

## EXILE AND REDEMPTION IN JEWISH MYSTICAL THOUGHT

Exile was a formative experience for the Jewish people throughout the progression and development of Jewish history. Exile became the expression of historical circumstance embodying the loss of political sovereignty, the deprivation of independence and the loss of territorial borders. Exile expresses in Jewish consciousness not only stateless existence, deportation, displacement and banishment, but also a profound sense of estrangement, powerlessness, alienation, fear and inferiority as well as lack of sovereignty, a threat of continuity and the abandonment of a communal-religious identity.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout Jewish history exile was a primary factor which generated a culture that was compelled to rely on common religious memory as recorded in sacred texts and in the common sacred language. Both preconditioned the religious life and the shared religious ritual which was centered around the textual heritage and communal hopes allowing self preservation and continuation of the Jewish community. Those three elements formed the bridge spanning the memory of the common national religious-mythological past and the hopes for common national restorative-future. All three were dependent on study, recitation, commemoration, interpretation, imagination and creativity within the confines of an inner spiritual world separated from external realities. Yearning and hope for the expected redemption from the long exile could only have been nurtured and maintained through the means of a ritual commemoration of the past and the mystical reconfiguration of the future.<sup>2</sup>

In utter contrast to the all-encompassing miseries of exile and to the incompatible concepts of time and place within the surrounding cultures, the Jews instituted an alternative inner chronology and a distinct interpretation or perception for historical memory which confronted life in exile and which maintained the hopes for redemption.<sup>3</sup> Jewish spirituality and ritual life of commemoration were centered around the study of holy scriptures through two

---

<sup>1</sup> Y.F. Baer, *Galut*, Berlin 1936 and see note 14 below.

<sup>2</sup> On the daily life inspired by these perceptions, see Y. Katz, *Tradition and Crisis*, Boston 1990.

<sup>3</sup> H.Y. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor, Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Washington 1982.

major attitudes of study known as *halakhah* and *kabbalah*. *Halakhah* confronted the existential needs according to the traditional legislative and interpretative process which drew its legitimacy from the past, while *kabbalah* was focused on the esoteric or hidden meanings of the literal sacred texts and on restructuring the divine realm in relation to metahistorical schemes which would decipher the inevitable course of the redemptive future.<sup>4</sup>

Jewish mystical thought, that which had developed in France, Spain, and Germany in the second millennium of Jewish exile, in the wake of the crusades, the religious persecutions and the expulsions,<sup>5</sup> could be characterized as a theological response which attempted to challenge the exilic existence. Kabbalistic mystical literature negated the validity of empirical reality, a reality which came to be perceived as exile and enslavement, and opposed the conventional social norms of a world that came to be defined as *sitra ahra* and *kelipah* (the other side, the ultimate powers of evil). *Kabbalah* consolidated an alternative order that was perceived as the passageway towards redemption and freedom associated with *sitra dekdusha* and *shekinah* (powers of holiness, divine presence).<sup>6</sup> This theological perspective that transformed enforced historical destiny into a cosmic *historia sacra* was consolidated as a response to historical experience that perceived the world order as exile and dispersion while constructing an alternative spiritual order of redemption and regathering of the people. It should be emphasized that such a spiritual response to historical changes and iniquity was the only avenue left opened before the Jewish communities which possessed neither political power nor military force throughout the course of its long exile.

Much of the Jewish mystical tradition is primarily concerned with the explicit distinction between exile and redemption. The absurdities of the hazardous and

<sup>4</sup> Y. Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 1984, 15.

<sup>5</sup> On the list of tragic historical events that affected the life of European Jewry in the Christian world, see Jonathan Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550-1570*, Oxford 1985, 6-36.

<sup>6</sup> On the *kabbalah* see: G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York 1967<sup>3</sup>; G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 1974; G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, New York 1965; G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, New York 1991; G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, (trans. A. Arkush) Princeton 1987; I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, (trans. D. Goldstein) Oxford 1989. For contemporary definitions, critical appraisals, and updated bibliography on *kabbalah* and Jewish mysticism see: R. Elior, 'Panea haShonot shel haHerut [various dimensions of freedom]: Studies in Jewish Mysticism', in: *Alpayim* 15 (1997), 9-119 (English version is forthcoming in 2005 from Littman Library, Oxford, and will be called: *Jewish Mysticism: The Quest for Spiritual Freedom*); M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Yale 1988; Y. Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Mysticism*, (trans. B. Stein) Albany 1993; E.R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton 1994; J. Dan, *On Sanctity, Religion, Ethics and Mysticism in Judaism and Other Religions*, Jerusalem 1997.

persecuted Jewish existence within seemingly 'normative' present became to be perceived as Exile. Redemption came to be perceived as a utopian dimension of yearned-for existence within a seemingly near and fast approaching 'messianic' future. Redemption signifies the aspirations for a reversal of existential experience – an alternative mode of existence encompassing vision of freedom, liberty, equality and sovereignty, autonomic power and independent being, promise for continuity, replacement, an ingathering within national territory, divine providence and an eternal messianic order of justice and liberty.<sup>7</sup>

The cruelty of historical reality, which patterned Jewish existence in exile for two thousand years, was the prevailing existential experience. This existence not only denied Jews any common geohistorical borders and foreseeable continuity within shared time and place, but also denied them the sense of normality in life and equal participation in worldly concerns. Life as an exiled, persecuted and marginalized minority caused intensification of the only domain where sovereignty could be allowed and continuity was expected – the spiritual realm expressed in the language of the sacred texts and holy ritual. The religious obligation of never ending study as the primary course of religious devotion and cleaving to the divine as an expression of spiritual freedom was entailed in this intellectual creativity of legal deliberation and mystical imagination. The sacred texts of the Bible, the Mishnah and the Talmud, were perceived as multifaceted and infinite: their sacred literal form was the source of deriving law and instituting norm and order, and as such, related to the revealed world within given time and place. The concealed and equivocal renderings were considered as relating to an inexplicable and divine world beyond any limits of given time and space.<sup>8</sup>

Kabbalistic literature was composed during the adversity and the anguish of Exile and was concerned with the redemption of the Jewish nation or in the creation of an alternative reality which would reverse the course of Jewish history and would transcend borders of time and place. The point of departure of this literature, which was concerned with the combination of eschatological perceptions with hopes of redemption, occurred with the perception of the all too apparent truth that the long expected messianic coming as based on biblical eschatology had not and would not immediately be fulfilled.

The underlying conception of the kabbalistic eschatological tradition was formulated in *Tikkunei Zohar*, a medieval pseudepigraphic mystical text written

---

<sup>7</sup> On the spiritual meaning of exile and redemption see: G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, New York 1971; G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Zevi*, (trans. R.Z. Werblowsky) Princeton 1973, introduction.

<sup>8</sup> G. Scholem, 'The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism', in: G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, New York 1965, 32-86.

about 1300, though ascribed to Rabbi Simeon Bar Yohai, a sage living in the second century C.E. in the Late Mishnaic period.<sup>9</sup> The pseudepigraphic text bridges the historical gap of 1000 years between its assumed early date of composition and the much later time of revelation. 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>10</sup>

According to the Zoharic 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 the revelation of the text at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent dissemination in the following period signified for many 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>11</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>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 156-204, note especially p. 162; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, introduction.

<sup>10</sup> *Tikkunei Zohar*, Mantowa 1558, (Ed. R. Margalio, Jerusalem 1978<sup>2</sup>), end of Tikkun VI f.23b-24a; *Raaya Mehemna*, Zohar Vaykra, f.124b.

וכמה בני נשא לתתא יתפרנסון מהאי חבורא דילך כד אתגליא לתתאי בדרא בתראה בסוף יומיא ובגיניא וקראתם דרור בארץ (ויקרא כה, י) בהאי חיבורא דילך דאיהו ספר הזהר .. יפקן ביה מן גלותא...

<sup>11</sup> Cf. I. Tishby, 'The Controversy on The Printing of the Zohar in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italy', in: I. Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and its Branches*, Jerusalem 1982, 79-182; Rachel Elior, 'The Dispute on the Position of the Kabbalah in the 16<sup>th</sup> century', in: *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981), 177-190.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Yehudah Hayat, introduction to *Minhat Yehudah*, in: *Ma'arechet Elohut*, Mantowa 1558.

In the mystical tradition, the contradictory concepts of exile and redemption were diametrically symbolized respectively as defilement and holiness, as *keliphah* and *keddushah*, as *satan* and *shekinah* or as the powers of evil combating the forces of the divinity. The cosmic struggle of heavenly holiness against earthly defilement signifies the ongoing battle between a prevailing exile and the yearned-for redemption. The study of the Zohar, the deciphering of the hidden meaning of scriptures, 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 continuation of exile.<sup>13</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>14</sup> The realistic circumstances which brought about the banishment of the Jews were well known and could not be contested, however, facts could offer but an insufficient explanation and could give no consolation for the devastating experience. 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>15</sup> The exiles were searching ceaselessly for different signs for their eschatological assertions and they found support in

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rachel Elior, 'The Doctrine of Transmigration in Galia-Raza', in: L. Fine (Ed.), *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, New York 1995, 243-269; Elior, *The Dispute*, 185-190.

<sup>14</sup> See: Baer, *Galut*, 49-69; H.H. Ben Sasson, 'Exile and Redemption Through the Eyes of the Spanish Exiles', in: *Yitzhak Baer Festschrift*, Jerusalem 1960, 216-227; J. Hacker, 'New Chronicles on the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain', in: *Zion* 44 (1979), no. 1-4: *Yitzhak F. Baer Memorial Volume*, 201-228; G. Scholem, *Shabbatai Zvi*, Tel Aviv 1967, 9-18; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 244-251.

<sup>15</sup> See Scholem, 'The Meaning of the Torah', 67-79. Joseph the son of Shaltiel HaCohen wrote in 1495: 'I suppose that the troubles that happened to the Jews in the Christian world from 1490 to 1495 are the premessianic tribulations' (Vatican manuscript 187, end of Sefer Ha-Pliah).

the mystical tradition.<sup>16</sup> The 'revelation' of the Zohar in the late medieval period was considered by the exiles and their followers as a significant expression of the emergence of eschatological times. Already in 1498 the messianic promise of the Zohar was merged with the religious interpretation of the Expulsion by Yehudah Hayat, a 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>17</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 during the sixteenth century.

This 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>18</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 († 1542) and Shlomo Molcho (1500-1532). This stage of acute expectations for miraculous divine intervention accompanied by eschatological heralds concerning 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>19</sup>

The martyrdom of Molcho imposed a grievous impression on the broad Jewish community and caused suppression of acute messianic expectation. Rabbi

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Abraham Halevi, *Mishra Kitrin*, Constantinople 1510; cf. *Kiriyat Sefer* 2 (1925), 101-104, 269-273; *Kiriyat Sefer* 7 (1930), 149-165, 440-456; Shimon Eben Lavi, *Ketem Paz*, Gerba 1940, f. 12a; Shlomo Molcho, *Sefer HaMefoar*, Saloniki 1529, cf. A.Z. Aescoly, *Jewish Messianic Movements*, Jerusalem 1956, 266-280.

<sup>17</sup> Yehudah Hayat, *Minhat Yehudah*, introduction.

<sup>18</sup> See Rachel Elior, 'Messianic Expectations and Spiritualization of Religious life in the Sixteenth Century', in: *Revue des Études Juives* 145 (1986) no.1-2, 35-49.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Aescoly, *Jewish Messianic Movements*, 236-280. Cf. Shlomo Molcho, *Hayat Kane*, Amsterdam 1660; Shlomo Molcho, *Sefer HaMefoar*, Saloniky 1529.

Joseph Karo (1488-1575), a leading rabbinic figure in Turkey who was associated with Molcho, began to receive what he perceived as auditory heavenly visitations which embodied the concepts of exile and redemption in a new way that changed the nature of mystical eschatology. The new turn in Karo's vision, that was initiated upon receiving the news about Molcho's death on the stake, was reflected in the assertion that exile and redemption were not any more the historical lot and hope of the people of Israel on earth but they are to be understood as the exile of the *shekhinah* and the redemption of the *shekhinah* in heaven.

Karo left detailed recordings of his visions in his mystical diary which was published posthumously as *Maggid Meisharim*.<sup>20</sup> He wrote of hearing the heavenly voice of the *shekhinah* urging him and his fellow mystics in Turkey who were engaged ceaselessly in the study of the Zohar, to redeem this divine female 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 dunghills. But now you have restored the crown to its former glory through your studies. [...] 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>21</sup>

The exiled *shekhinah* had described itself in the words of the daughter of Zion in 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-cosmic arena. The *shekhinah* can be redeemed from her exile

<sup>20</sup> R.J. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic*, Oxford 1962. Cf. Joseph Karo, *Maggid Meisharim*, Petah-Tikva 1990. (First published in Lublin 1648, common edition Jerusalem 1960.)

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Joseph Karo, *Maggid Meisharim*, Jerusalem 1960, introduction.

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 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 immigrate or 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 and to reinstitute the cosmic order. 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>22</sup>

After 1535 the members of the kabbalistic circles in Turkey could not wait passively any longer, they freed themselves from the place of exile and ‘elevated’ themselves to the Land of Israel in order to fulfil the mystical elevation of the *shekhinah*. They established the community of mystics at Safed, one that the life and writing of its members in the course of the sixteenth century were the source of inspiration to people in exile for four hundred years. Immanent halakhic and kabbalistic writings such as Joseph Karo’s *Beit Yosef*, *Shulhan Aruch* and *Magid Meisharim*, Moshe Kordovero’s *Pardes Rimonim* and *Or Yakkar*, Hayim Vital’s *Etz Hayim*, *Shemonah Shearim* and *Shaarei Kedusha*, Issaia Hurwitz’s *Shnei Luhot Habrit* and many other volumes of mystical teachings written in Safed, reshaped the spiritual consciousness and religious life of the Jewish community in exile.

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 hastening redemption in heaven and constituting eschatological future on earth – which focused upon the dissemination of the kabbalah and on the ritual practice of *yihudim* and *kavanot*, (i.e. mystical intentions and kabbalistic contemplation on the commandments and prayers) and *Tikkunim* (mystical restoration of cosmic order) – replaced the traditional

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Rachel Elior, ‘Rabbi Joseph Karo and Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov: Mystical Metamorphosis and Kabbalistic Inspiration’, in: *Tarbiz* 65 (1996), 671-709.



submissive expectation which entrusted redemption in the hands of heaven and generated profound spiritualization of religious life.<sup>23</sup>

The Kabbalists propagated the dualistic perception which views the world in its entirety as divided between the domains of holiness and evil, Qeddushah and Kelipah. They studied the scriptures as expressing the struggle of the holy and the profane in heaven and earth, and interpreted the commandments as reflecting the dual ontological perception of reality. They believed that these actions assisted the struggle of holiness against evil and moved to change the balance of power between exile and redemption. An example of this attitude that strove to change the state of exile in heaven and on earth and to restore the cosmic order could be found in the kabbalistic writings of Joseph Karo and Moshe Kordovero who integrated the dualistic ontology of the Zohar with the mystical efforts of changing the balance of eschatological history reflected in struggle between exile and redemption: 'All of the Torah is composed of the positive law and the prohibitory law: Positive law refer to the *holy spheres* and prohibitory law is relegated to the *evil spheres of Satan*';<sup>24</sup> 'By perfection of the [kabbalistic] worship, the humiliation of the gentile will occur and their rule will be overthrown, and it is understood according to what is known that this world includes *two supermundane systems, one holy and one profane*'.<sup>25</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 elitist-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>26</sup> All were urged and exhorted to engage in the study of kabbalah for the sake of redemption. As a result of this overriding demand, the books of the Zohar were printed in 1558 since, until that date they existed since they were written for about 270 years only in manuscript form, being exclusively reserved for the elect few. This unprecedented breach of esoteric tradition was justified by the obligation to

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Elijor, 'Messianic Expectation'.

<sup>24</sup> *Maggid Meisharim*, 126.

<sup>25</sup> Moshe Kordovero, *Or Yakkar*, Jerusalem 1986, IV, 155.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Tishby, 'The Controversy on The Printing of the Zohar'; Elijor, 'The Dispute on the Position of the Kabbalah'.

hasten redemption through the study of the mystical scriptures.<sup>27</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>28</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. In the core of this complex process was the distinction between 'law of exile' and 'law of redemption', the first concept was associated with the literal understanding of the halakhah while the second one was associated with the mystical understanding of the kabbalah. This process that distinguished between the law of the present and the law of the future 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 as 'the Messianic Torah and the Torah of the world to come' in of all aspects of religious life.<sup>29</sup> These attempts became apparent with the initiative to establish a new definition of the relation between kabbalah and halakhah in light of the prevailing eschatological expectations.<sup>30</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 onward testifies to the various stages in the formation of alternative religious norms in which the roles of halakhah and kabbalah were reversed.<sup>31</sup>

The common denominator of the diverse mystical writings of the period that challenged the supremacy of the halakhah, the 'Torah of the mundane world',

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*; 'The Controversy on The Printing of the Zohar', introduction; Elior, 'The Dispute on the Position of the Kabbalah'; B. Huss, 'Sefer ha-Zohar as a Canonical Sacred and Holy Text', in: *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1997) no.2, 257-307.

<sup>28</sup> R. Elior (Ed.), *Galia Raza, a Critical Edition of Oxford Manuscript Opp. 104*, Jerusalem 1981, Introduction.

<sup>29</sup> E. Gottlieb, *Studies in Kabbalistic Literature*, (Ed. J. Hacker) Tel Aviv 1976, 370-396; R. Elior, 'The Doctrine of Transmigration in Galia-Raza', in: L. Fine (Ed.), *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, New York 1995, 243-269.

<sup>30</sup> J. Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 1984.

<sup>31</sup> Elior, 'The Dispute on the Position of the Kabbalah'.

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>32</sup>

The kabbalistic conception that was founded on growing estrangement to the world of exile and growing devotion to the hidden world of redemption, 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>33</sup>

The culmination of this new orientation is to be found in the introduction to the Lurianic magnum opus *Etz Hayim*, written by Hayim Vital (1542-1620) in the later part of the sixteenth century.<sup>34</sup> *Etz Hayim* 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 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 Hayim* 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.

<sup>32</sup> Hayim Vital, *Etz-HaYim*, Warsaw 1890, Introduction to the Gate of Introductions, 2.

<sup>33</sup> G. Sed-Rajna, 'Le role de la kabbale dans la tradition juive selon Hayyim Vital', in: *Revue de l'histoire des Religions* 168 (1965), 177-196; Elijior, 'Messianic Expectations and Spiritualization of Religious life'; J. Katz, 'Halakha and Kabbalah as Competing Subjects of Study', in: *Da'at* 7 (1981), 61-63.

<sup>34</sup> On *Etz Hayim*, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 254, 409-414; cf. notes 30, 31 above. On Lurianic kabbalah see L. Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and his Kabbalistic Fellowship*, Stanford 2003.

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 only as law or as literal revealed narrative known as *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 minimize 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 deciphering 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 halakhah 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>35</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 Hayim* and *Torat Etz Hada'at* – the Torah of the Tree of Life and the Torah of the Tree of Knowledge.<sup>36</sup> In the previous mystical tradition, the former concept represents the hidden, superior spiritual and eternal holy Torah which 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 Hayim* while the halakhah, the mishnah 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 halakhah 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 immanent.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Etz-Hayim*, Introduction, 4.

<sup>36</sup> See G. Scholem, 'The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism', in: *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, New York 1965, 32-86; cf. pp. 66-70 for the radical meaning of the new spiritual conception.

<sup>37</sup> *Etz-Hayim*, Introduction, 1-10.

The division between the Torah of the Tree of Knowledge (halakhah) and the Torah of the Tree of Life (kabbalah) symbolized later on in the seventeenth-century Sabbatianism and eighteenth-century Frankism the difference between observing the prevailing norms (halakhah) associated with exile and breaking the borders of halakhah and traditional norms (kabbalah) associated with freedom in paradise before the law was given, but in the sixteenth century it was an expression of internalizing exile and redemption and making them part of the mystical discourse.

The mystical interpretation of the law with its eschatological perspective was offered as a spiritual alternative to the dominant contemporary Halachik-legal 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>38</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 *shekhinah* through comprehensive study, mystical devotion and innovative rituals – taken together, replaced the hopes for historical 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. The kabbalistic approach generated a growing estrangement and alienation to worldly affairs: ascetic measures known as *hishtavut* and *hitbodedut* (indifference to worldly concerns and seclusion) and *mesirut*

<sup>38</sup> Abraham Halevi, *Mishra Kitrin*, Constantinople 1510, 176; cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea In Judaism*, New York 1971.

*nefesh* (symbolic death of the body for the sake of the rebirth of the soul), were introduced as a response of profound alienation to exilic existence. The ascetic measures preconditioned the passage from the external world of exile to the internal world of redemption. Detailed instructions were formulated in the pietistic literature of Safed to teach the details of ascetic measures of separation and alienation towards the world of exile, and ecstatic devotional measures of mystical unity towards the world of redemption.

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. The new course of mystical and ritual activity centered around the ideas of *Galut HaShekhinah* (exile of the divine presence symbolizing the community of Israel) and *Geulat HaShekhinah*, (redemption of the divine presence and the earthly community of Israel) around mutual relations between the heavenly cosmic drama of exile and redemption, separation and unity and the parallel human experience of *Galut Israel* and *Geulat Israel* (exile and redemption of the community of Israel) opened new ways of spiritual intentions and religious experience, mystical rituals and kabbalistic theology of hope.

The kabbalistic eschatological perspective offered freedom from the bondage of arbitrary historical circumstance, by serving as a refuge from the external world, as well as freedom from the bondage of the traditional framework of the literal-legal course of study while passively waiting for redemption. The mystical perspective offered cultivated and demanded active human participation in the cosmic course for redemption and replaced passive waiting with human participation in the divine struggle. *Tikkun* and *Ha'alat Nizozot*, *Geulat ha-Shekhinah*, *Kavanot*, and *Yibudim* and similar mystical concepts relating to human spiritual obligation directed to redeeming the exiled deity, elaborated in Kabbalistic tradition, indicated the new character of the mystical struggle against the bondage of exile.

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 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.

## SUMMARY

The article is concerned with the perception of exile of the Jews who experienced it for two thousand years. In the second millennium in the wake of the crusades Jewish mysticism known as *kabbalah* was developed in conjecture with the spiritual perceptions of exile and redemption. The exile from Spain was a turning point that generated new mystical interpretations on the hidden meaning of history. The passage from exile to redemption was associated with the intense study of the kabbalah. The dissemination of kabbalah was perceived as a tool in hastening redemption and as part of human obligation to redeem the heavenly entity that was exiled. Divine exile and human exile were reassessed in the the post expulsion generation.

*Rachel Elio*, born in 1949 in Jerusalem (Israel), is Professor of Jewish Philosophy and Jewish Mysticism in the Department of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Head of the Department of Jewish Thought. She also is a visiting professor in Princeton University (NJ) and Yeshiva University (NY).

Address: 22 Dan Street, Jerusalem, Israel 93509 (e-mail: [melio@pluto.mscc.huji.ac.il](mailto:melio@pluto.mscc.huji.ac.il)).