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Inner Peace through Inner Struggle in Abraham Abulafia's Ecstatic Kabbalah*

INTRODUCTION

The ecstatic Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia created a detailed system according to which inner struggle is an important component of Judaism. He was especially interested in the issue of the killing of imagination and, as we will see in upcoming discussions, was concerned with Neoaristotelian noetics in which the main combatants are the intellect and the imagination. This agonic type of religiosity that is necessary in the beginning allows for the emergence of the next step in his mystical path, the harmonic one, in which the actualized and 'liberated' intellect is capable of cleaving to a supernal intellect capable of receiving prophecy.

* This is a shortened chapter from a more comprehensive study dealing with the sources of the theme of the two wars and the storiola about the discussion between the warrior, or king, and the sage that exemplifies the superiority of inner combat over military war in the history of Jewish mysticism.

In the ensuing discussions, I will emphasize the experiential dimensions related to the ideas outlined above. However, it should be remembered that the dichotomy between the two inclinations and the two spiritual faculties were regarded by Abulafia as constituting a hermeneutical grid which allows the understanding of many biblical passages. In this aspect Abulafia illustrates what eventually develops in the 18th century Polish Hasidism: it is not only the Bible that aids in the understanding of religious life, but also vice-versa. Thus, only someone whose spiritual life is intense may come to the conclusion that the Bible is speaking eminently about psychological processes.

WAR IN EARLY JUDAISM

The Hebrew Bible is a document replete with descriptions of wars. Forefathers, priests, prophets and kings were not only spiritual and political leaders but also, at least occasionally, warriors. Physical power was sometimes seen as sufficiently dignified that lengthy descriptions were dedicated to it in the Bible, as in the story of Samson found in the Book of Judges. Precise rules relating to the manner in which wars should be waged have become part of the biblical commandments as obligatory religious forms of behavior. The importance of regulations concerning wars is still evident in the first major body of post-biblical Hebrew literature: the Qumran literature. However, with the destruction of the Second Temple, wars have become more a matter of sacred history rather than a contemporary reality. Rabbinic literature, whose first major steps coincided with the tragic defeat of the Jews by the Roman armies and the few subsequent abortive

revolts, projects wars in the apocalyptic future, when the ultimate warrior, the Messiah, will come and restore Jewish kingship.

However, as wars became theoretical as a religious matter, Rabbinic literature could not ignore the relative importance of this issue in its canonical writings. At least one of the wars mentioned in the Bible, such as that against the evil nation of Amalek, was conceived of as an obligation for all generations of Jews. Moreover, given the exegetical propensity of rabbinic and other forms of Jewish literature, the need to elucidate the Biblical treatments of this topic became essential. In fact, in some cases within rabbinic literature, and even more in apocalyptic writings since the late seventh century, wars played an important role in the era preceding the coming of the Messiah. Indeed, the Messiah was conceived of as a warrior whose military performances are unparalleled. For the vast majority of Jews, these future wars were part and parcel of their religious framework, just like the ancient wars recorded in the Bible.

However, the new and quite variegated circumstances into which Rabbinic and other forms of Judaism were propelled by historical developments did not encourage any development of theories regarding political military issues. Their present was shaped not by wars in which Jews played an active role, but by hostile warriors. Reluctance toward the potential religious importance of contemporary wars became more and more visible in Rabbinic Judaism. This reluctance was undoubtedly due to the hardships and war atrocities from which Jews suffered (as did part of the general population) as well as the special brutality with which Jews were sometimes treated in times of war. The ideal of peace moved more and more to the center of many discussions. To illustrate this shift, let

me point out that while in the Hebrew Bible God is called by the name a “Man of War,”¹ Rabbinic literature invented a new name for God: *Shalom*, peace.² Israel, Jerusalem, and the Messiah,³ central concepts and values in Judaism, have also been designated by this name.⁴

Furthermore, the weakening of the importance of military war also found its expression in cases where the Biblical wars have been treated in post-biblical Jewish literature.⁵ This is already evident in the Rabbinic understanding of war as dealing with the evil inclination, but even more so in medieval and pre-modern Jewish approaches. However, before turning to the Middle Ages, it should be noted that a process parallel to the Rabbinic one, in which the external wars become irrelevant for spiritual combat that takes place in remote areas, is also evident in early Christian asceticism. These Christian sources emphasized the importance of both battles: that against Satan as an external force and that against inner thoughts and impulses, which I will refer to as inclinations.⁶

¹ Exodus 15:3. For a comprehensive recent monograph on war in the Bible see Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For the different ways of interpreting this verse in various forms of Jewish literature in general and in Jewish mysticism in particular see Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* tr. Menachem Kallus, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 88-109 and the pertinent footnotes.

² See *Derekh 'Eretz Zuta*, Pereq ha-Shalom, ch. XI, 12, 14; and the view of Rashi in his commentary on *BT, Makkot*, fol. 23b. See also Shraga Abramson, *Mi-Pi Ba'alei Lashon* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1988), 191.

³ This is part of another, less important vision of this warrior-figure in Rabbinic Judaism.

⁴ See *Derekh 'Eretz Zuta*, *ibidem*.

⁵ See Aviezer Ravitzky, “Peace: Historical versus Utopian Models in Jewish Thought,” in *History and Faith: Studies in Jewish Philosophy*, (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1996), 22-45.

⁶ See Ignace Brianchaninov, *Introduction a la tradition ascetique de l'Eglise d'Orient*, trans. Hieromoine Symeon, (Sisteron: Editions Presence, 1978), 38, 76, 140, 251.

Though recommendations for restraint and praise for the fight against sins, vices or temptations are ubiquitous in many religions even for lay audiences, in the vast corpora of mystical literatures this issue moves much more to the center and becomes integrated into many mystical systems. Some developments found in Islam, especially in Sufism, are extremely important in relation to the war with inclinations in Jewish mysticism - an important issue whose main expressions and earlier sources will be dealt with elsewhere.⁷

WAR IN ECSTATIC KABBALAH:

In the last quarter of the 13th century a new school of Kabbalah emerged, especially in the vast literature of R. Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia [1240-c.1291]. His numerous and sometimes voluminous writings revolved around the importance of spiritual processes envisioned as induced by different types of mystical techniques, which he described in detail in four of his extant books.⁸ On the one hand, he follows Maimonides when he defines the nature of these inner processes. On the other hand, he adopts devices stemming mainly from the esoteric literature of Hasidei Ashkenaz, in order to articulate major components of his techniques. Abulafia conceived of internal, intellectual growth as the most important development in human life, and this process may culminate in an attainment imagined as prophecy and Messiahhood. For him, the

⁷ See the asterisk fn. above.

⁸ See Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. J. Chipman, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 13-52.

whole intention of the Bible was to point to this spiritual path.⁹ In order to reach the maximum spiritual achievement, one must subordinate the body and the lower internal senses to the intellect. Sometimes, this subordination is conceived of as images of war.

The problem that I shall attempt to deal with below is the relationship between three distinct paths or approaches to warship found in Abulafia's writings. One is the Rabbinic understanding of performing the commandments; the other is the war of the inclinations; and the last is Abulafia's mystical techniques. Although the relationship between these distinct paths, which are sometimes described independently, will be discussed, the main issue to be emphasized in this study is the status of "the war of the inclinations."

Abulafia resorts to images conveying the inner war in many places throughout his works, many more than any other Kabbalist I am acquainted with. He even composed an apocalypse based on this image. Given the significant volume of his writings, it is easier to extract from them a theory of spiritual combat that constitutes a basically Aristotelian interpretation of both the two-war theme, namely the view that there is both an inner and an outer war, and the significance of the war of the inclinations.

PARTICULAR SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS OF WAR:

What distinguishes Abulafia's thought from early discussions and most of the later discussions in Jewish spirituality is that in his case we may see an example of what I

⁹ Moshe Idel, "Abulafia's Secrets of the Guide: A Linguistic Turn," in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism, Dedicated to the Memory and Academic Legacy of its Founder Alexander Altmann*, eds. A. Ivry, E. Wolfson, A. Arkush, (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 289-329.

call particular spiritual exegesis. It is not only an exegetical exercise nor just a general description or a theoretical recommendation – it is also an inner event that is personally related to the writer. For example, an interesting passage is found in his apocalypse *Sefer ha-'Ot*, one of his prophetic books in which he describes his own messiahhood, in which he writes:

The war was hard within the heart, between blood and ink - and the blood is from the spirit - and the ink from dust, and the ink was victorious over blood - and the Sabbath overcome all the days of the week.¹⁰

The war mentioned here is a sort of *psychomachia* between the spiritual element in man, allegorized by blood, and the intellectual one, allegorized by ink. The battle between the two inner powers represented by blood and ink is one of the major topics of Abulafia's mystical path.¹¹ Sabbath, therefore, corresponds allegorically to the intellectual faculty in man that prevails over the spiritual one, which is conceived as being lower. However, the juxtaposition between the ink-dust-Sabbath string of concepts on the one hand, and blood-spirit-‘days of the week’ string on the other, is a metaphorical expression for what is conceived as the real struggle: that between the faculties of intellect and those of imagination. These two powers are the real spiritual factors, which

¹⁰ *Sefer ha-'Ot*, in A. Jellinek, ed., "*Sefer Ha-Ot*. Apokalypse des Pseudo-Propheten und Pseudo-Messias Abraham Abulafia," in *Jubelschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstage des Prof. Dr. H. Graetz*, (Breslau, 1887), 81. See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, ibidem, 97.

¹¹ See Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections, Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 438-444 and also Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), 139, 150, 209.

are referred to metaphorically by other, more traditional terms. In other words, the opposition of intellect/imagination, which is clearly of Aristotelian origins, organizes the meaning of many traditional Jewish terms in the oeuvres of both Maimonides and Abulafia. This dichotomy constitutes the exegetical grid for Abulafia's understanding of the highest religious processes.

It should be pointed out that much of the final part of *Sefer ha-'Ot* portrays in some detail a war between different kings, which has in its plain sense a messianic apocalyptic significance. However, this apocalyptic war is interpreted by the Kabbalist as dealing with the inner war that takes place within the psyche of man. Thus, we may speak about a double war, which is quintessential for the understanding of his writings: the apocalyptic-external war, and the spiritual, inner one. The first draws upon earlier sources describing the wars of the Messiah that the Kabbalist, following the Jewish apocalyptic traditions, created in his imagination. Although Abulafia creates his own apocalyptic scenario, he also interprets it in psychological-philosophical terms:

What is their end, because he is one of your nations.¹² And I have ascended to the mountain of judgment and come close to the elder man. And I fell on my face towards the earth before his legs. And he placed his two hands upon me and he made me stand up upon my legs before him and [then] said to me: 'My son, blessed is your coming,

¹² I assume that there is a hint to the name Israel that is one of the designations of the Agent Intellect in Abulafia's writings. See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, *ibidem.*, 36, 38, 40, 110, 120.

peace, peace¹³ unto you and on all who love you, because you have been saved¹⁴ from the war, and you succeeded in all My wars'.¹⁵

For Abulafia, the two wars are different from the distinctions in the two-war *storiola*, found in several medieval sources dealing with the Grand and the Small wars, including R. Bahya ibn Paqudah's *Hovot ha-Levavot*¹⁶, where the emphasis is upon the difference between the military and the spiritual combat¹⁷. One of the two wars is a matter of imagination, a faculty in which the apocalyptic drama is represented by various kings who struggle with each other. The other war is the allegorical meaning of this vision, which is hinted at by Abulafia. However, it is important to point out the personal aspects of those visions. They are related to the author of the apocalypse - Abraham Abulafia.

Moreover, since Abulafia believed that he is the Messiah, or at least a messianic figure who plays a role in his apocalyptic vision,¹⁸ he is likely to be the fifth king that is identified with the Messiah. This affinity is pointed out by a linguistic strategy: the term in Hebrew for "the fifth" consists of the same consonants as "My Messiah." Indubitably,

¹³ *Shalom, Shalom*. For the sequel war-peace see more in the last section below.

¹⁴ *Nitzalta*. This is a pun on *nitzahta*, "you succeeded," which appears later on in the text.

¹⁵ *Sefer ha-'Ot*, 84. About this passage see also Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 89-90; idem, *The Mystical Experience*, 118.

¹⁶ V:5; *The Book of the Direction of the Duties of the Heart*, trans. Menahem Mansoor (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 276-277; R. Yehudah ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation, *Hovot ha-Levavot*, (Tel Aviv: Mahbarot le-Sifrut, ND), 357.

¹⁷ This issue will be dealt with in detail elsewhere.

¹⁸ See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 58-100.

this is an interesting example of particular spiritual exegesis. The assumption of new, basically theophoric names for himself is part of Abulafia's understanding that he and his students advance on this mystical path and their new mystical achievement demands a new name.¹⁹ The messianic context is clear. Resorting to the historical-eschatological scheme found in Daniel, which presupposes four kingdoms, Abulafia sees the wars between them as the precondition for the emergence of the fifth king, a pun on *Hamiyshiyy-Meshiyhiyy*, which is none other than Abulafia himself.

Nevertheless, this external plot should be understood on two levels: the imaginary-dramatic one, dealing with wars between Christian, Muslim, Mongol kings and the Messiah; and the intellectual-spiritual one, dealing with the development of the intellect, after a war with the other inner powers (presumably the humors). However, unlike the other prophetic books which have been lost but whose commentaries authored by Abulafia have been preserved, *Sefer ha-'Ot* is a prophetic treatise whose original text has been preserved without a commentary, as if to say that a spiritual commentary should be extrapolated by the intelligent reader. In other words, the hermeneutical grid constituted by intellect and imagination is not mentioned explicitly in the text of *Sefer ha-'Ot* even though it organizes its discourse. Indeed, as we learn from another important discussion in one of Abulafia's prophetic books, the term Messiah functions on both the historical and the intellectual level.²⁰

¹⁹ See idem, *The Mystical Experience*, 200-201.

²⁰ See idem, *The Messianic Mystics*, 65-70.

JUDAISM AS A TEACHING OF THE WAR WITH EVIL INCLINATION IN ECSTATIC KABBALAH:

On one level, Abulafia was interested in keeping the traditional Jewish theory of the conflict between inclinations as valid in its plain sense. On another level of meaning, namely the allegorical-philosophical plane, it stands for a struggle that should be conceptualized by resorting to philosophical concepts as the spiritual, hidden meaning of those Jewish terms. So, for example, we find an important passage dealing with our topic which does not refer even once to a philosophical term:

But someone whose God is within him in order to help him in his war and his good inclination prevails over the evil inclination so that it binds it in strong cables lest he will escape from its control any time and no hindrance will be found from its side against the behavior in general or in any of its parts. He will exercise his rule over things as he needs and according to his true benefits. It is not necessary for him to levy the war against it all the time since the strong war has been already accomplished at its outmost, and the power, which stands against its master, is weakened. Then the good inclination rides over the evil inclination as someone who rides over a big camel²¹ and rules over it always as he desires and as he wants. ...And the man that has been described has already clothed himself with royal garments²² and

²¹ There is an appropriation here of Maimonides's understanding of the passage from *Pirquei de-Rabbi 'Eliezer*, ch. 13, in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:20.

²² Abulafia resorts to the ancient Rabbinic theory of three crowns: of kingship, of priesthood and of Torah. See *'Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* ch. 41. Abulafia allegorizes the three functions: that of the king, of the priest and of the rabbi, and attributes their combined status to someone who adopts his Kabbalah. For other interesting allegorizations of the concept of the great priest see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 94-97 and idem,

serves as a great priest worshipping his Creator in awe, and he is united with Him out of love. And he receives the crown of the Torah on his head forever. This is because of the great victory that he gained over the ‘great king’ while he himself is a miserable and wise child.²³ About him and other like him it is said that ‘The angel of the Lord are dwelling around those who fear Him and He will rescue them.’²⁴ And every man whose good inclination prevailed over his evil inclination is known by us that he overcome himself and the entire world is in a positive position.²⁵ ...And you, the sons of the Living God²⁶, look and see whether we had added or extracted anything, to [all we said] is written in the Torah and Prophets and Hagiography and their commentaries and in the six tracts of the *Mishnah* and their commentaries. Whatever is written in all those books does not deal but with the guidance of the above-mentioned behavior. They [teach] how to subdue the evil inclination under the good one, and all the intention of those [books] is one and single right directive, may God be prayed, just as we have said above. However, we have inquired in truth what is the better way to come close to the victory in this strong war. But what is written in the plain sense²⁷ of the [sacred] writings alone [does not

“*Hitbodedut*: On Solitude in Jewish Mysticism,” in *Einseimkeit: Archaeologie der literarischen Kommunikation VI*, eds. Aleida Assmann, Jan Assmann, (Munich: Fink, 2000), 195.

²³ Ecclesiastes 4:13. This verse is used in Rabbinic discussions referring to the evil inclination.

²⁴ Psalms 34:8.

²⁵ This is not a literary translation.

²⁶ This book has been dedicated to four students whom he taught the *Guide of the Perplexed* in Capua in 1279/1280.

²⁷ On the issue of the plain sense in Abulafia’s thought see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 83-87.

suffice], because of our fear that we shall not be capable to stand against the warrior.²⁸

This seminal passage stems from one of Abulafia's three commentaries on the thirty-six secrets that he surmised are found in *Guide of the Perplexed*. Not all the formulations in this passage are transparent; nevertheless, we may perceive the elitist overtone and the fear that plain sense is not sufficient for someone who strives for a 'surer' type of religious experience. Although Abulafia expressly assumes that he has a better alternative, he nevertheless is capable of formulating his views without resorting to philosophical concepts. However, it is obvious from the above passage that the traditional discussions indeed deal with spiritual combat as a major topic but are not totally sufficient; Abulafia therefore attempts to ensure the victory in the inner war by his own inquiry.

Of utmost importance for our topic here is the Kabbalist's stand that the inner war is found at the very core of the Sacred Scriptures and that his own literary activity is intended to strengthen this spiritual concern. Moreover, as he pointed out expressly, he attempts to complement the traditional way of life in order to improve the manner of struggling with the evil inclination. Abulafia's technique was imagined to do so, as we have seen at the beginning of this section. However, although Abulafia is correct to a certain extent about the importance of the inner war in some Rabbinic sources, this is hardly the general picture of the biblical material, and even not an overall proper

²⁸ *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fols. 172b-173a. See also a similar stand in 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz, 168.

description of the majority of Rabbinic sources.²⁹ The main structure of Rabbinic Judaism is based upon the firm belief in the efficacy of the rituals for achieving a religiously perfect way of life and the demand to implement them *de facto*. According to the above passage, however, Abulafia conceives inner combat to be the ultimate path for achieving the three most important ‘crowns’ and sees his own path as an even better way of attaining the same goals as the Rabbinic path.

I have proposed to see a nomian approach in the Rabbinic emphasis on the importance of the performance of the commandments and in its later reverberations.³⁰ The Rabbinic discussions of the details in the biblical commandments, their own innovations in matters of rituals, and the interpretations and elaborations of those discussions found in the vast medieval literatures – the Halakhic and most of the philosophical and Kabbalistic ones – are part of this nomian approach. I propose to see in the nomian approach a more harmonistic attitude to religion, one in which the agonic approach plays only a secondary role.

Abulafia’s passage, dealt with above, is the more general of his writings as a whole and represents an anomian approach. What he presents to his readers as an

²⁹ On the war with the *Yetzer* in Rabbinic literature see G.H. Cohen Stuart, *The Struggle in Man Between Good and Evil, An Inquiry into the origin of the Rabbinic concept of Yeser Hara*, (Kampen: J.J. Kok, 1984); Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel, Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 62-68, 74-75. I am not acquainted with a conceptualization of Judaism as proposing its entire ritualistic system as an antidote *tavlin*, to the evil inclination. Such a statement is known in the context of the Torah alone. See, e.g., *Sifri`Egev*, par. 9. As to the rituals, it is only insofar as the permission to take as spouse the beautiful woman that is a prisoner taken during a voluntary war that the formulation that the Torah allowed this type of marriage in order to counteract the evil inclination is found. I shall elaborate on this topic more in my monograph mentioned in the asterisk fn. above. However, to my best knowledge, Abulafia never resorted to those Rabbinic discussions as proof texts for his more comprehensive view.

³⁰ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 74-75; idem, *Sha`arei Tzedeq*, 113-117, 144-163.

improved way is a technical path which, in its details, has very little to do, if anything at all, with the Rabbinic emphasis on the performance of the commandments.³¹ The main emphasis found in Abulafia's writing is on the path to self-transformation, to apotheosis (namely the mystic's becoming a god-like figure), and to self-redemption via a sacramental manipulation of language and the development of intellectual comprehension. By the term sacramental I imply here the assumption that the experiential aspect of religion may be actualized by a very precise recitation of letters, most of which have no meaning, as part of a spiritual technique. As part of this path, Abulafia interprets the textual elements of the biblical, Rabbinic and even philosophical material as pointing to the nature and manner of attaining his ideals. He also interprets the linguistic formulations of the commandments showing that, to him, their performance was not fraught with the same religious valence as in the nomian approach.

Let us turn to a major point found in *Sitrei Torah*,³² in which the spiritual combat is described in a manner of being able to culminate in a spiritual coronation. Accordingly, the struggle may be decided in a manner that does not require additional efforts, since the evil inclination has been defeated (perhaps in a definitive manner). If so, the implicit understanding of the commandments as intended to help man in his struggle constitutes

³¹ I propose to distinguish between discussions dealing with the details of the commandments as implying objects and forms of performance on the one hand, and the discussions dealing with the details of the linguistic expressions of those commandments on the other hand. Thus, the requirement to study the commandments, which is indeed recurrent in Abulafia's writings, does not necessarily mean that their performance also played the same role in his Kabbalistic system. This is an issue that I cannot enter into in the present framework, but is vital for the proper understanding of Abulafia's attitude toward the biblical-Rabbinic commandments.

³² *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 159b, ed. A. Gross (Jerusalem, 2002), 149-150.

an instrumental perception. Therefore, in principle, it is possible to envision a situation where someone has already subdued his evil inclination and has become crowned, rendering the performance of the commandments superfluous. I assume that this is the proper understanding of the *Sitrei Torah* passage. However, in a later book, Abulafia adopts what seems to be, *prima facie*, a different approach.

In his *'Or ha-Sekhel*, Abulafia describes, in the context of the spiritual combat, the relationship between someone who has already reached the supreme mystical attainment and the commandments.³³ Indubitably, this is another important passage dealing with the evil inclination. According to formulations that are found here, commandments should be performed all the time, even by the *perfectus*, since the danger of the temptation of the evil inclination haunts man during his entire life. Here, like in the passage from *Sitrei Torah*, is a strong affinity between the commandments and the evil inclination. However, in *Sitrei Torah* it is possible to transcend the ordinary human condition and to get rid of the evil inclination, rendering the commandments unnecessary in a certain moment of supreme experience. This earlier stand, formulated in 1280, is congruent with the stand articulated some years later in his longest book *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, written in 1285, which deals with the multitude as the main addressees of the commandments and the view that it is the multitudes [*beinoniyim*] that keep the commandments.

³³ *'Or ha-Sekhel*, ed. A. Gross, (Jerusalem: 1961), 22. See the different view regarding this discussion and its meaning in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 225-226. For the assumption that Abulafia quotes from a source I did not detect to the effect that someone preoccupied solely with the Torah is exempted from performing the commandments see below fn. 44.

In *'Or ha-Sekhel*, written in-the-between (perhaps around 1282), it seems as if Abulafia changed his mind and conceives the performance of the commandments as always strictly necessary for maintaining the proper equilibrium between a subdued evil inclination and the ruling good one. Here, Abulafia appears to be quite traditional, in line with the Rabbinic nomian stand, and may even be described as a hypernomian figure as Wolfson would put it.³⁴ However, I assume that this conservative stand does not reflect the esoteric intention of Abulafia even in the passage from *'Or ha-Sekhel* that is under scrutiny here. Immediately after the above passage, the ecstatic Kabbalist writes as follows:

What shall I add [that what it was already said] concerning the issue of all the commandments³⁵, since I know that you are intelligent [and] understand the intention of God concerning all the commandments after this remark that is hinting at in this second part? And if not³⁶, all I am singing³⁷ in your ears concerning the keeping of the commandments is like singing³⁸ in front of statues.³⁹

³⁴ Wolfson, *ibid.*

³⁵ The assumption that all the commandments have the same intention is an important hypothesis since it assumes some form of homogeneity that is not always the case in Abulafia's thought. See, e.g., the passage translated and discussed in Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, 56-57, and what I wrote on 121. This totalizing vision may hardly allow for the emergence of the literary genre of commentaries dealing with the rationale of the commandments, in his writings or in those of his students. See, however, the different assumption found in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, where quite often each and every commandment is envisioned as related to another aspect in the divine world or to different theurgical processes. For an important instance in which "all the commandments" are described as dealing, on their esoteric level, with matters of the soul see R. Abraham ibn Ezra's long commentary on Exodus 16:28.

³⁶ Namely if the students will not understand his hints.

³⁷ Though Abulafia is using the verb *NGN* here, which means in most of the medieval sources, instrumental music or melody, the ecstatic Kabbalist resorts to a rare meaning of the root as vocal singing in his writings. Thus he changes the meaning of his source, the Hebrew translation of the *Guide of the*

This enigmatic finale should be understood, in my opinion, as pointing to some form of esoteric intention that underlies the long passage about the performance of the commandments. What is the meaning of the phrases “singing in your ear” and “singing in the front of statues”? Why is Abulafia mentioning some form of oral instruction? To be sure, this emphasis on the importance of orality is not just a matter of rhetoric. *’Or ha-Sekhel* was dedicated to two of his students, R. Nathan ben Sa’adyah and R. Abraham ben Shalom, with whom he remained in contact for several years after writing this book.⁴⁰ This means that an oral explanation of an esoteric teaching was not a theoretical matter in Abulafia’s school, at least not in this specific case.⁴¹

On the basis of hints at some esoteric meaning that should not be written down in the above passages and elsewhere,⁴² it may be surmised that instead of assuming the existence of different approaches in Abulafia’s writings, we may allow the existence of

Perplexed (see the next fn.), where it is quite clear that instrumental music is intended. It should be mentioned that in some manuscripts this verb is missing, leaving the nature of the communication with the student open: it may be singing or just speaking into someone’s ear, namely delivering an esoteric message. There are also differences between manuscripts insofar as the ear is in singular or plural.

³⁸ Playing in the front of statues is mentioned as an idolatrous practice attributed by Maimonides to the Sabbaens. See his *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:30.

³⁹ *’Or ha-Sekhel*, 22-23.

⁴⁰ On this issue see Idel, *Sha’arei Tzedeq*, 30-32.

⁴¹ See additional material collected and analyzed in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 69-70; Idel, “Transmission in the Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah,” in eds. Y. Elman - I. Gershoni, *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality, and Cultural Diffusion*, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2000), 138-164.

⁴² See, e.g., the important statement found in *’Otzar ’Eden Ganuz*, 1:2, 90 where those who perform the commandments are described as a middle category, *beinoniyim* or *ha-naqshiyim*, between the intelligent or the illuminati, *ha-sikhliyim*, and the corporeal men or *ha-gufiyim*. I hope to deal with this issue elsewhere in more detail. It will suffice to pay attention to this seminal passage alone in order to question the plausibility of a hypernomian understanding of Abulafia’s thought. See also *Mafteah ha-Tokhahot*, 122-123.

two sharply conflicting views in his writings. One, an exoteric traditional view which conceives the performance of the commandments as always quintessential since the evil inclination will never be overcome; and another, an esoteric stand which attributes to the commandments solely an instrumental role. The latter stand is much more congruent with the theory concerning the possibility of some form of apotheosis and a substantial transformation of the mystic, as well as with the nature of the mystical techniques proposed by Abulafia.

Moreover, according to an earlier passage found in *'Or ha-Sekhel*, Abulafia mentions explicitly a theory according to which the faculty of imagination, which is identified there with the evil inclination, does not operate during the old age of men.⁴³ On the exoteric level, this stand may have been adduced only in order to refute it. However, I assume that this possibility constitutes a major clue for the proper understanding of Abulafia's esoteric stand. By claiming the possible obliteration of this inclination, at least in principle, the necessity of the commandments is undermined, at least insofar as moments in human life are concerned. Nevertheless, Abulafia contradicts the disappearance of the evil inclination immediately afterwards. Thus, at least in principle, we may assume that the ecstatic Kabbalist envisioned the possibility of moments in the life of man in which the evil inclination is subdued and thus the performance of the commandments is implicitly not necessary. In the same context, Abulafia expresses the

⁴³ *'Or ha-Sekhel*, 17. This is quite an interesting statement, which deserves a more detailed analysis, which should take in consideration Abulafia's and others' views that the age of forty is the moment when the intellect arises due to the weakening of the bodily operations. See Moshe Idel, "On the History of the Interdiction against the study of Kabbalah before the Age of Forty," *AJS Review* 5 (1980), (Hebrew Section) 1-20. On the opposite view, that it is possible to annihilate the imagination, see above fn. 43.

view that the commandments are instrumental for later attaining an intellectual achievement.⁴⁴ Therefore, there are significant contradictions on the same page of Abulafia between the traditional, sacramental understanding of the Rabbinic commandments and the instrumental understanding of those commandments. This stark contradiction invites the possibility that one of these stands represents an esoteric understanding.

Since I doubt that a traditional attitude toward the performance of the commandments may constitute an esoteric stand, I propose to see in Abulafia's view an instrumental role attributed to the performance of the commandments. By this kind of role I mean that the performance of the Rabbinic commandments is seen as helping to shape the life of a person in a manner that allows him to reach a mystical experience by means of the techniques Abulafia described in his handbooks. Or, to formulate these affinities in a sharper manner, the commandments prove helpful in achieving a better result in the war of the inclinations. This inner war is important in preparing the ground for the mystical techniques, which are conducive to a variety of experiences, unitive or revelatory. Though this proposed sequence of stages represents the gist of Abulafia's thought, as I understand it, this does not mean that sometimes there are no overlapping cases, such as in the use of the linguistic techniques, in order to kill the power of

⁴⁴ 'Or ha-Sekhel, 22. Compare to the view quoted in 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz, 84, according to which whoever is preoccupied with the Torah as his profession, *Torato 'Umanuto*, he is exempted of all the commandments found in the Torah. Abulafia cites this view using a general reference: 'amru: 'they said'. For the time being I am unable to detect such a far-reaching stand. To be sure: for Abulafia the Torah study is not identical to what we find in Rabbinic sources but, according to some instances in his writings and of R. Isaac of Acre, some form of combining letters. See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 115. The fact that the study of the Torah is involved here prevents me from describing Abulafia as an antinomian Kabbalist.

imagination. I assume that those techniques were conceived as efficient on more than one level: namely, as part of the warfare on the one hand, and as capable of creating some form of imaginary anthropoid related to the concept of the *Golem* on the other; and last but not least, in order to induce mystical experiences of different sorts.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Let me attempt to characterize Abulafia's attitude to the spiritual combat in the more general context of Jewish thought. First and foremost it should be pointed out that Abulafia did not derive his main topics in his mysticism from his two most important speculative sources. I am not acquainted with the occurrence of this theme neither in Maimonides' philosophical writings nor in Neoaristotelian medieval philosophies. Neither does this theme, to the best of my knowledge, occur in the esoteric literature of Hasidei Ashkenaz. It is plausible to assume that R. Bahya ibn Paqudah's discussion of the *milhemet ha-yetzer*, namely the war with the inclination, contributed something to Abulafia's discussion and choice of terminology. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that although he was probably aware of this phrase, he changed it grammatically and shifted the arena of the combat from the Neoplatonic concern with the soul to the Neoaristotelian concern with the intellect. In any case, the resort to the plural form may also be connected to the manner in which this war has been expressed in medieval European culture: 'the war of passions'.

While striving to spiritualize and interiorize the nature of religious life as much as possible, Abulafia never, to the best of my knowledge, resorted to R. Bahya ibn

Paqudah's concept of 'the duties of the hearts'.⁴⁵ Maimonidean in his approach on the one hand, and preferring other anchors of spirituality such as the development of the intellect and manipulation of language on the other hand, Abulafia was less concerned with the introspective propensity of Bahya, which is more oriented toward Sufism and Neoplatonism. In fact, like Maimonides, he almost totally ignored Bahya, aside from two instances: in the first he claimed to have studied his book and in the second instance he enumerated it among other ethical-philosophical books.⁴⁶ Like Maimonides, Bahya was also uninterested in various linguistic techniques which stemmed from *Sefer Yetzirah* and other ancient sources and which Abulafia learned from Ashkenazi texts and their earlier Jewish and non-Jewish sources. In his writings, Abulafia emphasizes that the supreme spiritual attainments are achieved by means of operating with letters. Such an assumption is quite consonant with the emphasis he put on his mystical path as both a technique to combat the evil inclination and to attain unitive and revelatory experiences. In my opinion, the sacramentalization of linguistic manipulations as part of his mystical techniques has replaced the sacramentalism of the commandments as it is conceived of in Rabbinic thought and practice.

As pointed out above, Abulafia was following Maimonides and had consequently revised the mythical aspects of the concept of evil inclination as found in Rabbinic literature, where this inclination is sometimes identified with an "objective" Satan or

⁴⁵ On this concept and its sources in Islam, and perhaps earlier in Christianity, see Amos Goldreich, "The Possible Arabic Sources of the Distinction between the Duties of the Limbs versus the Duties of the Hearts," (Hebrew) *Te'udah* vol. 6 (1998), ed. A. Dotan, 179-208.

⁴⁶ *Ve-Zot li-Yehudah*, ed. Adolph Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik*, (Leipzig: 1853), Erstes Heft, 18; 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz, 106. For Maimonides' neglect of R. Bahya see Goldreich, *ibidem*, 205.

angel of death. Through this process, Abulafia created an interiorized form of religiosity.⁴⁷ However, Maimonides, unlike Abulafia, was what I propose to have been a member of the primary elite.⁴⁸ He did everything in his power to avoid accentuating the inherent tensions between a religion that sees as its peak an intellectual attainment, drawn from Greek-Arabic sources,⁴⁹ and a religion based upon the performance of commandments as Rabbinism is.⁵⁰ For the great eagle⁵¹ the commandments, or at least some of them, have propaedeutic valences. They help people in some historical circumstances to restrict some forms of idolatrous worship.⁵² It would be interesting to see if we may find in Maimonides instances of a significant continuum between the performative aspect of the commandments and the intellectual attainments to which they are allegedly conducive.

⁴⁷ On interiorization-processes in Judaism see the important monograph of Ron P. Margolin, "The Interiorization of Religious Life and Thought at the Beginning of Hasidism: Its Sources and Epistemological Basis" (Hebrew) (PhD thesis, Hebrew University, 1999).

⁴⁸ See M. Idel, "Kabbalah and Elites in Thirteenth-Century Spain," *Mediterranean Historical Review*, vol. 9 (1994), 5-19; idem, "The Kabbalah's Window of Opportunities, 1270-1290," *Me'ah She'arim, Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, eds. E. Fleisher, et al., (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 2001), 171-208.

⁴⁹ See Amira Eran, "Intellectual Modifications in Maimonides' Model of Prophecy," *Trumah*, vol. 12 (2002), 149-161.

⁵⁰ For different scholarly approaches to Maimonides' understanding of the role of commandments and their rationales see Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 356-514; Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998); M. Idel, "Sitre 'Araiyyot in Maimonides' Thought," *Maimonides and Philosophy*, eds. S. Pines and Y. Yovel, (Dordrecht, 1986), 79-91.

⁵¹ "The great eagle" is a name given to Maimonides by his followers in recognition of his greatness and intellectual leadership.

⁵² See Moshe Halbertal, Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. N. Goldblum, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 108-136.

More than imparting some forms of religious knowledge, the performance of the commandments is envisioned as removing false information or imaginary conceits. They may create the proper condition for attaining the intellectual overflow without providing the intellectual insights obtained from the supernal world. This tension between the performative and the intellectual religious centers of gravity has been minimized in Maimonides' conceptual system and he attempted to conceal it as much as possible. However, theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists detected the philosopher's inherent instrumentalist approach to the commandments, criticized it, and advocated a strong sacramental understanding which assumes that no Kabbalistic attainment is possible without fulfilling the different acts of performance.⁵³ They adopted and created a variety of strategies that explained the emergence of an ontic continuum: isomorphic theories that deal with parallelism between the human and the divine limbs and bodies. They assumed that the human soul is divine and thus is capable of having an impact on high. According to many statements since its earliest documents, the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah has 'ritualized' the divine realm, referring to it by terms related to rituals – a strategy totally alien to Abulafia's Kabbalah.⁵⁴

⁵³ See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 123-126.

⁵⁴ See Charles Mopsik's important monograph *Les grands textes de la cabale, Les rites qui font Dieu* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1993); Elliot R. Wolfson, "Mystical Rationalization of the Commandments in Sefer ha-Rimmon," *HUCA*, vol. LIX (1988), 217-251; idem, "Mystical-Theurgical Dimensions of Prayer in Sefer ha-Rimmon," *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times* vol. III (1988), 41-80; Boaz Huss, *Sockets of Fine Gold, The Kabbalah of Rabbi Shim'on ibn Lavi*, (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 2000), 192-211; Y. Lorberboim, "Imago Dei: Rabbinic Literature, Maimonides and Nahmanides" (Hebrew) (PhD thesis, Hebrew University, 1997); Y. Garb, "Power and Kavvanah in Kabbalah" (Hebrew) (PhD thesis, Hebrew University, 2000); Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, XIII-XV, 156-199; idem, "On Some Forms of Order in Kabbalah," *Daat* vol. 50-52 (2003), XL-XLV, LVI-LVIII; idem, "Nishmat 'Eloha, On the Divinity of the Soul in Nahmanides and in His School," *Ha-Hayyim ke-Midrash*, (Hebrew) eds. Sh. Arzi, M. Fechner,

Unlike Maimonides and some of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists, Abulafia, belonging to what I call the secondary elite, was much less interested in keeping some form of concord between the performative and the intellectual/prophetic modes of religiosity. He was much more concerned with formulating the premises for a kind of spirituality that combined the necessity to deal with the inner tension between human faculties on the one hand and the harmonistic attainment in which the human intellect adheres to a higher, separate intellect on the other. Abulafia has accepted a mentalist framework quite similar to that of Maimonides' approach but, unlike him, forged detailed techniques that were intended to accelerate the spiritual processes and culminate in experiences of mystical-intellectual union or spiritual apotheosis – experiences alien to the late Maimonides' thought. Nevertheless, he repeatedly tended to attribute to the great eagle an esoteric level, which also includes those techniques and experiences.

Abulafia's technique is based upon enhancing the importance of the manipulation of language, whose sacramental valences have previously been dramatically diminished in Maimonides' writings.⁵⁵ From this point of view, Abulafia's resort to philosophical allegories is substantially modified by the superimposition of the linguistic speculations and operations upon both the philosophical understanding of Judaism (basically

B. Kahana, (Tel Aviv: Yediyot Aharonot, 2004), 338-380 and my *Enchanted Chains, Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005). For differences between Abulafia's understanding of a commandment, *qorban*, sacrifice, and that of the closest Kabbalistic interpretation to his, namely R. Azriel of Gerona's view of the sacrifice, see Idel, ""On the Meanings," 42-45.

⁵⁵ On Maimonides' view of Hebrew language see Menachem Kellner, "Maimonides on the "Normality" of Hebrew," in *Judaism and Modernity, The Religious Philosophy of David Hartman*, ed. Jonathan W. Malino, (Aldershot, 2004), 413-444.

Maimonides) and a variety of other Jewish traditions based on performative-mythical approaches.⁵⁶ According to a seminal passage from *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, persons practicing different manipulations of the letters and divine names are described as *mehapphei ha-shemot* (i.e., those who create permutations of the letters of the divine names). These persons are distinct from and perhaps even superior to those who levy the war of the inclinations at the beginning of a more complex path.⁵⁷ I propose to see the two forms of spiritual preoccupations as part of a hierarchy which requires some form of victory over the evil inclination before resorting to the Abulafian techniques; the latter may culminate, according to Abulafia's *imaginaire*, into a mystical experience. In any case, the attainment of a prophetic experience is recurrently described by the ecstatic Kabbalist as triggered, in the last phase of his technique, by the combinations and recitations of letters and divine names and not by a victory in the war with inclinations.

Moreover, the main gist of Abulafia's allegoresis differs from the philosophical, more general, historically oriented allegories. Most of the philosophers, especially Maimonides, were strongly inclined to naturalize both the biblical and the Rabbinic phases of Judaism as much as possible. While ancient traditional material served as a starting point for introducing the naturalistic tendency of Greek thought into a religion

⁵⁶ See Idel, "Between Magic of Holy Names." See also his *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, 192, where Abulafia mentions the Torah and the commandments as paths to come closer to God and to distance from anything beside Him, but interprets them immediately as 'language'. This passage will be dealt with in some detail elsewhere. Abulafia and his follower R. Nathan conceived language as the highest ontic plane beneath God, and thus superior to anything else. See Idel, "On Some Forms of Order," XLV-XLVII, idem, "R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar," 52-57. Compare also to the highly significant passage found at the end of Abulafia's commentary on the Pentateuch, *Mafteah ha-Tokhahot*, 122-123.

⁵⁷ See 1:2; 60. The Hebrew phrase is *milhemet ha-yetzarim*.

based in Sacred Scriptures, for the ecstatic Kabbalist, the tools of philosophical allegory were intended to encourage and to reflect present, rather than past, psychological events related to the ancient Jewish prophets.⁵⁸ Though also exegetical, his allegories are more prescriptive in their tone than the dominantly descriptive philosophical approaches. Moreover, while Maimonides' thrust is mainly historical when he proposes rationales for the commandments (namely to counteract the idolatrous practices found allegedly only in the past), Abulafia puts the emphasis on the present, when Judaism is dealing with the ways of combating evil inclination.

Though not a sharp departure from Maimonides' philosophical scheme that was very much concerned with noetics too, Abulafia's mysticism nevertheless constitutes a shift in the center of gravity. Maimonides' sharp critique, counteracting astro-magic practices, which is based on the special qualities of objects, times, or places, remained beyond the ecstatic Kabbalist's major concerns. Abulafia accentuated the restructuring of the psyche after suppressing the passions and mastering the operation of imagination. It is worthwhile to point out that Abulafia, despite his many and sometimes voluminous treatises that are extant, only very rarely adduces Maimonidean historical rationales for the commandments. This is rather surprising for someone who wrote three commentaries on the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Even when commenting on the *Guide*, the ecstatic Kabbalist was concerned not so much with a comparative religious anthropology of the past as with creating a mystical valence for religion in the present. By creating an affinity

⁵⁸ See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, XVI-XVII. For a view of combining letters by Metatron, namely the Agent Intellect, understood in explicit prescriptive manner as some form of *imitatio* by the mystic see 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz, 105. See also Idel, *ibidem*, 38-41.

between the wars of the inclinations on the one hand and the role of the commandments on the other he escaped the historicist mold. While Maimonides anchored the emergence of the specificity of biblical rituals in what he presented as obsolete alien practices, those Jewish rituals as antidotes were, implicitly at least, medicines for a past, no longer threatening illness. He apparently strove to actualize the significance of the commandments as part of a much broader hierarchical scheme in which his own mystical path based on recitations of divine names and many other components including the attainment of the mental worship of God, were conceived of as transcending by far the importance of the traditional *modus vivendi*. A hierarchy of esoteric topics found already in ancient Judaism arranged the secrets of the incest as being lower than the account of creation and the account of the chariot as higher than the latter.⁵⁹ Abulafia followed this hierarchical scheme and said that the higher account that deals with combinations of letters is superior in status to the secret of incest in relation to the account of creation.⁶⁰ In a manner that is reminiscent of the above relationship, I propose to discern between those persons who levy the war with inclination as being lower than those who operate with letters. Unlike the later Maimonides' more disjunctive understanding of the relationship between those three secrets, Abulafia's attitude toward them is more conjunctive, assuming certain continuity between mastering the prior secret for the attainment of the later one. Nevertheless, the Kabbalist's understanding of the relationship between traditional performance and mystical technique is still quite hierarchical.

⁵⁹ See *M. Hagigah*, 2.1.

⁶⁰ See idem, "*Sitre `Arayiot*," 88-89.

The strong impact of the Neoaristotelian noetics of Maimonidean extraction in the Kabbalistic camp is unique, to the best of my knowledge, to ecstatic Kabbalah. For the purpose of our discussion, this Kabbalistic school is comprised not only of the writings of Abulafia but also those of his followers in Italy and Sicily as well as the early writings of the young R. Joseph Gikatilla in Castile and some of the Kabbalistic theories found in R. Isaac of Acre's writings. The vast majority of 13th century Kabbalists was, however, much less interested in the interiorized vision of religion and of concepts like Satan and the Angel of Death. This is evident when we compare Abulafia's numerous discussions about the inclinations to the marginality of these issues found in the theosophical and more mature writings of his former student, R. Joseph Gikatilla. For Gikatilla, just as for some other Kabbalists in Castile, the theurgical and mystical operations are less concerned with subduing the evil inclination, an issue to which they would certainly agree in principle. They strove to recreate a nexus between the human spiritual powers, designated as *nefesh*, *ruah*, *neshamah*, in order to be able to cleave on high or to influence the divine realm. When evil inclination is nevertheless mentioned in the writings of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists it oftentimes undergoes a process of hypostatization, which describes those concepts as referring to external powers with which man has to struggle in order to attain some forms of religious amendment.⁶¹ Thus, the mythical elements inherent in the Rabbinic discussions of those concepts have been considerably amplified. This process of externalization of the individual's evil inclination

⁶¹ My assumption, as I shall try to describe elsewhere, is that the process of externalization is not only a matter of an independent emphasizing some Rabbinic possibilities but also a reaction to the strong spiritualization of the evil inclination, and of religious life in general, as formulated in R. Bahya, Abulafia and other late antiquity and early medieval sources.

and of the sins triggered by it started in Abulafia's lifetime in the Spanish Kabbalah (especially in the *Zohar*) and reached a peak in Safedian Kabbalah in the Kabbalistic systems of both R. Moshe Cordovero and R. Isaac Luria.

Abulafia strove to put the Neoaristotelian concepts of imagination, intellect, and Agent Intellect at the core of his religious worldview. However, most of his contemporary and later Kabbalists, who include the two above-mentioned Safedian masters, were concerned with correlative theosophies – namely some form of interactive structures of the divine and the ritual as well as with baroque architectures of the sacred and their affinities to the performance of human rituals. For them, the main tension was less within human inner life than between man and a variety of external realities like the demonic, the angelic and the divine realms, or externalized vices and sins. These Kabbalists were ready, when not attacking these philosophical approaches *en bloc*, at most to subordinate them to their other religious concerns. The ecstatic Kabbalist was much more eager to allow them a major role in his Kabbalistic system and even to enhance their religious valences. By so doing he attenuated the dialectic relationship between the two inclinations that is characteristic of the Rabbinic perception,⁶² creating a starker opposition between them due to the distinct philosophical contrast between imagination and intellect, on the one hand, and sometimes identifying the two, on the other.⁶³ The coexisting extremes of differentiation and identification between the two

⁶² See, especially, the analysis of Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 62-68.

⁶³ See the following passage found in what I assume is part of his *Sefer Ge'ulah*, an early commentary on the secrets of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Ms. Jerusalem JNUL 8* 1303, fol. 72b. "According to my opinion, which is true, the good inclination is the very [essence of] the evil inclination, [the latter] has been

inclinations in the thought of the mystic create a wide range of possibilities to deal with the resulting tensions. This is the reason why the concept of spiritual war, or the war in the heart, is more evident in his writings than in those of most Jewish philosophers, the Kabbalists, and even most of the Hasidic masters I am acquainted with.

However, under the accumulative impact of the internalized visions of religion expounded in R. Bahya ibn Paqudah's *Hovot ha-Levavot* and in similar sources of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, it is possible to discern a shift toward a more internalized understanding of the inner struggle. This shift is visible in the Kabbalistic-ethical literature written since the mid-16th century and even more so in the vast literature of Polish Hasidism⁶⁴ where this issue again becomes, like in Abulafia's writings, a major spiritual concern. Thus, both the understanding of the phenomenology and of the history of the vast Kabbalistic and Hasidic literatures should take into consideration numerous sorts of interactions between heterogeneous mystical systems as well as the variety of concomitant developments that involve those different schools and their various interferences.

formed in man according to the secret of "wa-Yiytzer" [Genesis 2:7], which is spelled with two *yodim* to show that the two inclinations are in the secret of "YHWH 'Elohim" [ibidem]." In his 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz, 60 Abulafia describes the two inclinations as twins. In his *Hayyei ha-Nefesh* Abulafia describes the two inclinations as "brothers". See ed. A. Gross, 87, 113. While the *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'* passage deals with the differentiation of the effects stemming from a unified supernal source, and distinguished subsequently in accordance to the recipient, here the recipient itself is described as possessing the same unified nature which brings together the opposites. Indeed the correspondence between the two *yod*-letters and the two divine names occurring in the Genesis verse, Abulafia hints at, is pointing to a theory which brings together a dialectic ontology and a dialectic psychology that I cannot elaborate in this context. See also the anonymous ecstatic treatise *Sefer Ner 'Elohim*, 5-6, in Abulafia's *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, 87, and an anonymous writing of Abulafia himself, which will be described in detail elsewhere.

⁶⁴ On those issues see my forthcoming study mentioned in the asterisk fn. above.

Examining the metamorphoses of the inner combat that are characteristic to many parts of Jewish mysticism, we may discern that Abulafia's treatment represents the closest Kabbalistic variant of this topic to what is found in Jewish philosophy as well as a view closer to the more psychologically oriented tendencies which permeate the vast literature of Polish Hasidism. Nevertheless, those later Hasidic masters expanded the range of the deeds that may bring the mystic to an experience of union with God, emphasizing the importance of the commandments while allowing for worship by corporeality, *`avodah be-gashmiyyut*. Phenomenologically speaking, Abraham Abulafia went in quite a different direction. His type of Kabbalah substantially restricted the spectrum of the deeds that may facilitate the attainment of such an experience, including the efficacy of the performance of Rabbinic commandments, and created an alternative path.

It will be hard, if not impossible, to advance a balanced understanding of Abulafia's writings as a whole without first highlighting the centrality of the techniques to which he devoted some of his lengthiest and most influential books. At the same time, he did not compose, as many of his other contemporary Kabbalists did, a commentary on the rationales of the commandments.⁶⁵ Marginalizing discussions that deal with the details of the techniques amounts to reducing Abulafia's thought to commonplace - which in some cases is part of his exoteric views - while obliterating the importance of the most original parts of his writings. No doubt, his interpretations of the concept of the

⁶⁵ For the centrality of the techniques in Kabbalah in general, and the distinction between those adopted in ecstatic Kabbalah versus the theosophical-theurgical schools, see my monograph *Enchanted Chains*. The neglect of the integration of the centrality of Abulafia's techniques in the recent scholarly descriptions of his Kabbalah is rather surprising, and hardly addresses a coherent vision of his thought.

war with inclinations and its relationship to other forms of religious activities constitute significant parts of the most original contributions of his mystical thought. As a Kabbalist who interiorized the meaning of the Messiah, he did so also insofar as the warfare related to the experience of inner redemption is concerned⁶⁶ – a matter of exegetical treatment of earlier material and the very self-understanding of himself as a Messiah.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Abraham Abulafia created a detailed system according to which the inner warfare is an important component of Judaism. This approach emerged from the combination of some Rabbinic statements about the struggle, though never the war, with the evil inclination on the one hand, and some reverberations of the Platonic ideal of overcoming passions, as formulated in medieval Neoplatonism and Sufism, on the other. However, the ecstatic Kabbalist was not so much concerned with the issue of the passions or the war against them, which he considered an easier struggle than the killing of imagination.⁶⁷ As we have seen in many earlier discussions, he was concerned with Neoplatonic noetics in which the main combatants are the intellect and the imagination, and he interpreted the earlier sources accordingly. This agonistic type of

⁶⁶ For the interiorization of many parts of the traditional messianic complex of ideas in Abulafia see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 65-79.

⁶⁷ See, especially, in his *Gan Na`ul*, 58-59 where he describes an entire war between the divine power helping man and the legions of the demonic powers. This does not mean that the issue of passion, *ta'awah*, does not occur in Abulafia or in the writings of his students. See, e.g., *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, 116 and *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, 481-482. However, my assumption is that this is conceived of as a lower danger, and a relatively less perilous issue to confront. Interestingly enough, Abulafia never resorted to the phrase *milhemet ha-ta'awah*, as he avoided the phrase *milhemet ha-yetzer*, found in some earlier writings of Neoplatonic extraction.

religiosity that was necessary at the beginning of the path allowed the emergence of the next step in his mystical path, the harmonic one, in which the actualized and 'liberated' intellect is capable of cleaving to a supernal intellect.

To a certain extent, we have on the initial level a sort of *via purgativa* applied not to the soul but to the intellect, which has been complemented with an additional practice: combining letters of the divine name. In an important statement formulated in his last book, Abulafia describes the reception of the knowledge of the divine name as a phase following the achievement of the three types of perfection described in Avot 4:1, which also includes the subduing of the inclination. He explicitly claims that only after those three attainments is the way to receive prophecy open and that it is conditioned by the prior reception of that name.⁶⁸ I assume that this knowledge includes also the combinatory operations related to it. Elsewhere, the disclosure of a secret is determined by the prior mastering of the recipient's intellect over the inclination and its powers.⁶⁹ In other words, a strongly spiritualized understanding of philosophy, including Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, has been combined with a practical path (or techniques whose details stem from ancient and medieval Jewish sources) and is grounded in linguistic practices.

Last but not least, we have emphasized the experiential dimensions related to the above discussions. However, it should be remembered that the dichotomy between the two inclinations and the two spiritual faculties not only appears as part of the constructed

⁶⁸ See 'Imrei Shefer, 29-30. See also above fn. 63.

⁶⁹ See *Shomer Mitzvah*, ed. A. Gross, (Jerusalem: 2001), 34.

allegory as formulated in *Sefer ha-'Ot* and in a shorter discussion in *Gan Na'ul*,⁷⁰ but also in the allegorizations related to the sacred Scriptures. Unlike the vast majority of the discussions regarding psychomachia in Judaism and all the non-Jewish discussions that I am acquainted with, Abulafia regarded these dichotomies as constituting a hermeneutical grid which allows the understanding of many biblical passages. Here, once more, Abulafia comes closer to what eventually develops in Polish Hasidism. It is not only the Bible that helps the understanding of the religious life, but also vice-versa. Only someone whose spiritual life is intense may come to the conclusion that the Bible is speaking eminently about psychological processes.⁷¹

⁷⁰ *Gan Na'ul*, 59.

⁷¹ See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 121-124. On the difference between the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists' more positive attitude to the body and Abulafia's rather negative one, as well as some of the implications of this divergence see *ibidem*, XIII-XV; idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 18-19.