

Mystical and Ecstatic Kabbalah

The mystical Kabbalah and theoretical Kabbalah were never entirely separate. The former always included a theological and technical dimension, and the latter was largely based on, and in turn stimulated, mystical insight. Nevertheless clear distinctions have been evident since the Middle Ages, and we can meaningfully depict the one as the “Kabbalah of the Heart” and other as “the Kabbalah of the Mind.” It is also convenient to discuss them separately. This segment focuses on the mystical Kabbalah and its offshoot, the ecstatic or prophetic Kabbalah. The theoretical Kabbalah will be discussed in Segment 4.

To provide essential background for this discussion of the Mystical Kabbalah we need to establish some basic principles of mysticism and to examine the relationship between mysticism and religious piety. We shall also examine earlier forms of Jewish mysticism, including Merkabah mysticism. Although the Merkabah movement, which flourished in the early centuries of the Common Era, was distinct in its objectives and methods, it overlapped with and inspired the mystical Kabbalah. Important personages from antiquity, some of whom were mentioned in Segment 2, featured in the literature of both. We shall then explore the emergence of the mystical and ecstatic Kabbalah. Emphasis will be given to the methods employed to induce higher states of consciousness. Most of those methods involved invocation of divine names.

Foremost among proponents of the ecstatic Kabbalah was the 13th-century Spanish scholar Abraham Abulafia. We shall explore his life and work and read what he and other medieval practitioners said about their experiences.

Segment 3 includes the following sections:

- Jewish Mysticism
- Emergence of the Mystical Kabbalah
- Techniques of the Mystical Kabbalah
- The Ecstatic Kabbalah
- Reflections, Resources and Assignment.

Jewish Mysticism

Elements of Mysticism

The mystic seeks to bridge the gulf between spirit and matter, between the finite and the infinite, between humanity and God. Very few individuals have attained or even approached that goal on anything like a continuous basis. More commonly, mystics have episodic mystical experiences lasting from a few seconds to a few hours. Episodes may be spontaneous, or they may result from months of careful preparation.

The mystical experience can take a variety of forms. Intensity may vary from a mild elevation of consciousness to a state of trance or ecstasy with profound physical and psychological effects. The experience may include a sense of detachment from the physical world and transportation to another dimension. Or it may involve a sense of universal Oneness. Upon their return to ordinary consciousness, mystics may report visions, voices, contact with celestial beings, or the presence of God. Often they struggle to find language to express what they have experienced—language to capture the ineffable, the indescribable, the indefinable, the unnamable. Paul wrote for Jews as well as Christians when he reported hearing “unspeakable words, which it is not

lawful for a man to utter.” Words which they do utter may be viewed as having prophetic significance.

Mystical experiences can be transformative. The person’s life may take a new direction; he or she may feel like a new person, with new beliefs, values and priorities. The mystic may receive instructions for new endeavors or moved to try to change the world. Or he or she may gain new insights into complex truths. For example the 12th-century Christian mystic Hildegard of Bingen reported: “I suddenly experienced the understanding of the exposition of books, that is, of the Psalter, the Gospel, and of the other orthodox volumes of both the Old and the New Testaments.”

Alternatively, the higher world of the mystical experience may seem of such majesty and importance that the everyday world pales into insignificance. The seeker may turn away from the everyday world, yearning only for what was once experienced. The desire for union with God can acquire an intensity comparable with or surpassing that for a human lover. In the attempt to describe that intensity, the mystic may turn to erotic imagery.

Modern Kabbalist Gershom Scholem points out that mysticism cannot be separated from its religious context. The mystical experience occurs within the framework of the tradition, beliefs and expectations of a particular religion. Jewish mysticism differs in important ways from Christian, Sufi or Buddhist mysticism. No Jewish mystic ever meditated on the passion of Christ, or been rewarded by the stigmata—though many Jewish mystics experienced strong physical manifestations, albeit of a more temporary nature. No Jewish mystic ever reported achieving nirvana, though many have attained comparable states of consciousness.

Nor, in general, can mysticism be separated from its social and geographical context. Virtually all the Jewish mystics of historical note were married, male rabbis living in the Middle East and Europe. And most of the mystical Kabbalistic considered in this segment of the course happened to live under Christian rule. This contextual homogeneity makes our task correspondingly easier—much as we might wish for greater inclusiveness and broader participation in the pursuits under discussion.

Segment 2 noted that Judaic religion had a mystical dimension from earliest times. The main source of inspiration in early Jewish mysticism was of course the Torah. The Torah could be regarded as a collection of sacred stories, repository of Judaic law, and catalog of religious observance. But it has always been viewed as something much more important: the living word of God, the incarnation of divine wisdom, to be read, elaborated upon by commentary, meditated upon, and savored on every level. Certainly to the Jews of the biblical and rabbinic periods, the Torah was capable of endless reflection, experience, interpretation and reinterpretation. Sometimes prophets, priests and rabbis cited scripture as a basis for speaking *about* God and his relationship with the Jewish people. More commonly they read it as a way for people to *know* God.

The Torah referred to God by a variety of names. Those names were never simply descriptors or labels; nor according to Jewish belief were they coined by man. They stemmed from the very nature of God. From earliest times Judaism treated the names of God with special reverence and awe. At the time of the patriarchs, divine names served as passwords providing access to the tribal deity and its favors. Later, as the deity became more universal and transcendent, the names expressed awareness of God’s majesty, affirmed the covenant, and offered vehicles for prayerful invocation. Visual images were prohibited under Mosaic law, but linguistic images and symbols provided lawful ways to represent and communicate with God. The names were incorporated into the liturgy and also used, by those with enough courage or audacity, for magical incantation.

Scripture also provided a wealth of symbols and images. For example the story of Moses was not just the historical account of his life—“historical,” that is, in the way that all sacred texts

approach their subjects. Hearing God's voice in a burning bush, escaping from servitude, crossing the desert and a sea, ascending a mountain to converse with God, following a cloud or a pillar of fire, and yearning for the Promised Land all had profound meaning and mystical significance. The stories of Elijah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and many others offered further images that would inspire generations of mystics.

Mysticism and Religious Piety

Mysticism cannot necessarily be compared, even qualitatively, with religious piety. But people with a religious orientation are likely to view their mysticism as an extension of conventional piety, and a mystical experience may occur spontaneously during routine devotional practices. The person may be at prayer or reading passages from scripture when consciousness rises to a higher level. Perhaps the experience was inspired by the words being read or recited, but then it may progress beyond words. Seed thoughts may give way to something beyond thought. Contemplatives describe the familiar practice of "talking to God" as *cataphatic* prayer. They strive for *apophatic* prayer that transcends thought, imagination or visualization. It is the formless prayer of the spirit.

Prayer pervaded the whole of Jewish history. People pray for a variety of reasons, particularly when things are going wrong. Prayers of supplication no doubt were as common in biblical times as they are today. For example:

I have called upon thee, for thou wilt hear me, O God: incline thine ear unto me, and hear my speech. Show thy marvelous lovingkindness, O thou that savest by thy right hand them which put their trust in thee from those that rise up against them. [*Psalm 17:6-7*]

In biblical times, and sometimes even more recently, the boundaries between petitionary prayer and magical invocation was indistinct. Distinctions might depend on confidence in the liturgical formulas used and on assessments of the likelihood of success. Moses and Elijah, among others, won approval for demonstrating the superiority of their magic over their enemies'. Their goal was to demonstrate the superiority of their God. However in *Numbers 20* we find that Moses was rebuked when he tried to devise his own magical procedures rather than following God's command. The practice of magic was relatively common in both the biblical and the rabbinic periods.

The mystical experience may extend to mental and intuitive levels, but typically it also has emotional associations. Certainly devotion, which can lead to mysticism, has a strong emotional content. In prayers, hymns and scriptural passages we find expressions of a broad range of emotion. Consider the following examples of jubilation, fear and desolation from the *Psalms*:

I will praise thee, O Lord, with my whole heart; I will show forth all thy marvellous works. I will be glad and rejoice in thee: I will sing praise to thy name, O thou most High. [*Psalm 9:1-2*]

Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands. Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing. [*Psalm 100:1-2*]

My heart is sore pained within me: and the terrors of death are fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me. [*Psalm 55:4-5*]

Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? [*Psalm 130:1-3*]

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. [*Psalm 137:1-2*]

Praise expressed people's joy when things were going well. The single English word "praise" translates eight different Hebrew words. The two verbs that appear most frequently in the Hebrew Bible are *halal* and *yadah*. *Halal* (HLL) has a range of meanings including "to boast (upon)," "celebrate," and "praise." The word "Hallelujah" is derived from it. *Yadah* (YDH) means "to stretch out one's arms" either to throw a stone or to praise or give thanks. A less-common verb is *zamar* (TzMR), which means "to sing praises or psalms" or "to play a musical instrument to accompany singing." The most common Hebrew noun is *tehillah* (ThHLH), which means "a hymn of praise." Also appearing frequently is *todah* (ThVDH), which captures the broader notion of extending the hands in praise or worship. Hymns of praise were often accompanied by instrumental musical, gestures and dance.

Conversely, lamentations gave vent to people's individual and collective suffering. It also expressed sadness at their own weaknesses. Moshe Idel notes that weeping was provoked as a method of purifying the self and repenting for sin. A passage in *Jeremiah* captured the essence of that practice:

Let mine eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease... We acknowledge, O Lord, our wickedness, and the iniquity of our fathers: for we have sinned against thee.
[*Jeremiah* 14:17, 20]

Weeping could also lead to visions, prophetic utterances, or states of ecstasy.

Lamentations became less popular after the biblical period, but hymns of praise continued to be composed through the Middle Ages. The following hymn was included in an 8th-century work in the tradition of *Maaseh Bereshit*:

You are blessed, YHWH!
Your great Name is above all other names!
Rise up, YHWH, in your power!
We want to sing and celebrate your valor! Celebrate your great and formidable Name! It is holy. I want to sing YHWH all the days of my life, celebrate YHWH as long as I live!

The importance of its emphasis on the Tetragrammaton will become clear later in our later discussion. Many more hymns and prayers came from the *Maaseh Merkabah*.

Merkabah Mysticism

The *Maaseh Merkabah* dates back at least to the first century BCE, but it flourished in the early centuries of the Common Era. The word *Merkabah* (MRKBH) was derived from the early Hebrew word for "chariot" and referred to Elijah's ascent to heaven at the end of his earthly life:

And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. [2 *Kings* 2:11]

The *Merkabah* movement drew upon a number of passages in the Hebrew Bible but drew more directly on the apocalyptic and wisdom literature of the late biblical period. Some of its concepts betrayed Platonic and Gnostic influence. The movement's central theme was the soul's desire to ascend to the divine realm, the "throne-world." Thrones were mentioned frequently in scripture. For example in *Ezekiel*

And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it... Then I looked, and, behold, in the firmament that was above the head of the cherubims [sic] there appeared over them as it were a sapphire stone, as the appearance of the likeness of a throne. [*Ezekiel* 1:26; 10:1]

The apocryphal *First Book of Enoch* described a similar ecstatic vision:

The portal stood open before me, and it was built of flames of fire. And in every respect it so excelled in splendour and magnificence... And its floor was of fire, and above it were lightnings and the path of the stars, and its ceiling also was flaming fire. And I looked and saw therein a lofty throne; its appearance was as crystal, and the wheels thereof as the shining sun, and there was the vision of cherubim. And from underneath the throne came streams of flaming fire so that I could not look thereon. And the great Glory sat thereon, and His raiment shone more brightly than the sun and was whiter than any snow. [*1 Enoch* 15:15-20]

Precisely who was sitting on the throne, with “the appearance of a man,” is unclear. The simplistic answer would be “God;” but it may have been the creator, or demiurge, considered in Hellenic Judaism to be a lower divine manifestation. Another suggestion is that the throne’s occupant was that august figure, the archangel Metatron. Metatron—whose Greek name, meaning “beside,” or “above the throne,” stood out in a system of Jewish mysticism—was sometimes identified with Enoch and at other times with the archangel Michael. In the Kabbalah, Metatron came to be associated with Kether, the highest sefirah.

The ascent to the throne-world required the Merkabah mystic to pass through seven *hekhaloth* (singular: *hekhalah*, “palace,” “hall” or “chamber”). Significantly, the two core texts of the Merkabah movement were the *Lesser* and *Greater Hekhaloth*. The texts were compiled and edited during the gaonic period in Babylonia, but they—or fragments of them—may have been written in first- or second-century Palestine. As noted in Segment 2, the principal speaker in the *Lesser Hekhaloth* was Akiba ben Joseph, and the lead role in the *Greater Hekhaloth* was played by Rabbi Ishmael.

Passage from one hekhalah to the next, according to Merkabah beliefs, became progressively more difficult. Archons guarding the gates did all in their power to stop or slow down the seeker. The Greek word *archon* originally meant a ruler or magistrate, but in Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism it came to signify a powerful angel or daemon. Angelic guards had many precedents; for example, as early as 800 BCE, angels were said to guard Assyrian palaces. Moreover, the notion of an ascent through successive levels of reality was not unique to Merkabah mysticism or even to Judaism. Plato had discussed the soul’s descent and eventual return through the seven planetary spheres. The Mithraic mysteries spoke of a ladder with seven gates, perhaps corresponding to initiatory grades. The apostle Paul described a man—probably himself—who was “caught up to the third heaven... caught up into paradise” [*2 Corinthians* 12:1-2] We would interpret the hekhalah as levels of consciousness.

Safe passage through the hekhaloth demanded the possession of secret passwords or seals. According to the *Greater Hekhaloth*, Rabbi Ishmael explained that entry to the first hekhalah required two seals: “One of Tutrosyay, the Lord, and one of Surayah, Prince of the Face.” Ishmael went on to explain that the angel Tofiel stood on the right of the door, and Mathpiel and Tagriel, “the chief guardian,” stood on the left. The seventh hekhalah was guarded by no fewer than 14 angels, seven of whom confronted the seeker on the way in and the others on the way out. Although some of them were “fearsome,” they were all described as “honored or beloved.”

Success in reaching the throne-world demanded not only the right seals but also great knowledge of the Torah, purity of heart, rigorous preparation through ascetic disciplines, and exceptional courage. Failure could result in destruction by the archons. Descriptions of the terrible pitfalls discouraged all but the most zealous seekers from ever trying. Even if the seeker passed through all the gates, experience of the divine presence might be too much to bear or might expose previously unrecognized weaknesses. However the spiritual reward awaiting the truly righteous and well-prepared seeker was profound. *The Greater Hekhaloth* described the experience of being admitted to the seventh palace:

The individual then trembles, shakes and shudders, is stricken and faint, and he falls backwards. He is then supported by the angel Aripiel and the 63 other guardians of the seven doors of the Chambers. All of them support him and say, “Fear not, O son of the beloved seed. Enter and see the King in his glory. You will not be destroyed. You will not be burned.”

The seeker was then instructed to chant a praise to “the Mighty King.” Merkabah mystics wrote many prayers and hymns. One hymn of praise, from the *Greater Hekhaloth* was the following:

His throne radiates before Him and His palace is full of splendor.

His Majesty is becoming and His Glory is an adornment for Him.

His servants sing before Him and proclaim the might of His wonders, as King of all kings and Master of all masters, encircled by rows of crowns, surrounded by the ranks of the princes of splendor.

With a gleam of His ray he encompasses the sky and His splendor radiates from the heights.

Abyssees flame from His mouth and firmaments spark from His body.

The difficulty involved in ascending to the throne-world, the extensive preparation involved, and the dangers facing the seeker all served to emphasize the great gulf between man and God. Experience of the divine presence was not possible simply by having the right intent; it also required dedicated effort, perhaps over a period of many years.

Merkabah and related forms of mysticism set a small elite apart from men of lesser stature. A story from the Babylonian Talmud illustrates just how small that elite might be. The story tells of four famous rabbis of the second century who sought to enter the garden of paradise. The first, Rabbi ben Azzai, saw God and died; “God granted him the death of His saints.” The second, Rabbi ben Zoma was overcome by the vision and became insane. The third, Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya, became a heretic. Only the fourth, Rabbi Akiba, “entered and left in peace.” “He gazed properly, not exceeding his limitations, and his mind was able to encompass these mighty confounding visions. God gave him the power so that as long as he gazed he kept proper thoughts in his mind and maintained a proper mental state.”

The Merkabah movement flourished both in Palestine and in Babylonia, reaching its peak in the third or fourth century and surviving until the tenth century. What precisely were the Merkabah mystics looking for? Gershom Scholem makes the point that, despite emphasis on the ecstatic journey to the throne-world, the Merkabah mystics did not express any particular love of God and had no real expectation of union with God. God was utterly transcendent. On the other hand, the mystics did express profound adoration of God as the King-Creator.

Emergence of the Mystical Kabbalah

The mystical Kabbalah built upon the strong foundation of the Merkabah movement, as well as on forms of Judaic mysticism from the biblical period. But there were important innovations. The Kabbalistic mindset provided a new conceptual framework for understanding the mystical experience. Whereas Merkabah mystics sought to ascend through the hekhaloth, some Kabbalah mystics sought to ascend through the sefiroth. In so doing, the Kabbalah mystics had greater expectations of contact with the Divine; after all, the sefiroth were divine manifestations while the palaces were simply stages on the way to the throne. Meditation on the sefiroth, which in some cases included visualization, became an important component of the mystical path. Opportunities for meditation will become clearer when we discuss the Tree of Life in more detail in the next segment of the course. Meanwhile we need to examine the more common forms of Kabbalistic mysticism that dispensed with any reference to the palaces or sefiroth.

Hints of the emergence of a mystical Kabbalah can be found in both Sephardic and Ashkenazic Judaism in the Middle Ages. However the mystical Kabbalah attained its most distinct form in northern Europe. Small Jewish communities had survived in the Rhine Valley of Germany since Roman times. Many more Jews came to Germany and northern France in the ninth and 10th centuries when the Carolingian conquests brought political stability throughout much of Europe and opened up new opportunities for trade. Charlemagne established his imperial capital at Aachen, which lies at the northern end of the Rhine Valley. As noted in Segment 2, Jewish merchants from Babylonia set up commercial and financial operations in the region, and rabbis, scholars and others soon followed. Sadly, the climate of religious toleration was short-lived; anti-Semitism increased over time, often becoming violent. Nevertheless, Jewish life in northern Europe steadily expanded, and a distinct Ashkenazic culture developed. The word *Ashkenaz* was the medieval Hebrew name for Germany.

By the 11th century, Ashkenazim still comprised no more than three percent of the world's Jewish population. But literacy levels were high, and Ashkenazic rabbis emerged as leading interpreters and commentators on the Torah and Talmud. Immigrants from Baghdad had brought with them Merkabah, Kabbalistic and other texts of Judaic interest.

The many prayers and hymns of the Maaseh Merkabah, and the few from Maaseh Bereshit, passed into Ashkenazic Judaism. They were especially favored by the group known as the *Haside Ashkenaz* (“The Pious of Germany”) that emerged in the 11th century. Moshe Idel explains that the Ashkenazic Kabbalists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries “preserved the ancient [Merkabah] texts, probably redacted parts of them, and... also continued the practice of their mystical techniques.”

The ideals of the *Haside Ashkenaz* were contained in two texts by Rabbi Judah ben Samuel (“Judah the Hasid”) of Regensburg: the *Sefer Hasidim* (“Book of the Pious”) and *Sefer ha-Kavod* (“Book of Glory”). The Hasidim committed themselves to lives of devotion, asceticism, altruism and serenity. They exhibited stoic indifference to the harshest of conditions—an ideal put to the test during the crusades and the Black Death. During that period anti-Semitic violence reached a level not exceeded until the 20th century. Numerous people were targeted, including the famous Talmudist and Kabbalist Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (1165–1230), a disciple of ben Samuel. One night, when Eleazar was working on a commentary on *Genesis*, Christian crusaders forced their way into his home and murdered his wife and three children. Atrocities eventually became less frequent, but persecution and pogroms continued for centuries. One result was the concentration of Jewish populations in ghettos. Another was the large-scale migration of Jews from Germany to Poland, Lithuania and Russia.

Kabbalah of Language

A key ingredient of the mystical Kabbalah was meditation on the Hebrew letters. The practice was described in the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Bahir*. But it tapped into an age-old Jewish tradition that venerated the Hebrew language as a special revelation from God. According to that tradition every word in scripture was replete with creative potential. Did not God create the universe by the power of the spoken word? The Torah contained his very utterance: “God said: Let there be light...” [*Genesis* 1:3].

When the Hasidim read or recited prayers or passages from scripture they paid close attention to the words. The Hebrew language took on magical significance. The mystics would count words, count letters in words, rearrange letters to form new words, and reflect upon the thoughts and sensations that came to them in the process. Every word, every letter offered possibilities for meditation—or potential for magic. Great care was taken to enunciate each word, savoring its vibration. Recitation had to be exact, and if a mistake was made the passage had to be recited again. A Kabbalah of language had developed.

The most important words were of course the divine names. Meditation practices were developed in which the names were used as mantras. Endless litanies of divine names—of scriptural origin or artificially created—were composed. Seekers experienced altered states of consciousness by writing, reading, speaking or chanting the names. As the meditative state deepened, they would simply allow the names to flow through their minds. Eventually the words no longer be intoned consciously, but they continued to inspire the seeker. Over many years of usage, the cumulative investment of energy by generations of seekers, and seekers' fervent expectations of mystical outcomes, gave the practices substantial ritual power.

Magic, which had been common in earlier periods, continued to be practiced during the Middle Ages, particularly among the Ashkenazim of Germany. The motivation for doing so probably varied from one practitioner to another, but at least some rabbis practiced magic to demonstrate their level of spiritual attainment.

It was believed, for example, that a very holy person could materialize a *golem*. A golem was a clay homunculus brought to life by magical incantation. The whole story of golems is a mixture of serious belief and folklore, extending back at least as far as the Talmud. Allegedly the *Sefer Yetzirah* hinted at a suitable incantation. Eleazar of Worms explained that, to be successful, incantations had to be made over every limb of the golem.

In individual cases it was never clear whether the golem appeared as part of an ecstatic vision, seen only in the seeker's mind, or whether it acquired enduring physical existence and could be seen and touched by others. While much of the medieval literature could be read either way, some writers claimed that the golems could interact with the magi's acquaintances. For example, one reads that golems could not speak but could perform menial tasks and function as house servants. The most famous golem story involved the 16th-century Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel of Prague. Reportedly the good rabbi created the golem to defend the Jewish community against anti-Semitic attacks. Unfortunately, the golem grew in power until it went on violent rampages around the city and eventually turned on its creator. Rabbi Judah managed to kill the golem by changing one letter in the name written on its forehead. Allegedly its remains lie in the Old Jewish Cemetery in the Czech capital.

The Holy Guardian Angel

A more significant subject, from our perspective, was invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel. Numerous people in both the Ashkenazic and the Sephardic traditions claimed to have been visited by *maggidim*, or mentor angels. But the Holy Guardian Angel seems to have been more than just a mentor; it existed in more a more intimate relationship to the seeker's own soul. Studied only by the Ashkenazim, the Holy Guardian Angel had much in common with the Solar Angel discussed Theosophist Helena Blavatsky and by Alice Bailey. These similarities will be explored in detail in a later segment of the course.

The first known use of the term "Holy Guardian Angel" occurred in a text written by the medieval Kabbalist Abraham of Worms (1362–1460). He attributed his knowledge to a sage named Abramelin whom he claimed to have met in Egypt. Abraham of Worms clearly was a magus in the spirit of the times, and his four books, now compiled into *The Book of Abramelin*, provide details of a variety of invocations and spells. One is "For Friendship, Marriage, and Love Affairs," another is "Protecting Houses and Buildings from Earthquake and Thunder," and yet another is "To Make Oneself Invisible to One's Enemies." There is nothing remarkable about those spells; medieval literature was replete with magical *grimoires*. What is remarkable is that Abraham dismissed the conventional reliance on magical paraphernalia, elaborate gestures, and long invocations to be learned by rote—including the methods of the Kabbalah of language which had evolved over the several centuries before his time. Instead, he insisted that spells and conjurations can be used safely and effectively only after a long period of inner purification and

transformation. The aspiring magus must embrace a life of asceticism, fasting and prayer, akin to the spiritual practices of the Merkabah mystics—and indeed akin to modern esoteric disciplines.

The ability to invoke the Holy Guardian Angel marked the culmination of this long period of preparation—variously described as a minimum of 18 or 30 months. Abraham presented a detailed ritual to be performed during the feast of Tabernacles and extending over a period of days. It begins with a supreme invocation of the Angel, who then guides the magus through the rest of the ritual. Numerous “unredeemed spirits” appear and must be subjugated. Only after the magician has “faced his demons” can he receive the Angel and enter into sublime and ecstatic union, a “mystic marriage.” In response the magician is urged:

Plead and beg that in future—and for the rest of your life—he will not remove his guardianship from you. Ask that he will guide and control you on all the roads and byways of Adonai [German: *Herr*]. Ask him especially to stand by you in this work of sacred wisdom and magic.

Interestingly Abraham refers to his Holy Guardian Angel in masculine terms. More it has often been suggested that a man’s Angel manifests in female form, and a woman’s in male form.

Techniques of the Mystical Kabbalah

Methods and techniques can only take the mystic so far. The higher forms of mysticism transcend the rational mind, and the mystical experience needs to “take on a life of its own.” Nevertheless the Ashkenazic Kabbalists developed specialized techniques which provided a useful basis for inducing altered states of consciousness. The techniques were applied to the letters and words of prayers, scripture and divine names. Stripped of their mystical intent they would be regarded as methods of textual analysis.

Temurah

The most popular analytical technique, *temurah*, was introduced in Segment 2. New words or phrases are formed by rearranging, or permuting, the letters in a given word or phrase. Temurah was particularly satisfying when the anagram has linguistic meaning. For example, “Tree of Life” (ETz H-ChYYM) could be rearranged to form “Life of Essence” (ChYY H-TzEM). Judicious creative insertion of vowels could often transform “nonsense” words into meaningful ones, but the Kabbalists were quite willing to accept words that defied such laundering.

Rabbi Eleazer of Worms was the first individual known to have used the method. He was an Ashkenaz, but he had contacts with other parts of the Jewish world and introduced the method to Sephardic Jews. Soon temurah acquired broad usage. Eleazer was inspired by a passage in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, part of which was cited in Segment 2:

Twenty-two letters... Engrave them, carve them, weigh them, permute them, and transform them, and with them depict the soul of all that was formed and all that will be formed in the future. [The letters] are set in a circle as 231 gates. The circle rotates back and forth... Weigh them and transform them, Alef with each one, and each one with Alef; Bet with each one, and each one with Bet. They repeat in a cycle. Therefore, everything formed and everything spoken emanates in one name. Form substance out of chaos and make nonexistence into existence. Carve great pillars out of air that cannot be grasped. This is the sign: One foresees, transposes, and makes all creation and all words with one Name.

The number 231 was not arbitrary. Modern Kabbalist Aryeh Kaplan notes that it is the number of combinations of two letters that can be selected from a population of 22 letters. In his book *Sefer Yetzirah* he provides an evocative “mandala” constructed by drawing lines between pairs of the letters arranged at equal intervals around the circumference of a circle. As will be seen in a later segment of this course, the notion of circular repetition of the letters may also have influenced the

design of the “archeometer” patented by the Marquis Saint-Yves d’Alveydre in 19th-century France.

In general, 24 permutations of four different letters can be formed. In the case of the Tetragrammaton, only 12 distinct permutations can be formed from the Tetragrammaton because of the repeated *he*:

| | | |
|------|------|------|
| YHVH | YHHV | YVHH |
| HVHY | HVYH | HHVY |
| VHYH | VHHY | VYHH |
| HYHV | HYVH | HHYV |

Those twelve names duly found applications in the meditations of the Kabbalah of language.

Notarikon

The second analytical technique was *notarikon*, in which new words are formed from letters in successive passages from a familiar text, usually from scripture. In one of the best-known examples, the “seventy-two name of God” were derived from *Exodus* 14:19-21. The scriptural passage was not chosen at random. Each of the three verses contains precisely 72 letters. And not only does the passage describe the Israelites escape from pharaoh’s army, Moses reportedly invoked the 72 divine names to part the Red Sea.

Precise instructions for forming the 72 names were provided in the *Bahir*. The three verses are shown below in English, from the King James Bible, and transliterated Hebrew:

19. And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them.

VYSE MLAK HALHYM HHLK LPNY MChNH YShRAL VYLK
MACHRYHM VYSE EMVD HENN MPNYHM VYEMD MACHRYHM

20. And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these: so that the one came not near the other all the night.

VYBA BYN MChNH MTzRYM VBYN MChNH YShRAL VYHY HENN
VHChShK VYAR AThHLYLH VLAQRB ZH ALZH KLHLYLH

21. And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.

VYT MShH AThYDV ELHYM VYVLK YHVH AThHYM BRVCh
QDYM EZH KLHLYLH VYShM AThHYM LChRBH VYBQEV HMYM

The first “name,” VHV, is formed from the first letter of verse 19, the last letter of verse 20, and the first letter of verse 21. The second name, YLY, is formed from the second letter of verse 19, the next-to-last letter of verse 20, and the second letter of verse 21. The procedure is continued until all 72 names are constructed. The last name is MVM, formed from the last letter of verse 19, the first letter of verse 20, and the last letter of verse 21. Normal distinctions between regular and final versions of the Hebrew letters are ignored. The 72 Names of God are listed in Table 2.

The passage in the *Bahir* ends with the comment: “These are the 72 names. They emanate and divide themselves into three sections, 24 to each section.” The significance of the 24 appears to rest on the fact that four letters ordinarily can be permuted in 24 different ways. However, as noted, the Tetragrammaton can only be permuted in 12 ways because it contains a repeated letter.

The 99 names of God, revered in Islam, all came from the Qur'an. By contrast, none of the 72 names of God appeared in the Hebrew Bible; they were all newly created.

Gematria

The third method of analysis was *gematria*, which focuses on the numerical equivalents of letters of the alphabet. We might recall that the definition of sefirah included references to both words and numbers. The gematric value of words or phrases is found by summing the values of their component letters. For example, the Tetragrammaton, YHVH, has a value of 26 (Y = 10, H = 5, V = 6, H = 5). Numerical values of the Hebrew letters are provided in Appendix 1.

Words or phrases with the same numerical value were believed to be related—or perhaps we should say that the seeker was challenged to search for meaningful relationships. For example, *kabad* (KBD, “great”) has a value of 26, the same as the Tetragrammaton. *Adon* (ADVN, “master”) and *Ain* (AYN), the first veil of the Godhead, both have a value of 61. *Din* (DYN, “judgment”), *nebuah* (NBVAH, “prophecy”), *Noach* (NVCh, “Noah”), and *Nogah* (NVGH, “Venus”) all have a value of 64. *Nachush* (NChSh, “Serpent”), *nachash* (NChSh, “enchantment”), and *mashiach* (MShYH, “Messiah”—the one who would overcome the serpent’s enchantment), all have a value of 358.

More complicated analysis can also be performed. For example, the first verse of Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (BRASHYTh BRA ALHYM ATh HShMYM VATH HARTz), has a total value of 2,071. It turns out that this number is the sum of two perfect squares: $26^2 + 45^2$. Twenty-six is the value of the Tetragrammaton, and 45 is the number of Adam (ADM). Opportunities to search for such correspondences—and to attach meaning to them—are endless. However a cautionary note needs to be sounded. Some variations in the spelling of Hebrew words occur in scripture and elsewhere, and numerical equivalents change accordingly. Also, many Hebrew words are prefixed, without a space, by *ha* (“the”), and the numerical equivalent will be different according to whether the prefix is included or omitted. The practice of gematria is sometimes criticized on the grounds that evocative results are obtained by the judicious choice of spellings, juggling of prefixes, and other sleights of hand.

It will be noted that permuting letters, as in the method of temurah, leaves the word’s numerical value unchanged. Thus the 12 names created from YHVH all have a value of 26. The Kabbalists obviously were concerned with the Hebrew gematria; considerable work has been done elsewhere to explore the Greek and English gematria.

The Ecstatic Kabbalah

Ecstatic meditation is distinguished from “normal” meditation primarily by the intensity of the experience. The ecstatic may lose all sense of physical surroundings, even of physical existence. He or she may make prophetic utterances, see visions, fall to the floor, or experience physical convulsions. An ecstatic state can develop spontaneously, but certain forms of meditation are believed to be more effective than others in producing such states, and the Kabbalah of language seem to have been particularly effective. The ecstatic, or prophetic, Kabbalah has its origin in the Kabbalistic practices of Ashkenazic Judaism, but ironically its leading exponent was not an Ashkenazic but a Sephardic Jew from Spain.

Abraham Abulafia

Virtually all the writings of Merkabah mysticism and the early Kabbalah were either anonymous or attributed to famous rabbis of the past. What little biographical material we have of individuals like Akiba ben Joseph or Saadia Gaon come from non-Kabbalistic sources. In contrast, we know a great deal about the leading exponent of the ecstatic Kabbalah, Abraham

Abulafia. Whereas most Kabbalists were reticent about revealing their identities and life-stories, Abulafia had no such qualms. As a result we know the story of one of the most fascinating Kabbalists of the medieval period.

Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia was born in 1240. His birthplace was Saragossa, in the kingdom of Aragon. His father, a pious Jew, taught him the Torah and Talmud. After his father died in 1258, Abulafia led an unsettled life, devoting his life to study, teaching and writing. Wherever he went he attracted small groups of loyal students. By the time of his death in Malta, sometime after 1291, he had authored a substantial body of written works. His most productive period coincided with the editing and publication of the *Zohar* which laid the groundwork for the theoretical Kabbalah.

Baruch Togarmi, a Turkish rabbi who had written a commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah*, was one of Abulafia's teachers. From him Abulafia acquired a fascination—even an obsession—with the Hebrew alphabet. Abulafia was also influenced by two prominent writers. One was Moses Maimonides, the preeminent Jewish philosopher of his time, who gave Abulafia's work a strong intellectual dimension. The other was Eleazar of Worms who had died ten years before Abulafia was born. Eleazar's influence helped launch Abulafia onto a path that owed more to Ashkenazic than to Sephardic tradition.

There is no evidence that Abulafia ever tried to create a golem, and in general he regarded magic as a diversion from true spiritual advancement. But the procedures he proposed for achieving ecstatic states were not unlike those used by the Ashkenazim, and the Sephardic rabbis frowned upon the publication of such sensitive information. Adding to their distrust, Abulafia claimed that he was singled out for special work. He based that claim partly on visions he experienced, while still in his twenties, and partly on the fact that he had been born in the Jewish year 5,000, the start of a new millennium. Fearing that Abulafia had messianic ambitions, the rabbis expelled him from Spain and Italy. Abulafia also had a close shave with the Christian church, only narrowly avoiding the stake when he tried to meet with the pope.

For most of his life Abulafia moved from place to place, searching for a haven where he could pursue his work. Study of his work was prohibited in Spanish Kabbalistic schools, and none of his writings was published for 600 years. Even today, most of his books are available only in Hebrew.

In some ways Abulafia's system of meditation was the very opposite of the magical system Abraham of Worms would promote at the turn of the 15th century. Whereas the latter rejected the use of long, complicated rituals, Abulafia built his whole system of ecstatic meditation on very specific ritual procedures and long litanies of divine names. Abraham of Worms did agree with Abulafia that careful preparation for a ritual was necessary, though the German rabbi recommended a much longer period of preparation.

Abulafia was intrigued with gematria. He noted that the word for "language" (LShVN) has the same value, 386, as "combination" (TzYRVP), reinforcing his belief in the power of analytical techniques; combination and permutation are closely related mathematical operations. Abulafia also sometimes used *noms de plume* which had the same numerical value as his first name, Abraham (ABRHM = 248). Two such pseudonyms were Raziel (RZYAL) and Zekariyahu (ZKRYHV).

Abulafia made much greater use of temurah. Just as an unlimited number of melodies can be created from a finite set of musical notes, temurah can be used to create endless series of words from a finite alphabet. Indeed, references to music were more than simply metaphorical. Abulafia encouraged seekers to chant the sacred names, claiming that such practice dated back to the temple priests of biblical times. Chanting also enhanced the power of the meditations. On the

other hand, music never played the role in the ecstatic Kabbalah that it did, for example in Sufism.

In addition to combining and permuting the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, all of which are consonants, Abulafia experimented with vowels, which, from the early Middle Ages onward, had been incorporated into Hebrew texts by means of “vowel points.” The Masoretic system of vowel points was developed in the 9th and 10th centuries CE by Aaron ben Moses ben Asher and other Jewish scholars in Tiberias, Galilee. The main purpose of vowel points was to assist, and help standardize, pronunciation, which had always been problematic in classical Hebrew.

In some cases Abulafia used what he called the “natural vowel,” the first vowel appearing in the expanded name of the Hebrew letter. For example, the natural vowel associated with *lamed* was “a.” In other cases he considered all five vowels, the equivalents of our “o,” “a,” “e,” “i” and “u.” At that time the precise number and order of vowels varied from one author to another. Other medieval writers considered six or even 10 vowels. “Ten” had obvious appeal since it corresponded to the number of commandments or sefiroth.

Just five vowels can be permuted in 120 different ways, so the total number of permutations of a word consisting of vowels and consonants could be quite large. Abulafia was not concerned whether a “word” created by the process had linguistic meaning. He believed that each Hebrew letter was a distinct divine entity, and combinations of letters put together with sacred intent automatically acquired spiritual importance.

Abulafia may have experimented with random permutations of letters, but more generally he favored highly structured permutations. In fact deviations were considered so serious that a seeker who made a mistake was instructed to begin a whole section over again. The words constituted a *form* into which the divine force could flow, and that form had to be perfect or the force would be diminished—or, worse, distorted. Noting that the *Sefer Yetzirah* correlated letters with parts of the body, Abulafia warned darkly:

[O]ne has to be most careful not to move a consonant or vowel from its position, for if he errs in reading the letter commanding a certain [bodily] member, that member may be torn away and may change its position or alter its nature immediately and may be transformed into a different shape so that in consequence the person may become a cripple.

Clearly the letters had power on physical as well as higher levels.

Two of Abulafia’s structured meditation procedures call for special note. The first, described in a text entitled *Light of the Intellect*, focused on the four letters of the divine Name, YHWH. Each of these letters was combined and permuted in a prescribed order with each letter of the alphabet and also with the five vowels. Table 1 shows the sequence for the letter *alef* (A), as provided by Aryeh Kaplan. The sequence begins: AoYo, AoYa, AoYe, AoYi, AoYu; AaYo, AaYa... AaYu; and so forth. After all combinations are exhausted, producing a 5 x 5 matrix, the order of the consonants is reversed: YoAo, YoAa, etc., etc., producing a second 5 x 5 matrix. Two hundred “words” are formed for *alef* alone, or 4,400 for the whole 22-letter alphabet.

The second procedure, described in *Life of the Future World*, focused on the 72 Names of God. Fortunately, from the standpoint of length, it did not combine those names with all five vowels. Instead, it confined itself to the natural vowel associated with each consonant. The 72 names are listed in Table 2. Thus the first name is expanded to VaHeVa, the second to YoLaYo, and so forth; the last is MeVaMe. According to Kaplan, “el” or “yah,” divine names which were associated with the sefiroth, could be appended to the 72 names, and these are shown in the table.

Table 1. Permutations of the Tetragrammaton with Alef (A) and Five Vowels

| | | | | | | |
|----------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <i>Yod (Y)</i> | AoYo | AoYa | AoYe | AoYi | AoYu | |
| | AaYo | AaYa | AaYe | AaYi | AaYu | |
| | AeYo | AeYa | AeYe | AeYi | AeYu | |
| | AiYo | AiYa | AiYe | AiYi | AiYu | |
| | AuYo | AuYa | AuYe | AuYi | AuYu | |
| | ----- | | | | | |
| | YoAo | YoAa | YoAe | YoAi | YoAu | |
| | YaAo | YaAa | YaAe | YaAi | YaAu | |
| | YeAo | YeAa | YeAe | YeAi | YeAu | |
| | YiAo | YiAa | YiAe | YiAi | YiAu | |
| | YuAo | YuAa | YuAe | YuAi | YuAu | |
| <i>He (H)</i> | AoHo | AoHa | AoHe | AoHi | AoHu | |
| | AaHo | AaHa | AaHe | ... | | |
| | AeHo | ... | | | | |
| | ... | | | | | |
| | ----- | | | | | |
| | | HoAo | HoAa | HoAe | HoAi | HoAu |
| | HaAo | HaAa | HaAe | ... | | |
| | HeAo | ... | | | | |
| | ... | | | | | |
| <i>Vav (V)</i> | AoVo | AoVa | AoVe | AoVi | AoVu | |
| | AaVo | AaVa | AaVe | ... | | |
| | AeVo | ... | | | | |
| | ... | | | | | |
| | ----- | | | | | |
| | | VoAo | VoAa | VoAe | VoAi | VoAu |
| | VaAo | VaAa | VaAe | ... | | |
| | VeAo | ... | | | | |
| | ... | | | | | |
| <i>He (H)</i> | AoHo | AoHa | AoHe | AoHi | AoHu | |
| | AaHo | AaHa | AaHe | ... | | |
| | AeHo | ... | | | | |
| | ... | | | | | |
| | ----- | | | | | |
| | | HoAo | HoAa | HoAe | HoAi | HoAu |
| | HaAo | HaAa | HaAe | ... | | |
| | HeAo | ... | | | | |
| | ... | | | | | |

**Table 2. The Seventy-Two Names of God
with the Natural Vowels**

| | | | |
|----|---------------|----|----------------|
| 1 | VaHeVa [yah] | 37 | AaNuYo [el] |
| 2 | YoLaYo [el] | 38 | CheEaMe [yah] |
| 3 | SaYoTe [el] | 39 | ReHeEa [el] |
| 4 | EaLaMe [yah] | 40 | YoYoTza [el] |
| 5 | MeHeShi [yah] | 41 | HeHeHe [el] |
| 6 | LaLaHe [el] | 42 | MeYoKa [el] |
| 7 | AaKaHe [yah] | 43 | VaVaLa [yah] |
| 8 | KaHeTha [el] | 44 | YoLaHe [yah] |
| 9 | HeTzaYo [el] | 45 | SaAaLa [yah] |
| 10 | AaLaDa [yah] | 46 | EaReYo [el] |
| 11 | LaAaVa [yah] | 47 | EaShiLa [yah] |
| 12 | HeHeEa [yah] | 48 | MeYoHe [el] |
| 13 | YoTzaLa [el] | 49 | VaHeVa [el] |
| 14 | MeBeHe [el] | 50 | DaNuYo [el] |
| 15 | HeReYo [el] | 51 | HeCheShi [yah] |
| 16 | HeQoMe [yah] | 52 | EaMeMe [yah] |
| 17 | LaAaVa [yah] | 53 | NuNuAa [el] |
| 18 | KaLaYo [el] | 54 | NuYoTha [el] |
| 19 | LaVaVa [yah] | 55 | MeBeHe [yah] |
| 20 | PeHeLa [yah] | 56 | PeVaYo [el] |
| 21 | NuLaKa [el] | 57 | NuMeMe [yah] |
| 22 | YoYoYo [el] | 58 | YoYoLa [el] |
| 23 | MeLaHe [el] | 59 | HeReChe [el] |
| 24 | CheHeVa [yah] | 60 | MeTzaRe [el] |
| 25 | NuThaHe [yah] | 61 | VaMeBe [el] |
| 26 | HeAaAa [yah] | 62 | YoHeHe [el] |
| 27 | YoReTha [el] | 63 | EaNuVa [el] |
| 28 | ShiAaHe [yah] | 64 | MeCheYo [el] |
| 29 | ReYoYo [el] | 65 | DaMeBe [yah] |
| 30 | AaVaMe [el] | 66 | MeNuQo [el] |
| 31 | LaKaBe [el] | 67 | AaYoEa [el] |
| 32 | VaShiRe [yah] | 68 | CheBeVa [yah] |
| 33 | YoCheVa [yah] | 69 | ReAaHe [el] |
| 34 | LaHeChe [yah] | 70 | YoBeMe [yah] |
| 35 | KaVaKo [yah] | 71 | HeYoYo [el] |
| 36 | MeNuDa [el] | 72 | MeVaMe [yah] |

States of Ecstasy

Merkabah mystics and ecstatic Kabbalists all offered advice on how best to prepare for ecstatic experiences. Preparations included purifying the body by fasting and devotion. Choice of location was also important. Merkabah mystics sometimes employed scribes to sit with them to record their experiences. In other cases they tried to ensure privacy. The experience of one Rabbi Michael, a French mystic from the 13th-century, is recorded thus:

(He) asked questions, and his soul ascended to heaven in order to seek (answers to) his doubts. He shut himself in a room for three days and ordered that it not be opened. But the men of his house peered through the gates, and they saw that his body was flung down like a stone. And so he laid [sic] for three days, shut in and motionless on his bed like a dead man. After three days he came to life and rose to his feet, and from thence on he was called Rabbi Michael the Angel.

Abulafia recommended solitude, where the seeker would not be disturbed. After bathing, the seeker was instructed to do the following:

Drape yourself in your prayer shawl and put *Tefillin* on your head and your arms. This will increase your respect and your thrill before the Shekinah that visits you at this time. Wear clean clothes. If possible, all your clothes should be white. This is of great help for the concentration on awe and love. If this is done at night, light many candles so your eyes are illuminated. Then take in your hand a tablet and ink. They serve you as you will observe that you are going to serve God with joy and good heart.

The seeker would begin exploring the sacred names. Again to quote Abulafia:

Begin then to interchange a number of letters. You can do this to a few or to many. Transpose them and interchange them quickly, until your heart is warmed as a result of these permutations, their movements and what follows. As a result of these permutations, your heart will become extremely hot. Through the permutations, you will gain new knowledge that you would never have learned by human traditions or intellectual analysis. When you experience it, then you are prepared to receive an Influx of Divine Light. The Influx will be conferred on you. It will come to you as many words, one after another. Prepare then your inner thoughts to reveal the Name and the highest Angels. Think of them as being in your heart, like human beings sitting or standing around you. You are among them as an apostle to whom the kingdom and its Servants want to entrust a mission.

Meditation procedures also included controlled breathing and bodily postures or gestures. Some mystics evidently followed Elijah's example [*1 Kings* 18:42], putting their heads between their knees. Abulafia recommended a prescribed series of head movements, correlated with the words being intoned and with the rhythm of breathing:

When you come to the *cholem* [a vowel point corresponding to the sound "o"] with the letters *Yod* and *Qof*, turn your head to the right. Do not incline your head right or left, or down or up. Keep your head straight, as if you were facing a person of the same size as yourself. Then, while you make the sound of the letter, start moving your head upward toward to the sky. Close your eyes, open your mouth, and let the words come forth. Clear your throat so that the sound is clear and does not disturb your pronunciation. While you exhale, continue to raise the head so that you end the exhalation and the movement of the head at the same time.

Initially, the seeker would write the names on his pad. But, as the ecstatic state heightened, the pen and tablet would fall from his hands and he recited or chanted the names, or simply allowed them to flow through his mind. Here we see the progression toward the *apophatic* state described

by contemplatives. Perhaps at some point conscious awareness of the names would cease entirely.

In due course, the seeker experiences profound physical and psychological effects. In Abulafia's words:

The blood within you will begin to vibrate because of the living permutations that loosen it. Your entire body will then begin to tremble, and all your limbs will be seized with shuddering. You will experience the terror of God, and will be enveloped with fear of Him.

Elsewhere he described the intensity of the physical convulsions that could occur:

Your whole body starts to shake until you think you are going to die. This is because your soul separates from your body as a result of the Great Joy that you experience when you perceive and acknowledge these things. In your mind, you choose death rather than life. Because death only involves the body and as a result, the soul lives forever when it is resurrected. You know when you've reached a level where you get the Divine Influx.

Clearly ecstatic meditation carried significant risks. Merkabah mystics were exposed to possible destruction by malevolent angels guarding the hekhaloth. The ecstatic Kabbalist was exposed to possible psychosis or even death. Nevertheless, the experience of uncontrollable convulsions was viewed as an essential demonstration that the seeker had attained the desired state of consciousness. Eventually the convulsions would end, leaving the seeker in a state of inexorable peace; Abulafia continued:

You will then feel as if an additional spirit is within you, arousing you and strengthening you, passing through your entire body and giving you pleasure. It will seem as [if] you have been anointed with perfumed oil, from head to foot.

The seeker might gain a profound sense of enlightenment. One of Abulafia's students experienced an all-pervading light:

I noticed that the candle was about to go out [and] rose to put it right... Then I saw that the light continued... I noticed that it issued from myself... I walked to and fro all through the house and, behold, the light is with me; I lay on a couch and covered myself up, and behold, the light is with me all the while.

The late 13th-century Rabbi Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, who emigrated from Germany to Barcelona, described an experience involving all the senses:

Sometimes, he will hear a voice, a wind, a speech, a thunder, and a noise with all the organs of his hearing sense, and he will see with his imaginative faculty with all the organs of sight, and he will smell with all the organs of smell, and he will taste with all the organs of taste, and he will walk and levitate. All this while the holy letters are in front of his eyes, and its colors are covering it; this is the sleep of prophecy.

The seeker may gain insights of revelation similar to that acquired by the prophets of biblical times. A common experience was for the seeker to see a figure in human form facing him and speaking words of wisdom. The figure might be recognized as a revered teacher or a *maggid*, an angelic messenger. Alternatively, the seeker might recognize the figure as himself. In the words of another of Abulafia's disciples:

When an individual completely enters the mystery of prophecy, he... becomes totally unaware of his own essence, as it were concealed from him. Then he sees his own image standing before him, speaking to him, and telling him of the future. It is regarding this mystery that our sages say, "Great is the power of the prophets, since they liken a form to its Creator."

The Safed scholars, whose work will be discussed in the next segment, are better known for their work on the theoretical Kabbalah. However they were aware of the ecstatic Kabbalah and

conducted their own experiments. Joseph Karo experienced ecstasy by weeping and was rewarded by a vision of the Shekinah, the feminine aspect of God. Moses Cordovero developed a system of meditation on the sefirot, in which the seeker invoked the divine Name along with nine distinct vowels. He and others may even have viewed the ecstatic Kabbalah as superior to the theoretical Kabbalah, though they probably felt that the latter was safer to recommend to students.

Reflections

Mysticism already had a long history in Judaism before the mystical Kabbalah emerged. The Hebrew Bible described cases in which individuals experienced altered states of consciousness, with all or most of the characteristics documented in later reports, including bodily gestures, weeping, visions, encounters with angels, and prophetic utterance.

Merkabah mysticism was a specialized form that flourished at a time when Jews had lost their temple and their homeland, and were struggling to adjust to the realization that God had not come to their rescue. Perhaps to turn inward compensated in some way for the tragedies that confronted them on every side. To leave the physical plane, with all its reminders of loss, and seek the Divine on higher planes may have served an urgent psychological need. The Merkabah mystics' ascent through the hekhaloth could be compared with Mohammed's ascent through the seven heavens at the end of his earthly life.

The mystical Kabbalah was not confined to northern Europe, and it spread to Spain and even to the Safed community in Palestine. Nevertheless it was the Ashkenazim who built the bridge between Merkabah mysticism and the emerging mystical Kabbalah. As noted earlier, the Merkabah mystics may not have expected to achieve union with the Divine; and whether the ecstatic Kabbalists had such expectations—or realized them—is debated. In one area where Moshe Idel disagrees with his mentor Gershom Scholem, the latter says “no,” while the former says “yes.” Even if a mystic had expectations of union, and claimed to have achieved it, we do not know what such union might mean.

We have spoken of the Haside Ashkenaz in medieval Germany. But when the term “Hasidism” is used today, it more often refers to a new Hasidic movement that emerged in the 18th century. The movement's central figure was the Ukrainian Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, also known as the Baal Shem Tov (“Master of the Good Name”), or simply “the Besht.” He sought to restore a sense of spontaneity and joy into Jewish life, in place of what he considered an excessive preoccupation with sin and repentance and overly ponderous study of the Torah and Talmud. Joy was not simply the result of enjoying life but was a precondition of spiritual awareness. According to the Besht, obsession with the minutiae of Jewish law hindered the service of God. Similarly, asceticism, which had been favored by some earlier Kabbalists, was to be avoided. A conspicuous feature of Hasidic religious practice was ecstatic dance.

The Besht seems to have advanced to a level of spirituality exceeding that of most other people. Allegedly he was able to work miracles by invoking the “Good Name”—the Tetragrammaton—though he was rebuked by God for doing so. Moreover, he believed in the possibility of soul ascent, claiming that he had “entered the palace of the Messiah.” Although exploits like those of the Besht may have been rare, the latter-day Hasidism he founded was a mass movement, contrasting with the elitism of the Haside Ashkenaz. It spread rapidly throughout eastern Europe and, in due course, also took hold in the United States; an important Hasidic culture developed among Jews in and around New York City. Initially, Hasidic Jews focused more on spirituality than on traditional study of the Torah and Talmud. Over time, however, the Hasidim have become more traditional in their religious practices, and today their movement is counted among the more orthodox branches of Judaism.

From earliest times to the present Judaism has produced its great mystics. What we do not find, however—at least until very recent times—are any records of women mystics. Judaism never produced mystics comparable to the eighth-century Rabia al-Adawiyya of Basra, or the 12th-century Hildegard of Bingen. Jewish mysticism was confined almost entirely to the ranks of the rabbis, and that background inevitably constrained the range of mystical experiences and the interpretations placed on those experiences. Women’s lot in Judaism was not materially worse than it was under Christianity or Islam, but Mosaic law institutionalized male preeminence. The law was binding only on free adult males; children, adult women, and slaves, were exempt to varying degrees from religious observations and obligations. As one commentator has noted: “Such exemptions had an unavoidable consequence: exempted persons could never serve God fully, and therefore could never stand in the same relationship to God as a free adult male who observed all the commandments.”

The ecstatic Kabbalah is distinguished from the broader mystical Kabbalah by the intensity of its experiences and their effects on the physical, emotional and mental vehicles. But what special character did they have that could produce states of ecstasy? How important was recitation of the divine names? Abulafia’s meditation procedures were impressive in their scope and detail. But how essential was the permutation of Hebrew letters to the process?

While only those who have “been there” can answer such questions, we can surmise that the controlled breathing may have induced hyperventilation. Recitation of long lists of words, together with prescribed gestures and breathing patterns, was a powerful exercise in concentration—particularly since such heavy emphasis was placed on conformity with the procedures. We can only speculate on whether the fact that the words were considered to be divine names had a significant bearing on the outcome. What we do not know is how reliable the procedures were in producing ecstatic states. From Abulafia’s and his students’ testimony we know that it could work. But we do not know how often they tried and failed. Nor has there been enough experimentation to indicate whether Abulafia’s procedures could be applied successfully today. Whether the ecstatic Kabbalah continues to offer a valid spiritual path will be discussed in a later segment.

Resources

- Abraham of Worms (Georg Dehn, ed.) *The Book of Abramelin: a New Translation.* Ibis Press, 1458/2006.
- Moshe Idel *Kabbalah: New Perspectives.* Yale Univ. Press, 1988.
The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia. State Univ. of New York Press, 1988.
- Aryeh Kaplan *Meditation and the Kabbalah.* Weiser, 1982.
Sefer Yetzirah. Weiser Books, 1997.
- Gershom Sholem. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism.* Schocken Books, 1946/1954.
Kabbalah. Meridian Books, 1974.

Journal Articles:

- John F. Nash “Abulafia and the Ecstatic Kabbalah.” *The Esoteric Quarterly*, Fall 2008, pp. 51-64.

Other Online Resources:

Online gematria database and calculator http://www.biblewheel.com/gr/GR_Database.asp

Assignment

Instructions for preparing your report are provided below. Your report should be headed SES Kabbalah Course, Segment 3, and should include your name, email address, and date of submittal. Send your report to seselectives@gmail.com.

- Following are a number of issues raised in this segment of the course. Write a paper addressing at least two of the issues in depth.
 - (a) Any kind of mysticism involves the raising of consciousness to higher levels of reality. Discuss the metaphors used to describe the process: a chariot ride, climbing a mountain or the rungs of a ladder, ascending the sefiroth, etc. What do mystics hope to find at the higher levels? Which elements of the human constitution—dense physical body, etheric body, emotional body, lower or higher mind, “soul”—might be involved in the ascent? [“Astral body” should be avoided because it has a different meaning in the western esoteric tradition than in Theosophical teachings.]
 - (b) Calculate the numerical values of the sefirothic names (Kether, Chokmah...) using Hebrew gematria. How many distinct permutations can be created from ADNY (the Hebrew transliteration of Adonai)? Select three or four permutations and insert vowels to make them pronounceable. Remember that in Hebrew “A” (alef) and “Y” (yod) are regarded as consonants. Sound your “divine names” and record your impressions.
 - (c) Study the large-font Hebrew letters provided in Appendix 3. Select six letters of your choice and carefully draw them on a sheet of paper. Meditate on your letters each day for a week, allowing them to speak to you. Record the impressions you receive.
 - (d) Clearly, the content of some mystical experiences may be too intimate to share. And clearly, one should always maintain a sense of proportion concerning the possible importance of such experiences. Bearing those considerations in mind, briefly describe any memorable mystical experiences you may have had. Have there been times when you have experienced profound elation or ecstasy? What were the circumstances that promoted the experience?
 - (e) What reasons might you have to embark on a spiritual path which included the active pursuit of ecstatic states? How might that type of activity fit into other aspects of your spiritual work? Do you think the pursuit of ecstatic states would be worthwhile, or ethical?
- Do you have any questions or comments about this segment of the course?

The instructor will critique the report, respond to questions, offer suggestions for further study, and provide encouragement in your subsequent work in the course.