also emphasized the meditative aspect of *Kavanot*, specific meditations related to particular practices. These meditations revolve around everyday life – eating, dressing, and specific holiday practices. Kavanot is supposed to bring an individual to higher universes and, like Abulafia, use divine names. Here, the Ari hopes to bring about a meditative state throughout the day, throughout the year. In this way, there is no divorcing from the meditative state of experiencing the divine. It is easy to see the similarities between Hasidism and the Luria's teachings in this aspect. Meditation is way of life for Luria, and should fit into one's life so that a higher state may always be attained. Emphasizing this point, Luria said, "One day a week, separate yourself from all people and meditate (*hitboded*) upon God. Bind your thoughts to Him, just as if you were speaking to Him on the Day of Judgment."[70]

Both Isaac Luria and Abraham Abulafia recognize the significance of previous meditative techniques during the Talmudic period, particularly the *Hekhalot* school where divine names are discussed and though guaranteed to fall in error, "descend to the *Merkava.*" Much of *Hekhalot* writings were dedicated to visions and the summoning and controlling of angels through names which required much time and practices of purification. Although the two were familiar with the texts, they both instead advocate an entirely different system because they realized "that the techniques described in the *Hekhalot* require a system of purification that was no longer in existence."[71] This suggests a constant growth in understanding of Judaism – including Kabbalisitc teachings regarding meditation. In addition,

[70] *Sefer Cheredim, Tshuvah* 3 (Jerusalem, 1958) pp. 214
[71] *Meditation and Kabbalah*. 62

both Abulafia and Luria present their meditation system practically as a matter of logic flowing from a Jewish life. The Ari held that there were optimal ways to approach each aspect of one's life. As seen, there were as many 'formulas' for contemplative purposes as there were life experiences. Kaplan translates Luria's reported teaching in the *Gate of Holiness* as, "Everything depends on the intensity of your concentration and your attachment on high. Do not remove this from before your eyes."[72]

As the writings of the Kabbalah became more accessible and accepted in the second half of the second millennium, the meditation schools developed around Kabbalistic teachings became more visible and understood – though as history has shown, theoretical and practical Kabbalah have prevailed. As a beginning scholar and promoter of Kabbalistic meditation, Abraham Abulafia was opposed by normative Judaism as well as those who accepted the Kabbalah (as seen by the letters written by Rashba). Nevertheless, Abulafia successfully wrote dozens of manuscripts in a short amount of time detailing the techniques of his system of meditation. In this way, Isaac Luria owes much to Abulafia in influence and laying groundwork. While Abraham Abulafia promoted the "Method of Letters" where Isaac Luria promoted the "Method of Sefirot," both engaged their initiates in use of divine names and a direct experience with the divine. Neither Abulafia nor the Ari were content with merely reading about meditative, divine experiences in the Torah and Kabbalah writings, and promoted their systems of meditation steadfastly. What is clearly evident from studying both Kabbalistic masters is that divine names play a critical role in Jewish mysticism, and achievement of meditative states is possible through numerous techniques.

The Ari's Disciples

*"One must seclude himself (*hitboded*) in his thoughts to the ultimate degree."* –Rabbi Chaim Vital

[72] *Meditation and Kabbalah* Pp. 258

After the death of the Ari at the young age of thirty-eight, Rabbi Chaim Vital codified his teacher's sayings and teachings in numerous volumes. Vital, though not a contributor for original content or revolutionary means, contributed to the study of *hitbodedut*. Kaplan calls Rabbi Vital one of the greatest Kabbalists of all time also noting his contribution to the study of meditation during the historical height of studying the Kabbalah. According to Vital, as the initiate separates his soul from the body to such an advanced degree, he should no longer feel relationship between his soul and his physical self. In this way, the soul becomes fully isolated (self-seclusion), and as Vital concludes, "the more one separates himself from the physical, the greater will be his perception."[73] In the writings of Vital, a story is told by Vital himself about Rabbi Isaac Luria teaching him *Yichudim* (meditation based on unification and manipulation of the various names of God) after much pleading. After being given instructions and practicing that very night, Vital reveals that his entire body trembled and his mind felt heavy much like the experience of the prophets in the Bible. Luria saw Vital in the morning and told Vital that he warned him about the danger of this system of meditation. Moreover, Luria tells Vital that if he were not the reincarnation of the great Jewish scholar and *Mishnah* and *Midrash* contributor Rabbi Akiba, he would not have survived.[74] Noting the importance that his master gives him, Rabbi Chaim Vital appears to be understudied in his own right.

To preserve his master's teachings, Vital wrote a set of eight mystical volumes revolving around specific prescriptions for different disciples entitled *Eight Gates*. Of the eight gates, the seventh one or the Gate of the Holy Spirit (*Shaar Ruach HaKodesh*) explains the system that the Ari taught Vital above. Remembering that the Ari was seen as the "physician of the soul", different meditation practices were given to different disciples to aid them in their progress. That is to say, it appears that some of the meditations that Vital describes were not given to him to practice, but other disciples practiced them.

[73] *Meditation and the Bible* Pp 2s
[74] *Meditation and Kabbalah* Pp 219s

For example, many of the *Yichudim* in the Gate of the Holy Spirit are for purposes like the rectification of sins or rites like exorcism. Mostly, however, the purpose was for concentrate spiritual power to one end or another. Sometimes the *Yichudim* also dealt with nonmeditative aspects not aimed at *Ruach HaKodesh*. The Ari also seemed to suggest that binding oneself to great leaders and saints of antiquity could aid their meditations, and so many performed their prescriptions at the graves of the saints if they were available.[75]

After the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the works of Vital appear to be the most influential on grand scales for a kind of manual to achieve meditative states. Not only does Chaim Vital describe the levels of meditation, but he also wrote in length about the need for purification in light of these levels. In *Sha'arei Kedushah* (the Gates of Holiness), one of Vital's most famous works, writes about the final level of purification before being able to be at the level of prophetic attainment. After being secluded in a special place,

> *And he should shut his eyes, and remove his thoughts from all matters of this world, as though his soul had departed from him, like a dead person who feels nothing […] and he should imagine that his soul has departed and ascended, and he should envision the upper worlds, as though he stands in them. And if he performed some unification – he should think about it, to bring down by this, light and abundance into all the worlds, and he should intend to receive also his portion at the end. And he should concentrate in his thought, as though the spirit had rested upon him, until he awakens somewhat […] And after a few days he should return to meditate in the same manner, until he merits that the spirit rest upon him.*[76]

As demonstrated here, the same terminology used to describe the prophetic mysteries and the *Merkava* tradition are used here by Rabbi Vital. Waiting for the spirit, or *Ruach HaKodesh*, is a common metaphor used throughout Jewish mysticism. This also reveals the lengthy, time

[75] *Meditation and Kabbalah* Pp. 222-223
[76] *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* Pp 135

consuming process often alluded to previously, but here the practice of concentration and meditation (*hitbodedut)* is stated as being at least a few days.

Other disciples also published their notes and recollections of the Ari where they all referred to him affectionately as "my teacher" or "master." Another key follower was Elijah de Vidas, who although not a formal disciple, had met and highly respected the Ari. Vidas's *Resbith Hokhmahis* was and continues to be considered by many to be a "crown jewel" of the Safed Kabbalist literature. Its wisdom teachings are divided into five gates – profoundly similar to the writings of Chaim Vital where each of which is almost book length. The Gate of Love begins with the recognition that "Our devotion to God, May He be blessed, must be performed with love. As Scripture says, 'And thou shall love the Lord the God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.' This passage is the gateway to our reverence for God."[77] The practitioner is reminded that "genuine love" means serving God "without seeking a reward." This same attitude of selfless service is to be upheld as well in one's relationships with fellow human beings. This appears to be another prescription by the Ari for a certain progression for one of his disciples, and only further demonstrates the impact that the Ari had on the Jewish community on every matter.

Sabbatianism

In the middle decades of the seventeenth century, East European Jewry suffered anti-Semitic massacres that left much of the Polish community in ruins. Scholem writes of the times after the Spanish exodus, "The catastrophic events of t hat period led directly to the rise of the new School of Safed whose thoughts […] centered round certain problems created or become visible through that great

[77] *Meditation and Kabbalah* Pp. 187

cataclysm."[78] Beginning with Jesus to the second century Bar Kokha after the destruction of the Second Temple, through the First and Second Crusades in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, messiah figures have routinely appeared in Jewish history. So though a tumultuous time, the seventeenth century was not the first rise in messianism that had occurred in Judaism. However this time was marked by the bizarre meteoric rise and fall of the charismatic Rabbi Sabbatai Zevi, whose messianic pretensions and later apostasy had a shattering effect, the ripples of which were felt for many years within the Jewish community worldwide.

Zevi was raised in a wealthy merchant family in what is now Turkey and educated in both the Talmud and the Kabbalah. At the start, it appeared that Zevi would be a prominent rabbi and scholar. However, as noted by numerous authors, Zevi suffered from mental illness.[79] Though early on he sometimes made claims to be the Messiah, it was not until he met the young Kabbalist Nathan of Gaza in 1665 that he was convinced he was the Messiah. Nathan proclaimed that he had a prophetic vision after a week of fasting after the holiday *Purim* where the spirit (*Ruach HaKodesh)* came over him. He saw visions of the *Merkava* and God first until God spoke to him prophesying about Zevi.[80] Nathan told Zevi that the torment of his physical body and soul were reflections of the cosmic battle of the light and the broken vessels. Rabbi Zevi was convinced by Nathan's persuasion, and Zevi began his short career as the proclaimed Messiah of Judaism. Word spread like a wildfire that the Messiah was known, and Zevi became the leader of his community. Following a minority opinion in the Talmud, followers of Zevi deemphasized the role of *mitzvot* believing that in the time of the Messiah these rituals lose their nature of obligation. As such, research shows a lack of meditation practices as previously set forth by Rabbi Isaac Luria and then continued by his disciple Rabbi Chaim Vital.

[78] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism Pp. 287*
[79] See *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* where Zevi is called a "sick man" Pp. 290 or descriptions of having a manic-depressive disorder in *What Do Jews Believe?* Pp. 231
[80] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism Pp. 295*

The rise of the movement among Jews troubled the Turkish sultan, and he arrested Zevi in 1666. During the time of Zevi's imprisonment, the number of followers increased as well as their enthusiasm. However, the sultan gave Zevi two choices – conversion to Islam or death. Zevi converted to Islam. Many Jews were profoundly disappointed, and went back to life before the rise of Rabbi Zevi. Alarmingly, however, another group gained fervor seeing this as a necessary part of the Messiah's mission to retrieve light from the shattered vessels. A new wave of followers began to practice "redemption through sin."[81] Like Zevi had done before, they violated Jewish commandments and some even converted to Catholicism as "an act of their faith." The numbers continued to grow into the eighteenth century. As a result, Jewish communities were torn apart all throughout Europe. Accusations and "witch hunts" for the Sabbateans occurred just as rapidly, and the crisis eventually dissolved.

There is no doubt that the popularity of Lurianic Kabbalism and the symbols of light associated with Jewish exiled contributed to the rise of Sabbatean messianism. Zevi's popularity and following not only grew in Turkey but spread over Europe causing numerous Jewish leaders and whole communities to become involved in the movement. Though messianism in no way died out completely, the fervor and following that it once had in the seventeenth and eighteenth century would not occur again.

The rise of Hasidism and the Baal Shem Tov

In many ways, Hasidism had the appeal of Lurianic Kabbalah with less emphasis on symbols and more on everyday spirituality. Hassidism, according to Scholem, neutralizes the Messianic influences of Sabbateans.[82] To do this, however, much of the symbolism laden in Lurianic Kabbalah was removed or hidden to cease the promotion of radical ideas exemplified by Rabbi Zevi. Or as Hebrew University professor Moshe Idel writes, "Eighteenth century Hasidism combined extreme spiritual mystical elements with conspicuously messianic concepts and terminology, which were given to interpretations

[81] *What Do Jews Believe*? Pp 241
[82] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* Pp. 334-7

that moderated their apocalyptic aspects." [83] Whether considering Scholem or Idel in understanding the shift in thinking within Hasidism, it is evident that a change occurred in interpretation. Instead, Hasidism focused on the popular elements of the Kabbalah – light, sparks, meditation, community. The founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, reinterpreted and re-infused the mystical element in to Judaism, though Scholem notes that Hasidism was virtually unproductive in *new* religious ideas.[84] Although, contrary to Scholem's statement, the role of the rebbe took center stage in this new religious movement, along with a new emphasis on holiness even within worldliness. Fostered originally by the East Europeans Jews, Hasidism still continues today as a religious revival movement founded on the premise that true spirituality arises from one's heart and intent, and a strong emphasis on community. Spiritual redemption took center stage in these communities over political and physical redemption.

Twentieth century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber was thoroughly interested in Hasidism, and many of his books on Jewish thinking took it up for discussion. Though Buber has often been critiqued for idealizing Hasidism, his emphasis on the non-rational components of Hasidism may fit with Scholem's grand understanding. For where many religions depend on the separation of the sacred and the profane in order to set their lives in order, Buber believes Hasidism understands it as follows, "there is […] no essential distinction between sacred and profane spaces, between sacred and profane times, between sacred and profane actions, between sacred and profane conversations. At each place, in each hour, in each act, each speech the holy can blossom forth."[85] In doing so, there is a demand to allow the Infinite to dwell wherever you are at all times. In these terms, the job of the Hasid at every moment is to create sincerity and authenticity so that preparations are made to allow God to dwell wherever we are. In essence, this may be akin to the prophets' preparation for the spirit to come upon them through purification, fulfilling of Jewish law, and meditation.

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[83] Idel, Moshe. *Messianic Myths*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998. Pp. 212
[84] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* Pp 338
[85] Buber, Martin. *Hasidism and Modern Man*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000. Pp 23

Hasidism captured the Jewish population more than most mystical movements. Hasidism also attracted many important Kabbalists to join, and thus helped the meditative aspect of the Kabbalah to rise in awareness. During the eighteenth century, the Kabbalah had already made a respectable name for itself both theoretically and practically. Yet Hasidism aimed to restore the mystical aspect to the Kabbalah and everyday Jewish life. When studying Hasidism in isolation without understanding the history of meditation in Judaism. It has been noted that the meditative aspects do not immediately manifest themselves.[86] During the rise of Hasidism, many texts of the Kabbalah were printed on larger scales since the Kabbalah was no longer restricted to the scholars. These newly printed texts, some of which were printed for the first time ever, became important for community life as the Kabbalah was now a part of popular folklore due to the previous rise of messianism.

The Baal Shem Tov, also commonly referred to as the Besht, is perhaps the most widely known figure in Jewish mysticism (along with Isaac Luria), and was accepted as a master and teacher in his lifetime. Founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov was an enigmatic figure who championed meditative states as a reaction to the ongoing Jewish Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Born in 1698 in a village on the Polish-Russian border, the young Besht's parents both died when he was a young boy. Then adopted by the village synagogue, he received an education common to Jewish communities at the time. Even in his youth, the then named Israel ben Eliezer "had a brilliant mind as well as a deep spiritual nature but at an early age he learned to keep his gifts a secret"[87] He also developed a strong love of nature. At the age of eighteen he received a leadership role in the Society of Nistarim, a secret society of Kabbalists which had been strongly involved in rebuilding the crushed Eastern European communities. It is during this time of his leadership that the Baal Shem Tov gained some popularity. After his marriage, Israel and his bride went to live in a small village in the Carpathian Mountains where, supported by his

[86] *Meditation and Kabbalah*. Pp 263
[87] *Meditation and Kabbalah.* Pp 269

wife of well-standing, he spent his days and nights studying, praying and meditating, coming home sometimes only on the Sabbath. Like the Ari before him, he lived seven years in this secluded meditative environment. He then emerged as a gifted teacher, and decided the time (at the age of thirty six) had come to make known some of the insights which had come to him in his prayer and meditation.

The Baal Shem Tov's early youth and early marriage are shrouded in mystery for scholars and historians, though he appears to have devoted extensive time to methods of meditation. Regarding his time spent in meditation and intense prayer, the Besht wrote his brother in law a rare letter regarding that states he was in while spending time alone. He wrote in September of 1746,

> *I engaged in an ascent of the soul, as you know I do, and I saw wondrous things in that vision that I never had before seen since the day I had attained to maturity…. "I went higher until I entered the palace of the Messiah wherein the Messiah studies the Torah together with all the tannaim and the saints and also with the Seven Shepherds (Adam, Seth, Methusalah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David)….I asked the Messiah: "When will the Master [the Messiah]come?" and he replied: "You will know of it in this way; it will be, when your teaching becomes famous and revealed to the world, and when that which I have taught you and you have comprehended will spread abroad so that others too, will be capable of performing unification and having soul ascents as you do. Then will all the kelippot [forces of evil] be consumed and it will be a time of grace and salvation.*[88]

This letter, printed for the community twenty years later after the death of the Baal Shem Tov, reveals strong elements of messianism combined with meditation techniques stretching back to the prophets through Rabbi Isaac Luria. Though the Besht is not the Messiah in this vision, he clearly has a connection to the Messiah through his devotional state. Moreover, armed with this vision and moving back to a community of people, the Besht's following grew immensely and whole communities devoted themselves to Hasidism.

[88] Jacobs, Louis. *Jewish mystical testimonies.* New York, NY: Schocken Books 1977, pp.149-53. The translation here follows the version as printed in the *Ben Porat Yoself* (pages 100a-b), since this was the version known to the Hasidim.

Though it is not hard to find references to meditation (particularly the use of *hitboded*) in the sayings of the Baal Shem Tov, previous scholarship has understood *hitbodedut* as contemplation rather than meditation without understanding the history of Jewish meditation methods. Even while current scholarship is exploring the notion of Jewish meditation, leading scholars such as Moshe Idel still translate *hitbodedut* as contemplation (despite its literally translation and context) in studies of Jewish mysticism. One clear example of the Baal Shem Tov related to how translation can go either way without taking into account Jewish meditative history is, "One should constantly meditate (*hitboded*) on the Divine Presence. He should have no other thought in his mind other than his love [of God, seeking that the Divine Presence] should attach itself to him."[89] What is evident, however, is that centuries later, though God is still distinctly Other, there is a more general acceptance of the Divine presence or immanence throughout the world. This is largely due to the conception of "sparks" out of the Kabbalistic tradition. Emphasis is placed on these sparks dwelling everywhere in the world, including the actions of a human being. In this way, every action, whether it be a small or great deed, is a service to God.[90] Aryeh Kaplan notes that one of the Baal Shem Tov's most important accomplishments was to reveal a safe form of meditation which could be used by even the simplest person. The undirected, inner meditations of the past were replaced with directed, inner meditations and even intense prayer became accepted as external meditation. Instead of just practicing to see the glory of God for just one individual, Hasids practiced to help the community and raise their consciousness.

Like Abraham Abulafia, the Baal Shem Tov engaged his followers with *Hitbodedut* meditation. Though the Baal Shem Tov encouraged life in a committed Jewish society, he also was fond of meditating. He started his *hitbodedut* practices in his youth and continued to meditate like this into his adulthood. Though the Baal Shem Tov never wrote his own book, his sayings and teachings were

[89] Tzavaat HaRivash (Kehot, New York, 1975) #8
[90] For more explanation of the "sparks" see *Hasidism and Modern Man* Pp 179-181 or *Meditation and Kabbalah* Pp. 289

transcribed for preservation. Referring to how Jews should serve, the Besht says, "When one at times goes about and talks with people, and at that time he cannot learn, then he shall cleave to God and unite with his soul the names of God."[91] Combining old meditative methods of cleaving to God and unification through the names of God as seen with the Ari, and with new emphasis on community, Hasidism grew rapidly popular. With the method of the Baal Shem Tov, one did not have to leave, but was encourage toward mysticism while remaining in his family and community. The Besht said, "At times a man rests on his bed, and it appears to his family as though he were asleep, but he spends this hour in solitude with his Creator […] That is a high rung, that he beholds the Creator at all times with the eye of his insight, as he sees another man."[92] Even surrounded by his family, the meditator can spend time meditating and conversing with his Creator with his "eye of insight."

Moreover, the Baal Shem Tov also engaged his followers and himself in the meditative system of *Yichudim* as was taught by Isaac Luria. Many of his followers and preservers of his teachings noted his use of *Yichudim*, but very little has been preserved as to instructions. Kaplan provides the example of "A Yichud for Immersion" in *Meditation and the Kabbalah* where the name KNA is related to the number 151 and the name *Ehyeh*, and then multiple Hebrew letters of Heh are introduced.[93] The result would be a constant focusing on adding and removing the Heh to produce a full effect of ALF HH YUD HH. Once this level is completed, more names are introduced along with the addition of more Hehs. Following the usage of the names, instructions say to meditate on the subject of prayer, elevating God's name to the highest level of Understanding. This prescription is reminiscent of the Ari's use of unification and understanding of the names through *Yichudim*. Despite the prevalent use of directed meditation on the

[91] *Hasidism and Modern Man*. Pp 182
[92] *Hasidism and Modern Man*. Pp. 186
[93] *Meditation and Kabbalah*. Pp 276-7

names, some mention of the undirected meditation on Nothingness is made in the teachings of the Hasidic Masters though only with the guidance of a master.[94]

Most interesting is that the Baal Shem Tov was one of the first Kabbalists to discuss the states of consciousness achieved through meditation. The Baal Shem Tov sought a mature consciousness. That is, he wanted a state of expanded consciousness to reveal the sacred nature of everything in the world. Beautifully stated by the Besht, "The soul constantly has a burning desire to attach itself to God. It is enveloped by a physical [body] however, which acts as a barrier to such attachment. Man's physical self desires such material things are sex and food. These things, however, are also required on high, in order to accomplish such things as the separation [and elevation] of the [holy] Sparks."[95] From the founding of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov was eager to remain in touch with the life of the community of which he attributed special meaning. Unlike the Sabbatians previously, Hasids took every caution to avoid conflict with Judaism.[96] To do this, doctrine and theory were replaced with stories and tales. These Hasidic tales describe the happenings of the Rebbes both physically and metaphysically in relation to Judaism. Today, these tales are still enormously popular, and already famed author Eli Wiesel retold and preserved many of these tales in *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*. Though the tale was originally oral in nature, followers transcribed the stories for preservation and recollection. Instructive by nature, yet in no way demanding, these stories are universally popular.

After the death of the Baal Shem Tov, his role was seen as distributed. Lineages of Rebbes were formed, and one of particular importance was the familial lineage of the Besht. His great grandson, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov also taught an inner directed meditation system of Hitbodedut. The Nachman lineage never had any successors after himself, making it the longest surviving Hasidic community without a living Rebbe.

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[94] For a more detailed description see Pp. 299-305 in *Meditation and Kabbalah*
[95] *Meditation and Kabbalah*. Pp. 281
[96] *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Pp. 347

The last great Kabbalah meditation Master: Rebbe Nachman of Breslov

"He who wants to see the truth must know within himself that it is impossible to resolve these questions with any intellect, even by following the ways of the true Kabbalists; *one must rely on faith alone*." – Rebbe Nachman of Breslov

There is much to be said about the "last Kabbalah meditation master" Rabbi Nachman of Breslov who happens to also be the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov. In a brief acknowledgement to one of the most popular rebbes of Hasidism, Kaplan dedicates the last mini-chapter in *Meditation and Kabbalah* to Rabbi Nachman. Born in the Ukraine in the late eighteenth century, he was taught by the Besht's assigned spiritual successor, the Maggid of Mezritch. Like the youth of his great-grandfather, Nachman spent much of his time in meditation and prayer. Nachman was married at the early age of thirteen and moved in with his in-laws where he continued to practice his methods. When he moved away, he had little difficulty attracting a following at first simply because of his great-grandfather. Over time, however, he acquired a name of his own through his magical tales and teachings. University of Pennsylvania professor Arthur Green notes Nachman's spiritual struggle throughout his life, and refers to Nachman as "the tormented master."[97] For Green, Rebbe Nachman was "one who spent all his years engaged in a life-and-death battle over the issues of faith and doubt."[98] Following the philosophical distinction made by Maimonides centuries ago, the central issue of Nachman's life was his constant awareness of the absence of God from the ordinary universe of human experience. To rectify this, Nachman promoted daily conversation with God, despite being remote and unknowable, for "if faith is to survive, […] it must offer some explanation for the basic existential fact of the seeming absence of God from the world."[99] In this way, Nachman's intellectual argument states that only through longing and noting God's absence can one truly find faith.

[97] See Green, Arthur. *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1979.
[98] *Tormented Master*. Pp 3
[99] *Tormented Master* Pp 292

In Rabbi Nachman's writings, one can see the influences of the Baal Shem Tov, the Ari and even Abraham Abulafia. Nachman demands a lot at every moment, but the results for followers was a constant experiencing of the divine. Nachman writes, "You must include yourself in God's unity, which is the imperative of Existence. You cannot be worthy of this, however, unless you first nullify yourself. It is impossible to nullify yourself, however, without Hitbodedut-meditation."[100] In this passage it is easy to see that preparation and purification is necessary to engage into a lifestyle that will include oneself in God's unity. Moreover, meditation is still playing an essential role in Hasidic teachings. Instead of years of purification and preparation however, here, emphasis shifts to intention. The mind must be emptied of current streams of consciousness in favor of thirst for God in order that growth may take place. To help empty the mind, prayer, often in the community, is utilized followed or preceded by the practice of *hitbodedut*. This challenge must be repeated daily, leading to the growth of the seeker as "an ongoing chain made up of challenges, resolutions, and higher challenges."[101] Nachman was the prime example of this growth as he often described his tormented, struggled past. Despite his struggles of despair and faith, Green writes "the example of his life […] was to serve as a prime source of truth and strength for the community he left behind."[102]

Nachman explicitly demands that his followers speak to God, in their language, to have constant remembrance of the Divine. "In your everyday native language, express all your thoughts to God, speaking of everything that is in your heart. This can involve regret and repentance for the past, or requests and supplications asking that you should truly come close to God in the future. Every person can express his own thoughts, each according to his level."[103] No matter what level you are, no matter what you have done in the past, the Hasid is asked to reveal himself to the urgency of God now and

[100] *Meditation and Kabbalah* Pp. 309. *Meditation and the Bible* Pp. 15
[101] *Tormented Master* Pp 295
[102] *Tormented Master*. Pp 265
[103] *Meditation and Kabbalah* Pp. 310

every day. Moreover, Hebrew was no longer eminently necessary to communicate with God. In *What Do Jews Believe?*, David S. Ariel notes that Nachman saw prayer as a battleground for the Hasid to combat obstacles in nearness to God. Since these are individual matters, Nachman "concluded that prayers written in Hebrew were inferior to personal prayers offered in Yiddish, his vernacular."[104] Though Nachman would sometimes come into conflict with orthodox Judaism for his superstitions and strong instructions, his overwhelming response was that it is, "better to believe in foolishness and superstitions along with faith, says Nahman, than to apply one's critical faculty in such a way that faith itself might be destroyed."[105] Here, again, a critique of reason is also being carried out.

Unlike Messianism which gathered followers based of the symbolic notion of the single Messiah, in Hasidism there is an overwhelming appreciation for every single person. Every-one is unique, has his own spiritual destiny in the world, and can never be replaced. The rebbe or master then was one whose mission was to lead the Hasid's soul and reveal the sparks of light within him. For Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the mission was to emphasize the need for daily conversation and love for God in his *own* language which was directly related to his prescription to practice *hitbodedut*. Nachman's relationship with his disciples, "unique in both quality and intensity," made the replacement rebbe impossible to find.[106] Instead, followers of Nachman are the only "dead Hasidim", that is to say, without a rebbe. What Nachman did leave behind were fantastical and magical tales of princesses, universes of darkness, and beggars. Not only were these tales entertaining, they were instructive with spiritual suggestion and intent and became central to followers of Nachman.

Judaism rationalized: the Jewish Enlightenment, 19th Century Historians, and the Holocaust

Though Jewish mysticism was widely popular among communities, the role of all these religious and mystical movements for all their contributions and failings resulted in the eighteenth century

[104] *What Do Jews Believe?* Pp. 202
[105] *Tormented Master* Pp 306
[106] *Tormented Master* Pp 265

rationalism in Judaism. Though a large part of Jewish history, emphasis was placed on philosophical and intellectual history and the magical and meditative elements were seen as too dangerous. Mysticism could unify communities as seen through Hasidism, but could also result in the Sabbatianism of the seventeenth century. The Jewish enlightenment began in Germany where the status of being a Jew brought head taxes on all cattle and Jews brought into a town, and marriage between Jews was forbidden unless special permission from the government was granted. Though not out rightly persecuted, Jews faced political and social discrimination.

The Jewish Enlightenment movement or *Haskala*, a counterpart to the more general Enlightenment movement within the European intellectual community beginning in the late eighteenth century, was a factor in the incipient decline of Jewish mysticism. Kaplan strongly notes, "Until the rise of the Jewish Enlightenment, mysticism and intellectualism had equal status within Judaism. The ostensible goal of the Enlightenment, however, was to raise the intellectual level of Judaism, and positive as this may have been, it was also done at the expense of other Jewish values....[From an extreme secular perspective] anything that touched on mysticism was denigrated as superstition and occultism and was deemed unworthy of serious study."[107] The practice and public persona of Jewish mysticism declined thereafter, and renewed interest did not substantially re-emerge within the world-wide Jewish community until the latter decades of the twentieth century. Though Kaplan is critical of the Jewish Enlightenment, it was a successful movement in terms of acceptance of Jews into European intellectual and social society.

The most important German Jew of the eighteenth century, Moses Mendelssohn, became a revolutionary force in the Jewish Enlightenment. In his writings, Mendelssohn focused on Jewish philosophical issues. Attempting to prove that Jewish metaphysical beliefs could be proven through

[107] Kaplan, Aryeh. *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide* ,1985. Pp.41

scientific proofs, he wrote an essay in 1767 that won an award from the Prussian Academy beating highly honored entries like one from Immanuel Kant. Now with national recognition, Mendelssohn became "the Jew the Germans like to love."[108] Mendelssohn translated the Bible into German along with some Hebrew commentaries resulting in national education of Jews and further popularity. By making Judaism popular, however, Mendelssohn's followers also lost the urge for commitment to Judaism. Only Jews were to follow Jewish law and were no longer deemed as universals for all of humanity. Moreover, "he believed that one did not have to be Jewish to accept Judaism's most important truths the unity of God, Divine Providence, and the immortal soul."[109] In this way, Mendelssohn attempted to create a philosophical and cultural solution. A more educated, integrated Jewish people spread throughout Europe and eventually throughout the Jewish world. Jews enjoyed a more secular life even within Mendelssohn's lifetime while simultaneously undermining commitment to Judaism. Despite being an observant, religious man himself, following their father's influence, four of Mendelssohn's six children converted to Christianity.

The next school to emphasize the rational, philosophical trends within Judaism was a school of history again in Germany that eventually became known as *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the science of Judaism). Historians like Heinrich Graetz and D.S. Joel sought to critically investigate Jewish literature and cultural through scientific methods. Again, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* hoped to place Jewish culture on par with contemporary European culture, attempting to rid the bias against the Jewish faith as being inferior to Christianity. Though for many "enlightened" Jews, "it made increasingly less sense to suffer for a religion in which they no longer believed."[110] Scholar Gershom Scholem was very critical of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement who presented Judaism as a dead organism. Author David Biale wrote of Scholem, "the Jewish historians against whom he waged his academic battles were but

[108] Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. *Jewish Literacy*. New York, NY: William Morrow, 2001. Pp 232
[109] *Jewish Literacy*. Pp. 233
[110] *Jewish Literacy.* Pp 240

representatives of the whole German-Jewish ambience he rejected."[111] For Scholem, the greatest battle was against Jewish apologetics who favored rationalism in Judaism despite abundant evidence of the mystical and magical. Though nineteenth century Jewish historians even studied Kabbalah themselves, they dismissed everything but philosophical notions believing that the reason of Judaism would reach its fulfillment in the modern age. For Scholem himself, Jewish mysticism was intrinsically bound up with the intellectual history while simultaneously independent of it. Moreover, "he claims repeatedly that Jewish mysticism was a movement at the very heart of rabbinic Judaism and not at its periphery."[112] Scholem, defensive against these historians, worried about the status of understanding Jewish mysticism, and even studied the Kabbalah himself.

Despite continuous attempts to rationalize Judaism, many Jewish communities (many of these, Hasidic) still flourished throughout Europe. The turn toward the twentieth century, however, did not bring optimistic news to these communities. Despite many Jews converting to Christianity, Adolph Hitler still believed that Jews maintained their "Jewish ideas" even in conversion.[113] Moreover, Hitler wrote to his onetime comrade Hermann Rauschning, wherever they went, Jews "brought their 'tyrannical God" and His 'life-denying Ten Commandments' into the world."[114] By the end of Hitler's rein, six million European Jews had been murdered, without including other victims to these systematic killings. Though numerous attempts were made to fully integrate Jews in to European society, these attempts failed in the face of Nazism. Though Jews were contributing largely to the legal and philosophical spheres of Europe, when leading scholars like German philosopher Martin Heidegger supported the Nazi cause, the case for Jews as professionls had lost. One of the largest Jewish populations affected by the Holocaust were European Hasidic communities. Moreover, Jews were forced to reevaluate their religious faith as

[111] Biale, David. *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982. Pp. 2
[112] *Gershom Scholem* Pp. 38
[113] *Jewish Literacy*. 373
[114] See *Jewish Literacy*.

the Holocaust challenged the very foundations of Judaism. Moreover, the question of how God could allow such a horrendous tragedy to his chosen people was the focus of concentration in Jewish minds. Many Jews turned toward the politically charged movement of Zionism and settled particularly in Israel while others escaped to America to for self-contained, and maintained communities particularly in New York and New Jersey. Both Israel and New York are critical places for the new reinterpretation of Judaism and Jewish mysticism.

Pop goes Jewish Mysticism! Modern Takes on Jewish Meditation

A controversial but well known group claiming Jewish heritage, particularly the Kabbalah, is known as the Kabbalah Centre. First established in Jerusalem in 1922 by Rav Yehuda Ashlag, the group claims spiritual lineage directly to Isaac Luria and even further back 2000 years. The Kabbalah Centre was transplanted to New York in 1965 by the Berg family, though the headquarters now resides in Los Angeles. The Kabbalah Centre is not an academic furthering endeavor, but rather claims the study as leading to "a way of creating a better life."[115] Selecting tenets like Light, Restriction, and Astrology, the Kabbalah Centre offers online and onsite courses in addition to available purchase of the *Zohar* and other items like the red string and special water. Though astrology was studied by rabbis in the Middle Ages, philosophers like Maimonides discouraged the use of astrology. Opposite to Mendelssohn's claim that Jewish law and sacred writings were not universal truths and for Jews only, the Kabbalah Centre markets itself as "Universal Wisdom." At least in the United States, the Kabbalah Centre has attracted numerous followers including high profile celebrities. In early January 2005, the BBC dismissed the Kabbalah Centre "as an opportunist offshoot of the faith with charismatic leaders who try to attract the rich and the vulnerable with the promise of health, wealth and happiness" after a leading Kabbalah Centre teacher claimed that the Holocaust occurred because the light was blocked due to the lack of use

[115] See http://www.kabbalah.com for details.

of the Kabbalah.[116] Highly controversial, the Kabbalah Centre cannot simply be dismissed since in the history of Judaism, groups with these ideas have routinely popped up though Jewish intellectuals may have tried to rid themselves of the problem. However, if the Jewish Enlightenment and subsequent events may be accused of the emphasis of the rational in Jewish history, then the Kabbalah Centre may be accused of the emphasis of the non-rational. Though a complicated matter combined with other New Age movements and elements, the Kabbalah Centre has propelled the Kabbalah into popular culture knowledge.

There has been a positive advancement in the study of Jewish history in favor of the rational and non-rational intertwinement within Judaism. Modern Jewish learning has been enriched by voice of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a respected scholar and mystic who serves as a bridge between religious and secular Jews. Editor and translator of the first commentary on the Babylonian Talmud since Rashi's in the eleventh century, he heads the Israel Institute of Talmudic Studies in Jerusalem and is committed to explore the relevance of classical Judaism within the context of the present day. In his *The Thirteen Petaled Rose: A Discourse on the Essence of Jewish Existence and Belief*, Steinsaltz posits a vast system of "worlds", most of which are spiritual in their existence and exist in different dimensions. "Various worlds interpenetrate and interact in such a way that they can be seen as counterparts of one another." [117] There is a world of physical action and one of spiritual action. Four worlds emerge: emanation, creation, formation and action that are characterized as higher or lower based on the degree to which they are transparent to the "divine light, which is their very light and subsistence."[118] In *The Thirteen Petaled Rose*, Steinsaltz also makes brief mention of the relation of Ezekiel's vision though methods of meditation are distinctly lacking.

[116] Sweeney, John. "Kabbalah leader's Holocaust 'slur'." *BBC News* 9 Jan 2005. 4 Mar 2009. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4158287.stm
[117] *Thirteen Petaled Rose*. Pp. 33
[118] *Thirteen Petaled Rose*. Pp. 20s

With the interested market for the Kabbalah and subjects revolving around, books are being dedicated to the subject. Though there are some scholarly works by Adin Steinsaltz, the late Aryeh Kaplan, and Moshe Idel, the majority of the literature generate recently reveal general characteristics of the New Age Spirituality movement mostly based around individual practices and beliefs. These characteristics include a kind of embodied global spirit, a spiritual transformation, the use of meditative and healing techniques to achieve this transformation or for a "higher" self, and the use of scientific language. These characteristics seem to be at the core of the Kabbalah Center. This is not to say that at no time did the Jewish faith include some of these aspects historically, however, the new phenomena of picking these characteristics out of the foundations of the religious faith and group is unique.[119]

Conclusions

Harkening back to Gershom Scholem's claim that there are non-rational forces and an emphasis on myth in Jewish religion and tradition and with all the allotted evidence from prophecy to daily and community meditative states, it is reasonable to claim the important role of meditation in Jewish tradition. Moreover, there is an abundant amount of resources suggesting the theory and practice of meditation throughout historical Judaism. Though these meditation systems appear to be transmitted orally often exclusively within fraternities, there are key references and contributions to these systems throughout Jewish literature as far back as the Jewish Bible. In his book *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Rabbi Moshe Idel confirms speculations that traditions revolving around or involving meditation were transmitted orally through letters and later, books written during the Kabbalistic period of mysticism.[120]

Despite the amount of research done by Aryeh Kaplan and Gershom Scholem among others, scholars defend the non-rational mysticism found within Judaism, but often borrow terms from other traditions. In much of Kaplan's work, there seems to be an appropriation of the need to borrow terms

[119] For a more information on New Age Spirituality and its characteristics see the "New Age Spirituality" section in *Religion and Anthropology* by Brian Morris , published by Cambridge University Press.
[120] *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* Pp. 130

like “mantra” or “enlightenment” for the explication of Jewish meditation, yet these borrowed terms are not necessary. Scholem, too, associates the *Merkava* tradition with “Gnostic” spirituality which is almost indefinable for most as it is a dumping ground for all practices and theories that do not fit in to the mainstream of a religion. The use of Gnosticism in relation to the *Merkava* tradition is unnecessary then since research and understanding of the texts reveal it to be a part of the mainstream Judaism despite its secretive nature. Further, Jewish mysticism is a distinctly different category of mysticism not easily lumped into other mystic traditions. There is no mystical union between the Creator and the Creation, rather a distinct Otherness is maintained. Sometimes in his books regarding Jewish meditation, Kaplan makes claims to this state of union with no foundation in texts or commentaries. A clear example of Kaplan’s appropriation is, “In order to attain the meditative state which unifies man and God, the prophets and their disciples would make use of various types of music and song.”[121]

Though the past couple of centuries have produced a re-envisioned Jewish history and faith, a second look shows this phenomenon. Throughout the history of Judaism, there is a close link between mysticism, meditation, and magic. These tendencies are intrinsically woven together from the non-rational beginnings of myth according to Scholem to the multidimensional nature of the Kabbalah to the often magical tales of Hasidic Masters to modern interest in pop Jewish mysticism in New Age spirituality. Even with Scholem’s attempt to reveal these tendencies, he also promoted a scholarly, secular study of the Kabbalah. That is to say, Scholem was not in favor of adopting the mystical practices of his predecessors. Kaplan, on the other hand, wished to preserve the meditation systems not just for scholarly purposes, but for future generations to practice.

In the prophetic and *Merkava* traditions, long periods of preparations and purification rites of fasting and solitude could be anywhere from twelve to forty-two days which were all required before

[121] *Meditation and the Bible*. Pp 7

the practice of *hitbodedut*. The traditions of Abraham Abulafia and Isaac Luria also had their own conceivably less severe practices, while in Hasidic communities in the nineteenth century, one could go out into the field or even in one's bed and converse with God through *hitbodedut*. Kaplan makes the intriguing point near the end of *Meditation and Kabbalah* that, "Looking at the entire field of meditation from a historical viewpoint, we find that the closer one gets to the present, the less dangerous and more universal methods become."[122] Noting the scope of the practice of meditation in Jewish history, the methods employed by the *Merkava* tradition and later on to Abraham Abulafia are considered advanced and required years of practice while the Ari's and especially the Baal Shem Tov's teaching become increasingly gentle in their approach. Following this logic, Nachman's method of direct correspondence is the most universal though difficult in its own right.

Ultimately, there are conceptions and characteristics that are distinctly unique within Jewish mysticism. The use of names and the sacredness of the Hebrew letters throughout all of these traditions reveal an unusually positive attitude toward language within the Jewish faith. Secondly, none of the literature denotes any sort of mystical union with God. Even before Maimonides stark philosophical claim of a remote, unknowable essence of God and the production of the conception of *Ein Sof*, the *Merkava* tradition never illustrates any union with God. God remains distinctly Other in all visions and meditation systems. What is valued, however, is the perception of experiencing God's glory through prophecy, sacred Hebrew letters, or creation stories. Finally, for the most part, a broad generalization of mysticism is the movement from below to above. In Jewish mysticism and practices of meditation, reveal the movement from above to below as God must lower Himself to reveal His attributes. Similarly, the *Merkava* tradition described the journey to the Chariot and Throne of God as a descent. These conceptions stand counter to what is normally described as mysticism.

[122] *Meditation and Kabbalah* Pp. 306

Many people – even particularly rabbis and Jews themselves – are surprised to even hear of "Jewish meditation" as it is thought of as something from the "East." There is still much more to be said about and more research needed to be conducted to further understand the often speculative mysticism within Judaism. What may be seen from current research is that systems of meditation in Judaism were not practiced by small groups of occult individuals, but rather was an important part to mainstream Judaism. That is to say, those non-rational aspects were not shoved in to a side corner for occasional purpose, but were center stage among the philosophical traditions in Judaism. Bearing this in mind, therefore, the theory and practice of meditation should be conceived as critical in understanding historical Judaism just like the rich intellectual and philosophical history of Judaism.

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