

NOT ALL IS IN THE HANDS OF HEAVEN:  
ESCHATOLOGY AND KABBALAH

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The different manifestations of Jewish mysticism may be categorized loosely into two major periods. The first period emerged in the last centuries before the Common Era and continued until at least the sixth century CE.<sup>1</sup> The written evidence that was preserved from this period is primarily concerned with the mystical perpetuation of the Temple and the accompanying priestly service.<sup>2</sup> This literature originated from within the prophetic vision of Ezekiel, known as the Vision of the Chariot, and was perceived as a visionary transformation of the desolated First Temple.<sup>3</sup> Priestly circles in Qumran, the self-proclaimed Sons of Light or the Priestly Sons of Zadok, elaborated upon this Vision of the Chariot in the second and first centuries BCE and described the divine worship as an eternal angelic liturgy taking place in the seven heavenly Temples.<sup>4</sup> The angelic worship was described in

1. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 3rd edn, 1967), pp. 40-79, 355-69; I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980); R. Elior, 'Mysticism, Magic and Angelology: The Angelology of Hekhalot Literature', *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1 (1993), pp. 3-53.

2. Cf. H.H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic: A Study of Jewish and Christian Apocalypses from Daniel to Revelation* (London: Athlone, 1963); J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1987); *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (ed. J. Charlesworth; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983); note there First Enoch, Second Enoch, Jubilees, Testament Of Abraham and the Testament of Levi.

3. See D.J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988); R. Elior, 'From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shines', *Tarbiz* 64.3 (1995), pp. 341-80 (English version in *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 1998 forthcoming).

4. For a general survey on Qumran literature see D. Dimant, 'Qumran Sectarian Literature', in M. Stone (ed.), *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (Assen:

great detail within these priestly-mystical circles which perpetuated the divine liturgy in their hymns and rituals by replicating the angels in their numinous divine service in heaven.<sup>5</sup> By the first centuries of the Common Era, after the destruction of the Second Temple, related mystical circles, the self-proclaimed Yordei-Merkavah (descenders of the chariot), became active. These mystics elaborated upon the existing themes of the sevenfold heavenly Temple and the eternal angelic liturgy and created the mystical literary corpus which became known as the Hekhalot literature.<sup>6</sup> In the Hekhalot literature, both the mythical eternity of the heavenly service, which had been fashioned after the priestly vocation, as well as the mystical ascent, which embodied the angelic myth, overshadow any historical or apocalyptic concerns and take precedence over all interest in mundane affairs and eschatological schemes.

The mystical literary corpus of late antiquity included diverse apocalyptic and eschatological expressions; however, the threefold emphasis on the eternal heavenly temple, on the ongoing angelic service and on the mystical ascent of an elect few replaced all concern with earthly expectations of an imminent redemption that might take place within history.

The second period of Jewish mysticism arose in the first centuries of the second millennium CE and was mainly concerned with queries attempting to delve into the obscured heavenly realm and into the eternal pre-deterministic schemes for spanning the interval between the beginning of time and the end of the days. Mystical writings of both the medieval and early modern periods express great reflection upon the application of these schemes to the concepts of exile and redemption. The literary heritage of this second period is commonly

Van Gorcum, 1984), pp. 483-548. On the Angelic Service cf. J. Strugnell, 'The Angelic Liturgy at Qumran, 4Q Serekh Shiroi "Olat Hasabbat"', in *Congress Volume Oxford 1959* (VTSup. 7; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960), pp. 318-45.

5. See C. Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 1-81.

6. Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 40-79; *idem*, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2nd edn, 1965); Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*; P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and the Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* (trans. A. Pomerance; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Elior, 'Mysticism', and *idem*, 'From Earthly Temple' see there extensive updated bibliography on Hekhalot literature and Merkavah Mysticism.

known as Kabbalah and has a distinct eschatological character throughout many of its expressions.<sup>7</sup>

Kabbalistic literature was composed during the afflictions and the anguish of exile and was concerned with the redemption of the Jewish nation or with the creation of an alternative reality which would reverse the course of Jewish history by means of a miraculous divine intervention. The point of departure for this literature was the all too apparent truth that the long expected messianic coming as based on biblical eschatology had not been fulfilled.

Kabbalistic eschatology was nurtured from three sources: (1) from dreams and visions of the mystics themselves which revived the Biblical tradition and envisaged anew the pre-deterministic scope of history, (2) from the mythical eschatology of the Zohar which reflects a profound dualist perception of the Divinity and the Cosmic Processes, (3) and from the Talmudic-eschatological tradition which laid the foundation for messianic expectation within history.

The underlying conception of the Kabbalistic eschatological tradition was formulated in *Tikunei Zohar*, a Medieval pseudographic text written about 1300, which was ascribed most convincingly to Rabbi Simeon Bar Yohai, a sage living in the Late Mishnaic period.<sup>8</sup> The eschatological tone of the text is readily perceived:

'Elijah of blessed memory said to Rabbi Simeon Bar Yohai, may he rest in peace, how privileged are you in that] from this book of yours elevated people will be sustained, until this book is revealed to those below in the last generation in the end of days, and because of it you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants... each of you shall return to his dwelling and each of you shall return to his family (Lev. 25.10), and therefore it is explained that through the book of the Zohar they will go out of exile.'<sup>9</sup> According to the Zoharic

7. G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974); *idem*, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991); *idem*, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965); I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* (3 vols.; trans. D. Goldstein; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

8. Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 156-204, note esp. p. 162; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, introduction.

9. *Tikunei Zohar* (ed. R. Margalit; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2nd edn, 1978 [Mantova, 15581]), end of Tikun VI f.23b-24a; Raaya Mehemna, Zohar Vaykra. f. 124b.

tradition, the secrets of the Kabbalah (which were assumed to have been written in the second century as noted above) were hidden for a thousand years and were destined to be revealed only at the End of Days. Thus their revelation in the end of the thirteenth century and their dissemination in the following period signified the emergence of the messianic era. Kabbalistic circles inferred from this assertion that by virtue of those who study the Zohar redemption shall come in the near future. The imminent connection between the study of the Zohar and the resultant hastening of redemption enhanced the study of the Zohar with an eschatological perspective. Similarly, the coming of the Messiah was exclusively preconditioned by the dissemination of Kabbalah.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, a twofold attitude was established—the revelation of the Zohar attests that the End of Days is near; however, only through the study of this book's mystical content and by means of its wide dissemination could the fulfillment of the hidden eschatological plan for redemption be assured.<sup>11</sup>

In the mystical tradition, the concepts of exile and redemption were diametrically symbolized respectively as defilement and holiness, as Kelipha and Kedushah, as Satan and Shekinah or as the power of evil combating the forces of the divinity. The struggle between heavenly holiness against earthly defilement signifies the ongoing battle between a prevailing exile and the yearned-for redemption. The study of the Zohar and the fulfillment of the commandments with Kabbalistic intention alongside a denial of mundane concerns were conceived to be the pre-eminent manner by which the powers of holiness could be strengthened and the redemption could be hastened. Conversely, both the commitment of sin, the indulgence in mundane concerns and negligence in the dissemination of the mystical writings were perceived as strengthening the powers of evil and contributing to the

זממה בני נטמי לרחמי יחפזכונן מואן חבורא רילך כד ארגליא לרחמי ברררא בתראא בסתר יצמיא ובניניה וקראתם דרור בארץ (ייקרא כה, י) כואן חבורא רילך דארתא ספר הורה יפקין ביה קן לרחמי . . .

10. Cf. I. Tishby, 'The Controversy on the Printing of the Zohar in 16th Century Italy', *Studies in Kabbalah and its Branches* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), pp. 79-182; R. Elior, 'The Dispute on the Position of the Kabbalah in the 16th century', *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981), pp. 177-90.

11. Cf. Y. Hayat, introduction to *Minhat Yehudah*, in *Ma'arechet Elohut* (Maniowa, 1558).

continuation of exile.<sup>12</sup> These ideas which had prevailed in diverse esoteric Kabbalistic circles were amplified by the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

The Spanish Expulsion uprooted and dispersed overwhelming numbers of the Jewish people and created a devastating impression on this generation and indeed on the generations to follow throughout the course of the entire sixteenth century.<sup>13</sup> The banishment was perceived neither as a mere historical incident nor as an arbitrary political decision of the mundane powers that could be compensated for within the stipulations of realistic-historical circumstance. The catastrophe was expressly interpreted in religious terms as a part of an all-encompassing and predetermined process signifying the End of Days, of which the expulsion was only the initial manifestation of approaching events.<sup>14</sup> There is no doubt that the ordeal of the expulsion sharpened the realities of existence in exile and facilitated eschatological expectations for the miraculous intervention of God in history, a circumstance which would culminate in the imminent coming of the Messiah.<sup>15</sup> The exiles were searching ceaselessly for different signs for their eschatological assertions and they found support in the mystical tradition. The 'revelation' of the Zohar in the late medieval period was considered by the exiles and their followers as a significant

12. Cf. R. Elior, 'The Doctrine of Transmigration in Galila-Raza', in L. Fine (ed.), *Essential Papers on Kabbalah* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 243-69; Elior, 'The Dispute', pp. 185-90.

13. Y. Baer, *Galut* (Berlin: Schocken Books, 1936), pp. 49-69; H.H. Ben Sasson, 'Exile and Redemption through the Eyes of the Spanish Exiles', in S. Ettinger et al. (eds.), *ל'גרות בער*, *Yizhak Baer Jubilee Volume*; Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel, 1960), pp. 216-27; J. Hacker, 'New Chronicles on the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain', in *Yizhak F. Baer Memorial Volume*, Zion 44.1-4, (1979), pp. 201-28; G. Scholem, *דורי*, *Major Trends* (n. 1 שבו'ר צבי והרברקה דורי, Scholem, *Major Trends* (n. 1 above), pp. 244-51.

14. See Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 67-79. Cf. Joseph the son of Shaltiel HaCohen, who wrote in 1495: 'I suppose that the troubles that happened to the Jews in the Christian world from 1490 to 1495 are the pre-messianic tribulations' (Vatican MS 187, end of Sefer Ha-Piiah).

15. Cf. A. Halevi, *Mishra Kirin* (Constantinople, 1510); cf. *Kiryat Sefer* 2 (1925), pp. 101-104, 269-73; *Kiryat Sefer* 7 (1930), pp. 149-65, 440-56; S. Eben Lavi, *Kelem Paz* (Gerba: Jacob Hadad, 1940), f. 12a; Shlomo Molcho, *Sefer HaMefoar* (Saloniki, 1529), cf. A.Z. Aescoly, *בשרא*, *תחיית המשיח* (Jewish Messianic Movement) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1956), pp. 266-80.

expression of the eschatological times. Already in 1498 the messianic promise of the Zohar was merged with the religious interpretation of the Expulsion by Yehudah Hayat, yet another survivor from Spain:

Hence it is explained that the Zohar was destined to be hidden until the last generation when it shall be revealed unto man; by virtue of its students the Messiah will come, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord and that will be the reason for his coming.<sup>16</sup>

The convergence between the hastening of redemption and the dissemination of the study of Kabbalah was securely founded in the tradition of the Zohar and was increasingly elaborated in diverse directions in different Kabbalistic circles along the sixteenth century.

The traumatic historical event was perceived in the first few decades of the sixteenth century as the foundation and background for the coming redemption since the events were interpreted as pre-messianic tribulations.<sup>17</sup> The tribulations were construed as apocalyptic birth-pangs which would culminate in the inevitable coming of the Messiah, delivered from heaven through the study of the Zohar. This messianic resurgence found various expressions in apocalyptic writings of the sixteenth century and in the pre-messianic figures of David Ha-Reuveni and Shlomo Molcho. This stage of acute expectations for miraculous divine intervention accompanied by eschatological announcers about imminent messianic redemption, reached a dramatic climax with the execution by auto-da-fe of Shlomo Molcho, who chose to be burnt at the stake in Mantua in 1532 as a martyr rather than to submit to the Papal decree demanding a renunciation of his profound belief in imminent messianic expectations.<sup>18</sup>

The martyrdom of Molcho imposed a grave impression on the broad Jewish community and caused suppression of acute messianic expectation. Rabbi Joseph Karo, a leading rabbinic figure in Turkey who was associated with Molcho, began to receive what he perceived as auditory and visual heavenly visitations which embody the concepts of exile and redemption in a new way that changed the nature of mystical eschatology. Karo left detailed recordings of his visions in his mysti-

16. Y. Hayat, *Minhat Yehudah*, Introduction.

17. See, R. Elior, 'Messianic Expectations and Spiritualization of Religious life in the Sixteen Century', *REJ* 145 (1986), pp. 1-2, 35-49.

18. Cf. Aescoli, *Jewish Messianic Movements*, pp. 236-80. Cf. Shlomo Molcho, *Hayat Kane* (Amsterdam, 1660 [?]; Paris: Edition Aescoli, 1938); *idem*, *Sefer Hamefoar*.

cal diary which was published posthumously as *Maggid Mesharim*.<sup>19</sup> He wrote of hearing the heavenly voice of the Shekhinah (the Divine presence which dwells, ideally, in the Holy of Holies in the temple. When the temple does not stand the Shekhinah is spoken of as being in exile and is described as the female aspect of the Godhead) urging him and his fellow mystics in Turkey to redeem this divine entity from the bondage of exile:

My friends, my beloved... blessed are you... that you have undertaken to crown me tonight, for it is now many years since the crown fell from my head. I have no one to comfort me and I am cast into the dust, embracing dunghheaps. But now you have restored the crown to its former glory... therefore my sons, be strong, resolute and joyful in my love, my Torah and my reverence; and if you could surmise the minutest part of the grief that is my lot... therefore, be strong and resolute and desist not from study... therefore, stand upon your feet and exalt me... and She repeated, blessed are you, resume your studies and desist not for one instant and go to the Land of Israel instantly... and through you I have been exalted tonight.<sup>20</sup>

The Shekhinah had described itself in the words of the book of Lamentations as a sorrowful captive thrown on the dunghills, desolated and tormented in exile and yearning for deliverance and salvation. This salvation could only be achieved by the actions of the mystical circle of Karo and his associates, who would transform and indeed forever reverse the respective roles of heaven and earth. The human being is perceived as the redeemer of the deity who is in exile, as against the traditional perception in which the redemption descends from heaven in order to free the Jewish nation from the enslavement of exile. The significance of this change is invested in the reversal of man's position from a passive to an active role as well as the shift in focus of the idea of redemption from the earthly historical arena onto a heavenly mythological arena. The Shekhinah can be redeemed from its exile only by man as the redeemer who alone can execute the restitution of heaven and earth back to their pre-exilic positions. Furthermore, the redemption affects directly the heavenly powers and not the

19. R.J. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo Lawyer and Mystic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). Cf. J. Karo, *Sefer Maggid Mesharim* (Petah-Tikva: Y. Bar Lev, 1990. First published in Lublin, 1648, common edition Jerusalem: Ora-press, 1960).

20. Cf. *Maggid Mesharim* (Jerusalem: Ora-press, 1960), Introduction.

immediate destiny of man. The nature of the human engendered redemption—in which the mystic becomes the active agent for redemption while God becomes a passive subject—is detailed in the decree of the divine voice which had been heard by Karo. He and his associates were called upon to ascend immediately to the desolated Land of Israel, to study ceaselessly, to adhere constantly to the Shekhinah in their thoughts and prayers, to study Zohar and to disseminate Kabbalah in order to strengthen the powers of holiness over the powers of evil. Only through these actions could the exiled deity be elevated and restored to its former situation and thus fulfill the call of divine redemption.<sup>21</sup>

After 1536 the members of the Kabbalistic circles could not await passively any longer. They 'elevated' themselves to the Land of Israel in order to fulfil the mystical elevation of the Shekhinah and they established the community of mystics at Safed.

This new attitude—that which concentrated all efforts on affecting the heavenly powers through comprehensive study of Kabbalah and consolidation of new mystical rituals which would generate salvation of the Shekhinah—gradually relinquished a belief in the miraculous intervention of God in history and abandoned the passive stance for external revolutionary change in the order of the universe.

The active attitude towards an eschatological future—which focused upon the dissemination of the Kabbalah and on the ritual practice of *yihudim* and *kavanot* (that is, mystical intentions and Kabbalistic contemplation)—replaced the traditional submissive expectation which entrusted redemption in the hands of heaven and generated profound spiritualization of religious life.<sup>22</sup>

In the course of the sixteenth century, Kabbalism underwent a significant transformation as it formed a conjunction with the contemporary eschatological notions. This conjunction between eschatological hopes and mystical beliefs had two major consequences. The first was the transformation of the Kabbalah from an elitistic-esoteric concern of an elect few into a popular doctrine readily available to wide circles. The mystics of the sixteenth century took an active course in the

dissemination of Kabbalistic eschatology, altering the traditional dichotomies between esotericism and exotericism.<sup>23</sup> All were urged and exhorted to engage in the study of Kabbalah. As a result of this over-riding demand, the books of the Zohar were published in 1558 since until that date they existed only in manuscript form, being exclusively reserved for the elect few. This unprecedented breach of esoteric tradition was justified by the obligation to hasten redemption through the study of the mystical Scriptures.<sup>24</sup> The sense of eschatological expectation is candidly expressed by many mystics who asserted that they were motivated to commit their mystical visions into writing on account of their profound belief in the inevitable eschatological course of history and the imminent approach of the end of days.<sup>25</sup>

The second significant outcome of the fusion between Kabbalah and messianic expectation was a comprehensive process of spiritualization that entailed a profound change in Jewish religious life. This process was propagated by diverse mystical circles who challenged and criticized the common predominant perception of religion while striving to establish the claim for spiritual supremacy of the Kabbalah in of all aspects of religious life.<sup>26</sup> These attempts became apparent with the attempt to establish a new definition of the relation between Kabbalah and Halakhah in light of the prevailing eschatological expectations.<sup>27</sup>

Before the sixteenth century Kabbalistic interests had existed harmoniously, for the most part, alongside the dominance of the Halakhah, since it occupied a marginal esoteric role. However in the course of the sixteenth century the earlier marginal position of the Kabbalah was replaced with a claim of supremacy through a doctrine that promoted radical change in Jewish life for the sake of advancing the messianic era. The Kabbalistic literature that was written from the turn of the sixteenth century onwards testifies to the various stages in the

23. Cf. n. 10 above.

24. Cf. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*; *idem*, 'The Controversy', introduction; Eliot, 'The Dispute'.

25. R. Eliot (ed.), *Galia Raza, A Critical Edition of Oxford Manuscript Opp. 104* (Jerusalem: The Institute for Jewish Studies Publications, 1981), Introduction.

26. E. Gottlieb, *Studies in Kabbalistic Literature* (ed. J. Hacker; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1976), pp. 370-96; R. Eliot, 'The Doctrine of Transmigration in Galia-Raza', in L. Fine (ed.), *Essential Papers on Kabbalah* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 243-69.

27. J. Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984).

21. Cf. R. Eliot, 'R. Joseph Karo and R. Israel Baal Shem Tov: Mystical Metamorphosis, Kabbalistic Inspiration and Spiritual Internalization', *Tarbiz* 65 (1996), pp. 671-709 (English translation forthcoming).

22. Cf. Eliot, *Expectation and Spiritualization*.

formation of alternative religious norms in which the roles of Halakha and Kabbalah were reversed.<sup>28</sup>

The common denominator of the diverse mystical writings of the period that challenged the supremacy of the Halakha, was the negation of the literal conception of the Torah as possessing sufficient religious spiritual meaning and true knowledge of God:

Regarding the Torah in its literality, which is the Torah of the mundane world, it is worthless when compared to the Messianic Torah and the Torah of the world to come. . . . Regarding the Mishnah, there can be no doubt that the Mishnah's literal aspects are but veils, shells and outer wrappings when compared to the hidden mysteries which are inherent and insinuated in its inner aspects (i.e. Kabbalah).<sup>29</sup>

The Kabbalistic conception denied the relevance of the prevailing rational perspective and legal orientation which derived from the literal reading of Scriptures, arguing for the existence of a concealed spiritual perception of the Torah and the Mishnah, perceiving both as being invested with hidden divine significance and messianic vocation. This inner meaning was to be found in the Kabbalah of the Zohar and in the writings of its followers. Thus those scholarly tendencies concerned entirely with the law and with literal interpretation were grasped as a direct contradiction to the foundation of the mystical perception and its messianic vocation and therefore should be rejected and contested.<sup>30</sup>

The culmination of this new orientation is to be found in the introduction to the Lurianic magnum opus *Etz Hayyim*, written by Hayyim Vital in the later part of the sixteenth century.<sup>31</sup> *Etz Hayyim* expounds the essence of the new Lurianic Kabbalah that flourished in Safed in the second half of the sixteenth century. Vital's introduction to this work does not relate to the new mystical beliefs that were introduced by Issac Luria but rather summarizes the ideological

28. Elijor, 'The Dispute'.

29. Hayyim Vital, *Etz-Hayyim* [Warsaw, 1891; Jerusalem, 1910], 'Introduction to the Gate of Introductions', p. 2.

30. G. Sed-Rajna, 'Le Role de la Kabbale dans la tradition juive selon Hayyim Vital', *RHR* 167 (1965), pp. 177-96; R. Elijor, 'Messianic Expectations', J. Katz, 'Halakha and Kabbalah as Competing Subjects of Study', *Da'at* 7, (1981), pp. 61-63.

31. On *Etz Hayyim* see Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 254, 409-14; cf. nn. 29, 30 above.

background of the struggle for the new position which the Kabbalah had been seeking to attain throughout the first half of the sixteenth century. Each of Vital's contentions presented in the introduction had been previously stated in the Kabbalistic literature of the generation of the expulsion. In other words, the introduction to *Etz Hayyim* is the summation of the spiritual turning-point of the first part of the sixteenth century and not the announcement of its second manifestation that was embodied in the Lurianic Kabbalah.

Vital wrote his introduction as a reflection upon the change in the order of priorities stemming from his eschatological hopes. He strove to amend the prevailing misapprehension of the Torah as only law, as nomos or, as the literal meaning revealed, narrative-peshat. He aspired to restore the Torah to its inherent hidden divine origin and true spiritual significance. Vital endeavored to identify the spiritual perception of the Torah with the Kabbalah arguing that the Scripture and the law have a concealed stratum, a position which thereby minimizes the priority of the legal position and the revealed literal layer. He argued that the paramount vocation of the Kabbalistic literature lies in the discovery and decipherment of this layer. In his opinion, traditional legal concerns and Halakhic interpretation in their literality were no longer to be viewed as the center of Judaism since they reflect the Torah of exile. The Kabbalah on the other hand should be placed far above the Halakha in importance and position since it is the Torah of Redemption:

The major scholars of Torah have degenerated into the heresy of denying the validity of the truth while insisting that the only meaning of Torah is the literal meaning, the peshat. The situation is desperate since it is only by means of the Kabbalah that redemption can be brought about while to refrain from it would delay the restoration of our Temple and our Glory.<sup>32</sup>

Vital consolidated this dual perception of the Torah as hidden spirit and revealed law under two opposing concepts which originated in the earlier Kabbalistic literature—Torat Etz Hayyim and Torat Etz Hada'at—the Torah of the Tree of Life and the Torah of the Tree of Knowledge.<sup>33</sup> In the previous mystical tradition, the former concept represents the hidden, superior spiritual and eternal holy Torah which

32. Vital, *Etz-Hayyim*, Introduction, p. 4.

33. See G. Scholem, 'The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism', in *idem*, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, pp. 32-86; cf. pp. 66-70 for the radical meaning of the new spiritual conception.

will prevail in the messianic future. The latter term refers to the subordinate Torah which had already been given to the Jews, that which emphasized literal dimension and legalistic determinations. Vital argued forcefully that the Kabbalah is the *Torat Etz Hayyim* while the Halakah, the Mishna and the Peshat (literal interpretation) are the *Torat Etz Hada'at*. The focus of his contention viewed the literal perception of the Torah and the application of the Halakah as the conclusive deciding medium for all aspects of daily life, as expressions of the era of the exile while the Kabbalah was presented as the expression of the new messianic era, thought to be imminent.<sup>34</sup>

The mystical interpretation of the law with its eschatological perspective was offered as a spiritual alternative to the dominant contemporary Halaehic tradition and to its major exponents. There can be but a small doubt that it was the eschatological orientation, which dominated the mystical circles of this generation, that inspired the daring criticism of the rabbinical establishment as well as the literal legal system. It was the transformation of the acute messianic perspective that motivated a new perception of spiritual priorities and religious hierarchy.

In the first decades after the expulsion, Kabbalistic writings were primarily concerned with immediate redemption delivered from heaven. Mystics were engaged in the definition of an accurate understanding of the eschatological process seen to be obscured within the strata of the Scriptures, and in deciphering the hidden messianic meaning lying behind historical events. These writings concentrated on the attempt to detect apocalyptic meaning within every word of the Scriptures. R. Abraham Ha-Levi, one of the leading Kabbalists of the period once stated: 'Behold, scripture in its entirety is filled with covert allusion to the future redemption'.<sup>35</sup>

In the course of the century the mystical circles transformed the Kabbalah into the sole content of their eschatological expectation and gradually relinquished hope for any external redemption. The spiritual pursuit of the Kabbalistic writings, the mystical interpretation of the textual heritage, as well as the ceaseless efforts to elevate the Shekinah through comprehensive study and innovative rituals

taken together replaced the hopes for redemption and turned the end of the days into a mystical frame of mind in which the study of Kabbalah moved to the paramount position.

As against the ongoing chaotic experience of exile and the passive despair generated by historical reality, Kabbalistic eschatology offered hope and consolation for generations of exiles by consolidating an alternative order for reality and by transcending the constraints of history. This viewpoint offered a sublimation of arbitrary meaningless experience by transforming the events into a stage for a meaningful cosmic-mystical drama of exile and redemption as expressed in the Kabbalah.

Kabbalistic eschatological perspective offered freedom, freedom not only from the bondage of arbitrary historical circumstances by serving as a refuge from the external world but, no less importantly, as freedom from the bondage of traditional thought.

The teachings of Karo and Vital and many other contemporary Kabbalists reflect a comprehensive breach of restraint which was motivated by eschatological speculation: Karo broke the borders of the divine-human relations by reversing the traditional order of the subject of redemption; Vital broke the confines of tradition by inverting the order of the messianic Torah and the Exilic Torah, while many other Kabbalists transcended the borders of time and place, reconstructing both history and metahistory.

34. *Etz-Hayyim*, Introduction (n. 29 above), pp. I-10.

35. A. Halevi, *Mishra Kirin* (Constantinople, 1510), p. 176; cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).