

FOUR

Transmission in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah

MOSHE IDEL

THE TRAIN OF TRANSMISSION

The study of the transmission of elements of culture, and their role in intellectual, religious, and other cultural change, may be carried out from various angles. Two in particular provide a salutary contrast to students of culture. On the one hand, there is *translatio studii*, the translation of the subject from one cultural sphere to another, one school of thought to another. In the case of religious change, elements are transferred from one religion to another and cause change so great as to generate the recognition that another religion has been produced or, in cases of lesser change, generate syncretistic phenomena. In any case, transmission is viewed abstractly, in a gross way; systems impinge on one another, interact and become transmuted.

On the other hand, cultural transmission and change may be viewed on the individual level, from the point of view of personal contacts, studying

two adjoining links in the chain of transmission. Only later on, perhaps much later on, does the work of a few individuals yield massive transformations, immense cultural alterations. For example, the appropriation of Muslim neo-Aristotelianism by medieval Jewish philosophy was primarily the work of Maimonides; in Renaissance Europe, the whole corpus of Platonic, Neoplatonic and Hermetic writings was made available — translated, annotated and published — by virtually one person, Marsilio Ficino.

These great cultural changes are rarely a matter of the transmission of esoteric oral lore, or initiation in ancient theological or mystical doctrines; more often, they are effected by translation and general teaching of written material. The role of personal contact is rarely so crucial as in the transmission of kabbalistic lore.

In this case, we may designate contacts as “micro-chains,” in contrast to the “macro-chains” of large-scale cultural change. The latter often involves massive ruptures, abandonment of what had prevailed in the recent past, and consigning eternal verities to the proverbial “dustbin of history” — often in an amazingly short space of time. In the case of the former, transmission involves more than trading information, translation of texts, and the appropriation of new ideas. As a precondition of all the above, and as the basis for what was to come, a certain type of new understanding of the significance of one’s religious life had to be inculcated. Indeed, the crucial role of the master-adept relationship has stood at the center of a whole series of studies of the social context of mystical knowledge.¹

In the following, I will restrict my analysis of this phenomenon to one century and one cultural orbit, namely, thirteenth-century Spain. In this way I hope to be able to draw some preliminary distinctions in an area which is still a *terra incognita* in the study of Jewish mysticism: the concept of esotericism, and the manner in which esoteric concepts have been transmitted, or have been conceived to have been transmitted.

My primary concern is to examine the importance of one type of transmission, that is, oral transmission, during the first generation of Spanish kabbalists. Kabbalah, the major form of medieval Jewish mysticism, emerged in the thirteenth century and produced a large variety of voluminous documents that can be studied in some detail.² In these documents the direct transmission of esoteric lore is mentioned time and again. But my

concern here is not to prove the existence of earlier esoteric concepts or techniques, transmitted orally before being reduced to written form in the thirteenth century, important as such a subject may be for the history and prehistory of Kabbalah.

Here I am primarily concerned with how the kabbalists themselves viewed the importance of such transmission, and not, at least at this point, with the actual rituals of transmission, on the one hand, or the question of to what extent these ideas mirrored the reality of transmission.³ In short, my concern is more with the rhetoric of transmission, the image of an esoteric tradition, than its actual praxis. I shall thus ignore the question of the actual transmission of esoterica in early kabbalistic circles,⁴ and concentrate my attention on the meaning of such transmission in various kabbalistic schools of the thirteenth century.

In order to highlight the unique character of this transmission, I will briefly compare some aspects of it to what transpires in modern scientific endeavor. Though these two areas of knowledge are radically different in terms of both the object of research and the methodologies adopted to carry forth that study, they are structurally similar in ways vital to both, and a comparative approach similar to that proposed by Henri Atlan, may be of real benefit.⁵

Transmission of both religious and scientific knowledge involves a learned Informant, the Content of the information, the process of Transmission itself, and last but not least, the Recipient.⁶ First, a kabbalist instructs his disciple, an act which at times has the character of an initiation rite. Likewise, a scholar may inform his graduate students, or assistants, or colleagues, of his recent findings. This takes place in a special environment, a symposium or a conference, involving highly ritualized forms of discourse.

Despite these surface correspondences, the differences between the two realms are profound. The kabbalist or religious teacher wishes to impart sacred knowledge, with a clear realization of the transformative effect of such knowledge on the psyche of his student or colleague. In some kabbalistic circles the imparting of the sacred, esoteric tradition establishes a boundary between initiates and outsiders; in some cases this involves the line between Jews and gentiles as well.⁷

Thus, while scientific information is, at least in theory, intended to be

universally available, kabbalistic traditions are frequently intended to be secret, restricted to a few initiates or *illuminati*. Secret religious doctrine becoming available to the masses is deplorable; on the other hand, scientific knowledge which is restricted to a few practitioners signifies a defect in its dissemination. Closely tied to this concern is the matter of misinterpretation. Scientific misunderstanding does not incur the dangers attributed to kabbalistic misapprehensions: heresy, disintegration of the receiver's personality, madness. Kabbalistic secrets are after all "secrets of the Torah." The nature of God, of reality, of the soul, or even of history, as in eschatological matters—all of these matters affect the initiate's understanding of sacred Scripture.

In short, science attempts to confer structure to inchoate reality; tradition, however, confers meaning to lore or praxis that has already been fraught with meaning. Transmission, or the imaginary construction of such transmission, is a major means by which Jewish thinkers have linked the external face of Judaism, chiefly, its ritualistic side, to its more inward aspects.

The importance of the concept of oral transmission and oral tradition has a long and vital history in rabbinic Judaism. Its importance in kabbalistic writings and thought merely carries on and perhaps intensifies that importance. It may be worthwhile to delineate, briefly, some of the precedents which influenced the early kabbalists in their regard for the importance of oral tradition.

- a. From its beginning, rabbinic Judaism held to primacy of its oral tradition, the "Oral Torah." Its formative compilations, the Mishnah, the Talmuds and various midrashic collections had their genesis in the work of small study-circles whose traditions were passed on orally. The restricted orality of these groups is reflected in the group study of the early kabbalists.
- b. Oral transmission was thus both reliable and authoritative. Since religious traditions cannot be empirically verified, or duplicated for testing purposes, the identity of the Informant is almost as important as the content of tradition. While experiential kabbalistic lore, as described below, depends more on repetition and praxis than on explanation, religious esotericism is much more fideistic and experimental than other religious knowledge.

- c. Last but not least, the view that some religious knowledge, especially theological knowledge, must only be transmitted orally is already explicit in earlier rabbinic texts; indeed, this view inspired some of the kabbalists as well as Maimonides, as in his *Guide of the Perplexed*.⁸

CONCEPTUAL TRANSMISSION

In this section I will attempt to uncover the differences between the transmission of religious concepts, on the one hand, and that of modes of behavior and esoteric techniques, which are often transmitted mimetically.⁹ In the latter case, a great deal of emphasis is put on the identity and psychological makeup of the Recipient, as well as the identity and authority of the Informant. In this context, the mode of Transmission serves, along with the authority of the Informant, to ensure the religious validity of the Content of the tradition. While some aspects of these pertain to scientific discourse as well, the essential concern there is with the correctness of the information transmitted; the identity of the Informant and Recipient are of secondary importance. But beyond its informational value, religious traditions have another dimension, which scientific data do not; religious doctrines so transmitted must be congruent with the general outlook of the particular religion concerned, and/or the worldview of the Informant. Moreover, it must be perceived as religiously significant to the Recipient.

There is yet another aspect of the transmission of esoterica which does not occur in other realms, even non-esoteric religious ones. At some level, an esoteric tradition must partake of the recalling of a certain aspect of the primordial revelation, a fragment of knowledge which reverberates in the very soul of the Recipient. Antiquity, which is not only irrelevant to scientific exchange, but positively deleterious to the status of the information imparted, enhances the tradition's authority in a religious context. Indeed, novelty rather than antiquity is desired; the *antiqui* have long since lost out to the *moderni*.

The authority of the Informant is derived from that of the founder of the religion, tradition, sect, or school; in the case of kabbalah, however, there are a number of candidates for this position: Adam, Abraham, and, last but

not least, Moses. It is the latter who is portrayed as the prototype of both Recipient and Informant of secret lore. Thus, kabbalistic teachings are often depicted as stemming from "the mouth of Moses."

In conceptual transmission, as defined above, primordial knowledge has its own importance, quite independent of the importance of the current Informant; it must be accepted as authoritative, and must be perpetuated, because of the identity of its original Informant—the initiator of the human chain, behind whom stands divine authority. The current Informant is more a vessel for transmission than a creator of esoteric lore.

On the other hand, in those types of esotericism or mysticism which are more experiential, and consist more of the knowledge of techniques for inducing mystical experiences, the authority of the Informant, original or current, is reduced, indeed, often drastically diminished, since the Recipient may reproduce the experience.

Let me exemplify these two types of transmission by means of two quotes from a kabbalistic text composed by a thirteenth-century kabbalist, the Castilian R. Isaac b. Jacob ha-Kohen. One deals with the reliability of an experiential issue, the efficacy of magic; the other with esoteric lore *per se*.

According to the Kabbalah that was transmitted to the masters of this wisdom from the mouths of the ancient sages: We have known that indeed R. Sherira and R. Hai,¹⁰ blessed be their memory, were competent in and received this science¹¹ as a tradition transmitted in their hands, master from the mouth of master, and sage (*zagen*) from the mouth of sage, a gaon from the mouth of a gaon,¹² and all of them have used the magical practices of *Hekhalot Zutartei*, namely, the *Shimmusha de-Shedei*, in order to climb the ladder of prophecies and powers by means of it.¹³

Elsewhere in the same treatise it is said that a certain esoteric topic

is transmitted in the name of the ancient sages who made magical use of *Shimmusha de-Hekhalei Zutartei* and *Shimmusha de-Shedei*, and it is ladder by which they attained degrees of prophecy and its powers.¹⁴

It should be emphasized that these quotes both assume that the ancient masters indeed practiced both magical and mystical—here designated as

“prophetical” — kabbalah. But — and this is crucial for the point I wish to make — despite R. Isaac’s insistence on the importance of the chain of tradition he cites, the text has little if at all to do with the actual practice of a thirteenth-century kabbalist, at least in the way described. In other words, the grandeur of the ancients, their unquestioned religious authority, is made to confer an aura of holiness on the kabbalah as sublime lore; kabbalistic texts which promote this image are less concerned with the actual kabbalistic praxis as such, at least as far as the kabbalist depicts himself in his own writings. The reliance on the achievements of the ancients as mystics and magicians was essential in order to foster the status of nascent medieval kabbalah. It is this search for authority, more than anything else, including its specific contents, that counts in these contexts.

Let me adduce another text to illustrate my point, this one from one of the paragons of medieval Judaism, as well as one of the earliest promoters of mystical lore, R. Moshe b. Nahman, Nahmanides. In his introduction, he warns the reader of his *Commentary on the Torah* of the futility of attempting to understand this mystical lore, unless he has first been initiated into it by a master.

I adjure all who look into this book not to reason or entertain any thought concerning any of the mystical hints which I record regarding the hidden matters of the Torah, for I do hereby firmly make known to him that my words will not be comprehended nor understood at all by any means of reasoning or contemplation, unless [the one seeking to understand such lore has received it] from the mouth of a discerning kabbalist [speaking] into the ear of an understanding recipient. Reasoning about [such doctrines] is foolish; any irrelevant thought can cause much damage, without any [corresponding] benefit.¹⁵

Nahmanides stresses the need to receive the interpretation of his kabbalistic hints from an expert master;¹⁶ otherwise, speculation as to their meaning will be damaging. Though different from the claims of R. Isaac ha-Kohen, who enlisted the titles of ancient books and extreme practices, such as magic and prophecy, in order to enhance the knowledge he was to impart, Nahmanides’ argument is nevertheless based upon the same affirmation of antiquity, without, at the same time, providing detailed information about

the concepts or praxis of this allegedly ancient kabbalistic lore. Though Nahmanides does not mention ancient books to underscore the antiquity of his kabbalistic knowledge, he does describe Moses as the single source for authoritative esoteric lore.

It must be emphasized that although oral transmission is a prerequisite for understanding kabbalistic doctrine, this is not Nahmanides’ sole requirement. Clearly, not everything which is transmitted orally constitutes part of kabbalistic teaching and esoteric discipline. At least one other aspect of the transmitted lore is essential: it must be related to hints concerning topics inherent in the Torah. In other words, the oral tradition must address issues explicit or implicit in canonical writings. This is apparent from another of Nahmanides’ assertions.

Indeed, this matter contains a great secret of the secrets of the Torah, which cannot be comprehended by the understanding of a thinker, but [only] by a man who acquires it, learning [it] from the mouth of a teacher,¹⁷ going back to our master Moses, [who received it] from the mouth of the Lord, blessed be He.¹⁸

It should be noted that here, unlike in the previous text, the emphasis is on the Informant, while the qualities of the Recipient are not mentioned at all. In yet another text, his *Sermon on Ecclesiastes*, Nahmanides declares that

These issues¹⁹ and others like them cannot be understood properly in any essential way from one’s own reason²⁰ but by means of kabbalah. This issue is explained in the Torah to whomever has heard the meaning of the commandment by kabbalah, as is proper — a receiver [*meqabbal*] from the mouth of [another] receiver,²¹ [going back] to our master Moses, [who received it] from the mouth of the Lord.²²

We may infer that, according to Nahmanides’ rhetorical strategy,²³ and in my opinion, so too in his practice, esoteric issues included under the rubric of “kabbalah” must be transmitted orally.²⁴ However, it is important to note that at times Nahmanides alludes to some theosophical doctrines, including his explicit naming of the sefirot, without alluding to the fact that he is revealing some esoteric lore.²⁵ In other words, it may be that the theosophical content which serves modern scholarship as the principal criterion for

the definition of this kind of mystical lore did not serve Nahmanides in the same way—it did not necessarily serve to demarcate the realm of kabbalah. It should also be noted that Nahmanides has no other option than to declare Moses as the original human Informant; he alone is mentioned in the quotes presented above. Moreover, his role is the one implied in another important discussion, namely, Nahmanides' disquisition, such as it is, of the location of the supernal palaces, the *heikhalot*, or *Ma'aseh Merkabah*. He asserts that, despite the fact that he does not know it, he assumes that "there was an oral tradition which [extends to the time] when Ezekiel and Isaiah came and linked it [to the biblical text]."²⁶

This emphasis on the central role of orality for the transmission of kabbalistic information seems to be the result of two different considerations. One is the actual practice in the circle of Nahmanides;²⁷ the other is the conscious attempt of the main halakhic elite of Catalonia—the primary elite in thirteenth-century kabbalah—to keep to itself the "secrets of the law."²⁸ It is noteworthy that Nahmanides does not mention a term found in Jewish esoteric, and even talmudic, texts: *roshei pera'ot*, "chapter headings," namely, general hints, or perhaps some principles concerning esoteric issues.²⁹ His reluctance to employ, or his decision to marginalize, such an important term in this context reflects Nahmanides' view that kabbalistic lore should be transmitted or, more precisely, reproduced, in a faithful manner and without elaboration.³⁰

TRANSMISSION OR EXEGESIS

The last third of the thirteenth century saw the emergence of highly elaborate kabbalistic systems. Some fourfold exegetical systems, such as those of Isaac ibn Latif, Joseph Gikatilla, Moses de Leon, the Zohar and the Tiqqunei Zohar, and that of Bahiya ibn Bahya, on the one hand,³¹ and that of Abraham Abulafia, on the other, is evidence for the period's deep interest in hermeneutics, a much deeper and broader interest than before. Other writers on Kabbalah—R. Joseph of Hamadan, late in the century, and R. Isaac ben Samuel of Acre, at the beginning of the next—show a strong interest in exegetical methods, though not in all aspects of the hermeneutic enterprise, nor as systematic an interest.³²

In contrast to Nahmanides, however, all of these kabbalists are representatives of a distinct type: none of them, as far as I know, was an important halakhic authority, and none of them played a leading, or even important, role in the internal affairs of their respective communities. Moreover, despite their achievements as kabbalists, it is far from clear whether they ever produced, or were capable of producing, in-depth or wide-ranging legalistic studies.³³ They mark the appearance of a distinct, new type: the kabbalist.

These innovative kabbalists³⁴ may well be described as members of a "secondary elite," namely, educated individuals who were uncomfortable with the more "mainstream" intellectual stance into which they had been educated, and were in more or less continuous search of new types of thought. Maimonidean philosophy most often constituted their starting points; less common was an involvement with the views of Nahmanides.

The restless intellectual search which marked them stands in sharp contrast to the role played by their contemporaries and seniors, the "primary elite" of Catalonia and Castile, who managed to combine the roles of authoritative halakhic authority and kabbalist. Nahmanides in Gerona, R. Shelomo ben Abraham ibn Adret (Rashba) in Barcelona,³⁵ R. Moses ben Simeon of Burgos, and R. Todros ben Joseph ha-Levi Abulafia in Toledo were all accomplished kabbalists who were also active either as social leaders or halakhic authorities; in all these cases there is no evidence of an interest in systematic kabbalistic hermeneutics.

In my opinion, this distinction between the two groups is highly significant for a proper understanding of kabbalistic conceptions of the nature and role of hermeneutics. On the one hand, we have a secondary elite strongly interested in the presentation of hermeneutic systems, and on the other, a primary elite which is not. The interests of the secondary elite mark the manner in which these kabbalists define their subject. Abraham Abulafia, for example, enumerates the three principles of Kabbalah as follows:

... letters, combinations [of letters] and vowels. ...³⁶ Their acronym is 'AZN, which can be permuted as Tzo'N. ... The permutation controls the letters, the vowels control the permutation, and the spirit of man, given by God, controls the vowels until they cause the emergence and illumination of the concept proper³⁷ [for any] intelligent kabbalist.³⁸

According to other kabbalists in Abulafia's circle, Kabbalah is defined not by specific doctrines but by its linguistic methods. Among these were *gematria*, *notarikon*, *temurot*, that is, the permutation of Hebrew letters; their acronym, GiNaT, "the Garden of [the Nut],"³⁹ often serves as a metaphor for mystical speculations.⁴⁰ Both Abulafia's emphasis on language and the various mechanical permutations of its elements, and his acquaintances' emphasis on the more formal aspects of textual manipulation, involve facile manipulation of texts more than the interplay of esoteric concepts, which in the past constituted and would later constitute the inner religious core of canonic kabbalistic writings. Though Abulafia was insistent, as were other kabbalists, on the importance of maintaining the esotericism of mystical knowledge, he is also aware of his own tendency to reveal it rather than to withhold it. Thus, he declares, in a rare example of conscious kabbalistic exotericism:

Though I know that there are many kabbalists who are not perfect [in their knowledge], and think that withholding a secret doctrine [testifies] to their perfection [in this science], I care neither about their thought nor of their condemning me for disclosing [these secrets], since my view on this matter is very different from, and even in direct contrast to, their own.⁴¹

Immediately after this declaration, Abulafia discloses his view that *Ma'aseh Merkabah*, the Account of the Chariot—one of the most important esoteric topics in Jewish mysticism, and one which has strong rabbinic support for its esoteric nature—should be understood neither as a visionary experience, nor as an allegory for metaphysics, as in Maimonides, but as a matter of letter permutations of divine names. It is thus not a doctrine, but an interpretative technique, and perhaps also a mystical technique.⁴²

In sum, the various hermeneutic systems devised by late thirteenth-century kabbalists were deemed to extract new kabbalistic doctrines, or to elaborate upon existing doctrines, from Scripture. This type of Kabbalah, with its emphasis on innovation, constituted a considerable departure from the dominant perception of Kabbalah as an ancient, precious fund of esoteric lore, which consisted of certain concepts or explanations of certain aspects of Scripture, and which must be transmitted and preserved without change.

The emergence of the fourfold exegetical system, at the end of the thirteenth century, is an essential ingredient of the nascent innovative Kabbalah. Historically considered, this connection is of vital importance.⁴³ Transmission has been reduced to handing down certain methods, exegetical or technical, much more than instruction into doctrine or theory. It is for this reason that the contents of Nahmanides' mystical tradition could continue to constitute a distinct kabbalistic school which was perpetuated orally and in secret for at least three generations after his demise. This cannot be said of any of the systems of innovative Kabbalah of his juniors and those of the next generation.

TRANSMISSION OF METHODS AND EXPERIENCE

Speaking abstractly, it may seem that tradition and experience stand at loggerheads, as competing methods of acquiring esoteric knowledge. Given the veneration with which tradition was endowed by the kabbalists themselves, the mystical insights achieved by experiential methods could easily be overcome by traditional doctrines, even obliterating such knowledge. Indeed, the question of the extent to which mystical experiences themselves are shaped and determined by tradition, or alternately, have a status independent of it, is part of an ongoing controversy in some academic circles.⁴⁴ However, since tradition as construed in that debate has a more general sense than that which forms the essential center of this paper—the matter of oral transmission, I will not advert to that general debate. Rather, I shall focus my short discussion on the question of the status of experientially derived esoteric knowledge in the view of a few thirteenth-century kabbalists. According to a treatise belonging to the realm of ecstatic Kabbalah:

The essence of this issue cannot be conceptualized, *ex definitio*, nor discussed orally, and even less in written form; for this reason it forms part of what is called Kabbalah, or "chapter headings,"⁴⁵ namely, the principles [of this knowledge].⁴⁶ [This is because] the meaning [of these chapter headings] depends upon the [ability] of the recipient to [understand it] in detail and [thus] divest [his soul from corporeality]

and [then] delight. The Kabbalah is transmitted only [by means of] "chapter headings."⁴⁷

Thus, the impossibility of transmitting the *content* of the Kabbalah in detail, and the consequent transmission of only the general principles, tends to devalue the importance of detailed kabbalistic doctrine, since the details will be shaped by each and every recipient according to his own understanding. The experiential methods of acquiring such knowledge thus become primary. The issue of delight and sweetness recurs several times in this treatise, and the author's assumption is that such knowledge is acquired experientially, and not dialectically. The emphasis is thus not on ratiocination but on practical techniques for obtaining such lore. The anonymous kabbalist confesses that after his rather modest philosophical studies he has encountered:

a divine man, a kabbalist, who taught me the path of Kabbalah by "chapter headings." Despite my little knowledge of natural science, it [= the path of Kabbalah] seemed to me invalid [from a philosophic point of view], [but] my master said to me: "My son, why do you reject an issue you have not experienced? Indeed, it would be worthwhile to experience it."⁴⁸

This emphasis on experiment and experience is not unique to this kabbalist. R. Abraham Abulafia, who may be none other than the "divine man" mentioned in the passage just cited, notes in one of his writings that the study of mystical texts on his part did not induce mystical experiences in him; rather, it was only when he received a revelation that his approach to mystical texts, among them the two most important mystical sources for Abulafia, *Sefer Yetsirah* and Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, became more experiential.⁴⁹

In a passage from his *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, Abulafia classifies orally transmitted kabbalistic traditions as the *lowest* form of Kabbalah.

In order to understand my intention regarding [the meaning of] the *qolot* [voices], I shall hand down to you the well-known *qabbalat*, some of them [which have been] received from mouth to mouth from the sages of [our] generation, and others that I have received from the

books called *sifrei Qabbalah*, composed by the ancient sages, the kabbalists, blessed be their memory, concerning the[se] wondrous matters,⁵⁰ [together] with other [traditions] bestowed on me by God, blessed be He, which came to me from ThY⁵¹ in the form of the "daughter of the voice,"⁵² these being the higher *qabbalat* [*qabbalat elyonot*].⁵³

This is one of the few instances in which Abulafia explicitly mentions his reception of oral traditions from some masters. Only in one other case, when speaking of the esoteric traditions concerning the secrets contained in Maimonides' *Guide*, that Abulafia again mentions an oral tradition.⁵⁴ As we have seen, he attributes a relatively low status to such orally transmitted lore. This is again demonstrated, though indirectly, in an earlier work of his, where he defines the *mevin*, "the one who understands," as being higher than the *hakham*, who receives his knowledge from books.

If he obtains it from the Kabbalah, that is, from one who has himself obtained it from the contemplation of the Divine Names or from another kabbalist,⁵⁵ he is called a *mevin*.⁵⁶

Higher still is the *da'atan*, the "one who knows," who received the content of esoteric knowledge from his own understanding. And still higher is the *rav*, "the master," who has received his knowledge as a revelation from the divine intellect. Thus, for an ecstatic kabbalist, orally received traditions are far lower in rank than those received from the "mouth of the Agent Intellect."

Indeed, the very resort to the metaphor of the "mouth" for the relation of the human to the cosmic intellect is very significant, because it transposes the image of transmission here below, viz., the horizontal, to a vertical, namely, the mystic's connection with the divine world by means of the intellect.⁵⁷ Moreover, Abulafia's use of this metaphor may indicate that the Agent Intellect was conceived of as a master, or even the master *par excellence*, in the manner in which Hindu mystics conceived of the *guru* as a cosmic power.⁵⁸ This emphasis on the supernal spiritual source of the Kabbalah, in lieu of the more concrete flesh and blood teacher in Nahmanides, is just one of the differences between the conservative Kabbalah of the

Geronese master and the innovative Kabbalah as envisaged by Abulafia. Revelation is not only the prerogative of the ancient masters, especially Moses, as Nahmanides and his school would maintain, but also of the medieval mystics, whose contemporaneous revelations may be assigned to an even higher plane than that of the ancient masters.⁵⁹

The passage quoted above is based upon two distinct approaches: the ancient Jewish one, found in the Talmud, whereby esoteric lore is transmitted only to one who is wise, *hakham*, and understanding, *mevin*, and further, whose understanding is *mi-da'ato*, on his own, by his own mind.⁶⁰ However, Abulafia has broken what are two talmudic phrases, *hakham*, and *mevin mi-da'ato*, "one who understands on his own," into three, and further attributed different meanings to each of the three, as though they signify three distinct activities. These activities are further connected to the well-known distinction between acts performed in writing, those done orally, and purely mental endeavor, a division which is crucial for the proper carrying out of Abulafia's mystical techniques.⁶¹ Now, just as the *mevin* is greater than the *hakham*, and the *da'atan* greater than both, so too are oral recitations of the Divine Names and the written permutations of the letters inferior to their inner, mental pronunciations.⁶²

Abulafia also mentions, as in the second passage quoted above, that he has received traditions orally from "the mouths of the sages of his generation."⁶³ Thus, though such traditions do play a role in Abulafia's Kabbalah, it has only a limited one, and is of lower degree than Abulafia's own discoveries, or revelations. Oral teachings provide him with the techniques for attaining mystical experiences, and not, as in Nahmanides, the passing along of substantive esoteric lore. The master, who plays an important role in Abulafia's system, serves primarily as an external catalyst, a fairly limited function.⁶⁴

Elsewhere, Abulafia describes Kabbalah as follows:

The purpose intended by the ways of the Kabbalah⁶⁵ is the reception of the prophetic, divine and intellectual influx from God, blessed be He, by means of the Agent Intellect, and causing the descent of blessing, and providing, by means of the [Divine] Name, for the individual and the community.⁶⁶

While the image that Nahmanides wishes to project is that of a reliable transmitter of esoteric traditions, as in the texts from his writings quoted above, Abulafia would have been pleased to have been viewed as a recipient of kabbalistic lore by means of divine revelation. Nahmanides' perception of Kabbalah returns to the founding experience of Moses in the glorious past, with Kabbalah constituting the essential reverberation in the present of this formative experience. For Abulafia, however, this humanly transmitted lore is a lower form of knowledge, which can and should be transcended by resort to higher forms of revelations in the glorious present, directly from the source of all knowledge, the Agent Intellect, and thus ultimately from God. This latter form of revelation presents the recipient with detailed knowledge of esoterica, while that which comes by tradition involves only the "chapter headings." Abulafia wished to short-circuit the chain of human transmission by establishing direct contact with the spiritual source. For him, the past is significant only insofar as it provides techniques which shorten the way to the divine, rather than certain fixed doctrines to be passively accepted and then transmitted. His concern is with the present and immediate future.

In sum, the role of the authoritative master who is expert in certain esoteric concepts, and was esteemed most highly by the primary elite — as was Nahmanides — becomes of much less moment within the value system of the secondary elite. Members of that elite are concerned with the examination and preparation of future recipients, and the fostering of mystical techniques which open the way to new revelations.

With the emphasis transferred to the future and future practitioners of the kabbalistic arts, it is no wonder that we know so very little about the masters of the secondary elite, kabbalists such as Isaac ibn Latif, Joseph Gikatilla, Moses de Leon, Joseph of Hamadan, and Abraham Abulafia; indeed, in most cases their very names are unknown to modern scholarship — only their treatises remain, their authors anonymous. In the case of the conceptual Kabbalah, where the Informants, the masters, were all-important, we know much more; we can trace their identities. R. Yehudah ben Yaqar, Nahmanides, R. Shlomo ibn Adret, R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon, R. Meir ibn Avi Sahulah, and R. Yom Tov Ishbili share the more conservative form of Kabbalah, which has been handed down from master to disciple for approximately a century and a half. While this conceptual Kabbalah is concerned

with reconstructing the vestiges of those primordial experiences, by studying and preserving the remnants of the secret tradition transmitted by God to Moses, the exemplary recipient of revelation, the kabbalists of the innovative, secondary elite, were more concerned with their own mystical experiences, or the avenues open to the realization of such experiences, namely, mystical techniques.

In sum, while Nahmanides and his school primarily functioned as curators of esoteric lore, Abulafia, like some of the other innovative kabbalists such as Gikatilla and de Leon, should be envisaged as “artists” of Kabbalah, who transformed it into an art rather than a store of traditional teachings.

PARTICULAR VERSUS UNIVERSAL TRANSMISSION

The shift from conceptual to technical transmission caused an important change in the very nature of the kabbalist’s relation to Scripture. The more conservative conceptual transmission was deeply related to the text, that is, it exploited many of the idiosyncratic qualities of the Hebrew text, and was closely concerned with its eschatological and ritual content.

Technical transmission, on the other hand, was much freer in its handling of the text, since its reductionistic use of letter-permutations allowed the same methods of interpretation to be employed in any passage, no matter what the ostensible content might be. A gifted kabbalist may manipulate the text, employing the more general hermeneutic either for exegetical purposes, or to attain mystical experiences.

Of course, as noted above, the emphasis on method over detail revolutionized the very concept of Kabbalah. Let us examine two more passages dealing with the importance of “chapter headings” from the works of ecstatic kabbalists, one from a follower of Abulafia, and one from the master himself. Let us begin with an excerpt from *Sefer ha-Tseruf*, by an anonymous disciple.

Whatever is transmitted concerning this lore [merely constitutes] “chapter headings,” and requires intellect [to understand]. [That is why] it is called “intellectual Kabbalah,”⁶⁷ and is unlike other sciences, that is, the propaedeutic ones, which are transmitted alone. . . . But this

lore, known as Kabbalah, is impossible to transmit *in toto* orally, nor even in written form, even for thousands of years. And no matter how great the kabbalist’s interpretive effort, everything [remains but] a hint and “chapter heading.”⁶⁸

The emphasis upon the application of intellectual understanding in order to understand kabbalistic lore is a unique feature of this text, which on the other hand criticizes philosophy as being too scholastic, and transmitting knowledge without advancing it by an innovative approach. In a Platonic vein, Kabbalah is conceived of as an invitation to decode, elaborate, and expand—rather than merely reproduce and repeat. The very resort to “chapter headings,” namely, the principles that are, by definition, themselves starting points rather than final statements, is quite representative of ecstatic Kabbalah. The recourse to philosophic methods, despite the ecstatic kabbalists’ critique of it, may be understood as the synthesis of the individual strand of the linguistic Kabbalah, which apparently preceded it, and neo-Aristotelian philosophy, especially that devised by Maimonides, which is part of the more general Jewish intellectual tradition imbibed by these kabbalists. This is Abraham Abulafia’s major contribution, as an ardent student, teacher and commentator of Maimonides’ *Guide*, but one who was also profoundly influenced by the traditions associated with the linguistic techniques of *Sefer Yetsirah* and the Ashkenazi Hasidim.

Let us return to the “chapter headings” themselves; Abulafia himself writes in one of his epistles that

Despite the fact that Kabbalah is transmitted to all the *illuminati* in general, not every listener and receiver is able to actualize it. [This is] because what is transmitted from it are but “chapter headings” [and intended only for] those who are wise, understanding and “from their own knowledge.”⁶⁹

Kabbalah thus became, in many circles, a much more open-ended theory, whose contents may vary, become enriched and also reflect, to a certain extent, the personality and concerns of the kabbalist, as much as the nature of the religious tradition from within which it had emerged. The introduction in this context of the Aristotelian epistemological concept of

“actualization” is particularly significant, and is crucial for understanding of the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah in Abulafia’s thought: Kabbalah is a type of information *in potentia*, which is intended to be actualized by the recipient. Given the medieval valuation of matters *in actu* over those merely *in potentia*, there can be no doubt that Abulafia considered his elaborations of the traditional “chapter headings” to have been of higher standing. We can easily understand why Abulafia considered these elaborations inevitable. The ecstatic kabbalist would receive the proper interpretive methods by oral transmission, and then employ them to achieve either a state of heightened consciousness or kabbalistic interpretation of scriptural texts.

Let me adduce one more quote that emphasizes the great importance given the preparation of the recipient:

The secrets of the Torah, the secrets of reality and the foundations of the commandments, are only transmitted orally, face to face, from a perfect person to someone who merits receiving perfection, [but only] after testing and trial [regarding his] intention, that is, [that of] the recipient: if he is meritorious, it is right to transmit [them] to him, or not.⁷⁰

It should be noted that the many quotes from Abulafia’s *Sefer Shomer Mitsvah* adduced here in the context of our discussion of matters of transmission are not accidental; they are not the result of my decision to disinter this forgotten treatise. In my opinion, the question of the proper methods of transmission was central to the subject of this work, because it is dedicated to one of Abulafia’s own students, R. Shlomo ben Moshe ha-Kohen, who left Sicily, apparently in order to return to his native Galilee. The occasion of Abulafia’s composition of this treatise may explain his emphasis on the lower status of written, as opposed to oral, transmission. In other cases, where it is Abulafia who left his students, and dedicated works to them, we do not find this emphasis.

GRADUAL TRANSMISSION

Both conceptual and technical transmission take into consideration the spiritual development of the recipient. Despite their differences, both agree

that esoteric traditions must be transmitted only gradually. In the case of the Nahmanides’ school, some secret topics are not to be revealed before the recipient reaches the age of forty, and even then, as we might have expected, they are to be transmitted orally, so as to maintain their secrecy,⁷¹ a policy not only reasonable in itself, but one which has strong support in rabbinic tradition, to the effect that some issues should not be revealed until late in the program of studies.⁷² This is made explicit in Abulafia’s *Sefer Shomer Mitsvah*:

The kabbalist may not reveal [kabbalistic secrets] and explain them in writing, but he should disclose one handbreadth while covering two. But when [the kabbalist encounters] a person who is prepared and worthy of having [these secrets] revealed to him orally, he should first reveal two handbreadth while covering one. And if [the recipient] will receive it, and really desire to complete what he has begun, some topics may be revealed, in accordance with [the recipient’s] capacity to receive them; these [topics] should not be hidden from him, though they are, by nature, hidden and occult and essentially concealed.⁷³

Elsewhere in the same treatise we learn that:

Despite the fact that wondrous secrets⁷⁴ emerge out of their numbers [*gematriot*], these secrets⁷⁵ should be taught only orally, and only after much labor concerning the essence of the paths of Kabbalah, so that the knowledge of truth should not be given to the recipient in a random manner. But it is necessary that at the beginning he should put forth great efforts to [follow] the ways and paths of Kabbalah, which are the ways which open to gates of the heart, in order to understand the truth. Whoever wishes to enter the depths⁷⁶ of truth, according to the Kabbalah, must at the beginning lay the foundations of wisdom and understanding within his heart.⁷⁷

The disclosure of the seventh and most advanced hermeneutical method is conditioned by Abulafia on the prior oral reception of the knowledge of the Divine Names of 42 and 72 letters, together with the transmission of “some traditions, even ‘chapter headings.’”⁷⁸ Moreover, the emphasis on the importance of systematic study, including, it would seem, oral instruction and

technical exercises, which are mentioned in some of Abulafia's writings and those of his followers, assumes that these are more pertinent than more conventional religious behavior to the attainment of an understanding of kabbalistic secrets. Again, the end of this statement may imply the necessity of philosophical study as an important step in the drive to attain such understanding. Abulafia believed that philosophy — in particular that of Maimonides — can help in purifying some central theological concepts which are generally misunderstood by some readers of the Bible. His kabbalistic approach therefore emphasizes a gradual intellectual and spiritual development, culminating in a deeper penetration of the secrets of the Torah rather than in cultivating the development of an elite into which the student will aspire to assimilate himself in terms of ethos and behavior.

LATER REPERCUSSIONS

The duality of conservative / conceptual and experiential / innovative types of Kabbalah is a crucial feature of this lore during the latter part of the thirteenth century. Without a commonly held point of view, kabbalistic works would diverge, and the project which began in the late twelfth century, to offer kabbalistic teachings as an attractive alternative to philosophical speculation, would soon dissipate. However, with the decline of ecstatic Kabbalah, and the consequent neglect of its emphasis on hermeneutic methods and experiential techniques, the Kabbalah would soon after its emergence lose its inertia and yield only fragmentary systems, combining different proportions of the two trends, varied according to place and circumstance. Nevertheless, with its variegated hues, the kabbalistic systems which survived and/or developed became more popular, moving from the elite to somewhat larger audiences, and also from the periphery to a more central position.

A somewhat more universalistic cast in innovative Kabbalah facilitated its acceptance by later Jewish kabbalists, who studied its texts independently of a master and a guiding tradition, and then by Christian kabbalists, especially insofar as the hermeneutical facets of Kabbalah are concerned.

With the movement of Spanish Kabbalah to Italy at the end of the thirteenth century, mainly by means of written documents — as evident from the writings of R. Menahem Recanati, and at the end of the fifteenth cen-

tury, as can be seen from the writings of R. Yohanan Alemanno — the esoteric features of Spanish Kabbalah have been dramatically reduced. In the case of the latter, this attenuation is not only a consequence of his study of kabbalistic texts without a teacher, but also of his sustained effort to offer a philosophical interpretation of this lore, which generally encourages a more universalistic approach. Indeed, this approach is evident as late as the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁷⁹

The ascent of a rhetoric of transmission is evident in the views of R. Isaac Luria, at least as represented by R. Hayyim Vital, and represents a much more exclusivistic view of such transmission.⁸⁰ On the other hand, the Christian kabbalists, who were inclined to accept claims of an ancient pedigree for the object of their interest, were also more inclined to accept the authenticity of rather innovative kabbalistic texts.⁸¹ This is true also of R. Abraham Cohen Herrera, an early seventeenth-century Amsterdam kabbalist; he repeatedly emphasizes the importance of oral tradition from master to disciple, but at the same time he offers strongly philosophical interpretations, which were inspired by scholastic and Renaissance types, as well as by a variety of Jewish philosophic works.⁸² The absorption by the developing Kabbalah of philosophical concepts, as well as the full-fledged philosophical interpretations of Kabbalah, are palpable examples of an attenuation of the role of transmission and of the influence of individual masters; these forms of Kabbalah represent a plug-in to the macro-chains of cultural transmission.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., *Abba, Guides to Wholeness and Holiness East and West*, ed. John R. Sommerfeld (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1982); *Le Maître Spirituel selon les traditions d'Occident et d'Orient = Hermes*, Nouvelle série, no. 3 (1983), *Direction spirituelle et psychologie* (Les Etudes Carmelitaines, 1951); Jacques Vigne, *Le maître et le thérapeute* (Paris, 1991).

2. On the concept of transmission in Ashkenazi esoteric literature see Daniel Abrams, "The Literary Emergence of Esotericism in German Pietism," *Shofar* 12 (1994), 72–73; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Shining Light*, (Princeton, 1994), 234–247.

3. See Joseph Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of the Ashkenazi Hasidism* (Jerusalem, 1968), 74–75 [Hebrew]; M. Idel, “Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names,” in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, & Typology*, ed. R. A. Herrera (New York, 1993), 100–102, as well as Wolfson, *ibid.* For more on esotericism in a fourteenth-century Kabbalistic text written in central Europe, see M. Idel, “An Anonymous Kabbalistic Commentary on *Shir ha-Yihud*” (forthcoming)

4. See, e.g., the texts quoted by Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, tr. A. Arkush, ed. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton, 1987), 40–41, 226; on the Hasidei Ashkenaz genealogies of transmission see Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, 14–20, and Ivan G. Marcus, *Piety and Society, The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany* (Leiden, 1980), 122 and 85.

5. Henry Altan, *A tort et a raison* (Paris, 1986).

6. Moreover, the whole process should be viewed in the broader perspective of the culture, which may encourage, foster, or discourage oral transmission. In fact, different types of cultures would host in different ways, if at all, the transmission phenomena.

7. The more particularistic approach of Spanish Kabbalah was sometimes attenuated or even obliterated in Italian Kabbalah. Abraham Abulafia taught this lore to Christians, and was prepared even to discuss it with the Pope. About this dichotomy between the two forms of Kabbalah, see M. Idel, “Particularism and Universalism in Kabbalah, 1480–1650” in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* ed. D. Ruderman (New York, 1992) pp. 324–344. See also Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 85.

8. See bḤag 13a; Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Mekavah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1960), 58; G.A. Wewers, *Geheimnis und Geheimhaltung in rabbinischen Judentum* (Berlin, 1975); and Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), s.v. secret, secrecy; Alexander Altmann, “A Note on the Rabbinic Doctrine of Creation,” *JJS* 6–7 (1955–1956): 195–206, M. Idel, “Secrecy, Binah and Derishah,” in *Secrecy and Concealment* ed. H. Kippenberg and G. Stroumsa (Leiden, 1995). On medieval views of oral transmission see Isadore Twersky, “The Contribution of Italian Sages to Rabbinic Literature” *Italia Judaica, Atti del I Convegno internazionale — Barri, 18–22 maggio, 1981* (Rome, 1983), 386–387.

9. The existence of the famous rabbinic concept and praxis of *shimmush tal-midei hakhamim*, namely a life in the presence of the great sages, attending them and learning thereby how to behave as well as having the student’s personality impressed by that of the master, is relevant for our discussion.

10. This seems to be part of the *imaginaire* of the thirteenth-century Kabbalists, who attributed to these sages a knowledge of Kabbalah. Indeed, some texts found in Ashkenazi writings also attribute to this figure mystical topics. See Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, 11, 124–128; Scholem, *Origins*, 322.

11. *Hokhmah*, a term that can be translated here as lore.

12. This term designates a medieval religious leader in the early medieval Middle East.

13. *Sullam ha-nevu’ot ve-kohoteiah*. R. Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen, *Ma’amar ha-’Atsilut ha-Smalit*, ed. G. Scholem, *Mada’ei ha-Yahadut* (Jerusalem, 1927), 2:90.

14. *Ibid.*, 98. compare also 82, 92, 98, 107, 110. The term *Kabbalah mesura* occurs several times in his treatises; see pp. 93, 103, 111. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1967), 120.

15. Ch. D. Chavel, tr., *Commentary on the Torah* (New York, 1971), 15–17. For more on Nahmanides’ esotericism see M. Idel, “We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This,” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass. 1983), 51–73.

16. Compare the text quoted from a responsum of R. Hai Gaon and analysed in Idel, “Defining Kabbalah,” 101–102.

17. See also above in the passage quoted from the preface to the *Commentary on the Pentateuch*.

18. *The Commentary on Job*, in *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, ed. Ch. D. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1964), 1:23.

19. Traditions related to the cosmic cycles, *shemittah* and *yovel*.

20. *mi-da’at ’atsmo*.

21. Compare the responsum of R. Hai Gaon, discussed in more detail in Idel, “Defining Kabbalah,” 101–102.

22. *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, 1:190.

23. See Elliot R. Wolfson, “By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides’ Kabbalistic Hermeneutic” *AJS Review* 14 (1989), 103–178.

24. This assumption has some antecedents in earlier period in the Rabbinic texts. See Wewers, *Geheimnis und Geheimhaltung*; Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*; Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1960) 58.

25. I assume that it would be better not to automatically identify any recourse to theosophical terminology with the esoteric Kabbalah Nahmanides claimed that he does not reveal. This is an issue that is worthy of a detailed treatment in itself.

26. *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, 1:163.
27. See M. Idel, "On the History of the Interdiction against the Study of Kabbalah before the Age of Forty," *AJS Review* 5 (1980): Hebrew Section, 6–9.
28. See M. Idel, "Kabbalah and Elites in Thirteenth-Century Spain," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 9 (1994), 5–19.
29. See bḤag 13a.
30. For a different view of Nahmanides, which assumes that he indeed was much more of an interpreter than his rhetoric would allow, see the abovementioned study of Wolfson (note 23 above).
31. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, 1988), 210–218; idem, "PaRDeS: Some Reflections on Kabbalistic Hermeneutics," in *Ioan Culianu Memorial Volume*, ed. J. Collins and M. Fishbane (Albany, 1995), 245–264; Daniel Matt, "The Old-New Words: The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar," in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 50 Years After*, ed. P. Schäfer and J. Dan (Tübingen, 1993), 181–208.
32. See M. Idel, "Prometheus in a Hebrew Garb," *Eshkolot*, New Series, 5–6 (1981), 119–123 [Hebrew].
33. See Idel, "Kabbalah and Elites."
34. On this kabbalistic type, in opposition to the conservative Kabbalah, see Idel, "We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This"; and *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 212–213, and the study mentioned in the following footnote.
35. See Moshe Idel, "Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah and Spiritual Leadership" (forthcoming); idem, "Kabbalah and Elites" (note 28 above).
36. See also *Shomer Mitsvah*, MS Paris BN 853, fol. 78b.
37. *Tziyyur*; on this medieval concept see H.A. Wolfson, "The Terms *Tasawwur* and *Tasdiq* in Arabic Philosophy and Their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents" *The Moslem World* (April, 1943), 1–15.
38. *Sefer Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, MS Oxford 1582, fol. 45b. See also M. Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, 1989), 3–11. On the influence of this quote on R. Mordekhai Dato's description of R. Moses Cordovero's kabbalistic activity see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany, 1989), 137.
39. That is, *ginat egoz*.
40. See the discussions of this acronym in R. Barukh Togarmi and Joseph Gikatilla's early *Sefer Ginnat 'Egoz*.
41. *Sefer 'Otsar 'Eden Gamuz* MS Oxford 1580, fol. 55a.
42. More on this issue see Idel, "Ma'aseh Merkavah"

43. On the last quarter of the thirteenth century as one of the most creative period of Kabbalah see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 211–212.
44. See the three volumes of studies edited by Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford, 1983), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford, 1978) and *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford, 1992) as well as the opposite stand as presented in the studies edited by Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness, Mysticism and Philosophy* (Oxford, 1990).
45. *Rashei peraqim*. This term will occur again in a passage from this book to be quoted here below.
46. *Ha-kelalim*. See the view of Rav Hai Gaon, *Otsar ha-Geonim*, ed. B. Levin, *Ḥagigah*, p. 12; Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 58.
47. *Sefer Sha'are Tsedeq*, ed. Y.E. Porush (Jerusalem, 1989), 9.
48. *Sha'arei Tsedeq*, 23. For another view of Jewish esotericism in terms of an experiential event, the union with God, see the view of the mid-eighteenth-century Hasidic master Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Premiszlany, quoted and discussed in Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 58.
49. *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, in Adolphe Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabbala* (Leipzig, 1854), 21.
50. A list of ancient mystical books appears in a similar context in his epistle *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, 21.
51. In the manuscript: *MHTY*; it is possible that this is one of the many errors of the copyist of this manuscript that is, unfortunately, a unique one. If so, we should read the sentence as follows: "which came to me in the form of *Bat Qol*." However, it is possible that Abulafia alluded to the Greek form *THY*, namely God, and then *MTHY* would mean "from God." Abulafia uses the form *THYV* in order to point to God already in his earlier *Sefer Get ha-Shemot*; see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 24.
52. *Bat Qol*. See above at the beginning of this text the mentioning of the *Qolot*, voices. It is also possible that the similarity between the sounds and written forms of *Qolot* and *Qabbalot* is also implied in the idea that traditions coming from above are voices.
53. Compare to his epistle *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah* 21, where he counts the revelation from the Agent Intellect as higher than the secrets he learned from various esoteric books. Cf. M. Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 57–58.
54. See Idel, *ibid.*, 58–59 and 69 n.90. On the superiority of oral transmission to written documents, see Abraham Abulafia's view discussed in Idel, *Language,*

Torah and Hermeneutics, 46–55. For the Renaissance misunderstanding of the identity of Abulafia's master as Maimonides himself see Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 87–88, 91–98.

55. Later on he mentions "a genuine Kabbalist" as the necessary source, in the vein of Nahmanides' first passage quoted above.

56. According to the translation of Scholem, *Major Trends*, 137. The Hebrew original has been printed there on p. 376 note 75.

57. See also *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, (Albany, 1987), 180–184.

58. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 140.

59. *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 50–51.

60. See bḤag 12a. On the various varia and analyses of this text see David Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven, 1980), 11–12.

61. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 24–37.

62. *Ibid.*, 20–21.

63. See Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah, 69 n. 128.

64. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 137.

65. Described previously as transmitted themselves orally. See below.

66. *Shomer Mitsvah*, MS Paris BN 853, fol. 48b. On this view of Kabbalah, which assumes both mystical and magical aspects, see my discussion of the mystico-magical model, as exposed in *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, 1995).

67. *Qabbalah sikhliit*. This view, characteristic of some of the innovative Kabbalists, has been reiterated by several Kabbalists, especially in the period of the Renaissance and later on. See also below n. 78.

68. MS Paris BN 770, fol. 175b.

69. *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah* 12.

70. *Shomer Mitsvah*, fol. 74ab.

71. See Idel, "On the History," 6–9.

72. yAZ 2.8

73. *Shomer Mitsvah*, fol. 48b.

74. *sodot nifla'ot*.

75. *sitreihem*.

76. On this term in relation to secrecy see Idel, "Secrecy, *Binah* and *Derishah*."

77. *Shomer Mitsvah*, fol. 78a.

78. *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, 20.

79. M. Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of Kabbalah in the

Renaissance" in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. B.D. Cooperman (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 186–242, "Major Currents," 345–368; "Kabbalah, Platonism and Prisca Theologia: The Case of Menasseh ben Israel" in *Menasseh ben Israel and his World*, ed. Y. Kaplan, H. Meshoulam, and R. Popkin (Leiden, 1989) 207–219.

80. See his introduction to *Sefer Ets Hayyim*, where he declares that the reliable Kabbalah was transmitted only until Nahmanides; cf. *Shevah Hokhmat ha-Kabbalah*, printed in *Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim* (Premiszlany, 1975), fol. 26cd.

81. See Wirszubsky, *Pico della Mirandola*, 198–200, 262–263.

82. Cf. Alexander Altmann, "Lurianic Kabbalah in a Platonic Key: Abraham Cohen Herrera's *Puerta del Cielo*" *HUCA* 53 (1982), 321–324. Nissim Yosha, *Myth and Metaphor* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1994).