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## MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS AND SPIRITUALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY\*

The expulsion from Spain in 1492 left a deep impression on its generation and on the generations to follow throughout the course of the sixteenth century<sup>1</sup>. The banishment was not perceived as mere historical circumstance nor as an arbitrary political consideration that could be compensated for within a realistic historical framework, but rather, as a part of a wide-ranging, comprehensive process, of which the expulsion was only one manifestation among many.

The leaders of the Jewish community, the Rabbis, the sages, and the spiritual leadership pondered the reason underlying exile and sought explanation and meaning for the catastrophe which uprooted the major part of the Jewish People.

The research of Baer, Aescoli, Ben Sasson, and Scholem<sup>2</sup> has revealed that the majority of the spiritual leaders interpreted the expulsion in religious terms, some of these leaders, in particular Itzhak Karo and Joseph Hyon<sup>3</sup> interpreted it as divine punishment and as the abandonment by providence of the people of Israel. Others, in despair and unable to find reasonable answers to the meaning of the torments of the expulsion,

\* This article is the revised and annotated version of a lecture presented at the meeting of the Second Congress of the European Association for Jewish Studies, held in Oxford, England, 22-26 July 1984.

1. Cf. H.H. Ben Sasson, "Exile and Redemption Through the Eyes of the Spanish Exiles", *Yitzhak F. Baer Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem, 1960, pp. 216-227; J. Hacker, "New Chronicles on the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain", *J.F. Baer Memorial Volume*, Zion XLIV 1-4, Jerusalem 1979, pp. 201-228.

2. I. Baer, *Galut*, Berlin, 1936, pp. 49-69. A.Z. Aescoli, *Jewish Messianic Movements*, Jerusalem 1956, pp. 236-280; Ben Sasson, *ibid.*; G. Scholem, *Shabbetai Zvi*, Tel Aviv, 1967, pp. 9-18. *Idem*, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1967, pp. 244-251. *Idem*, "The Idea of Redemption in the Kabbalah", *Devarim Bego*, Tel Aviv 1975, pp. 201-206.

3. Yitzhak Karo, *Toldot Yitzhak*, Mantua 1558, *Parashat Bereshit* (cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V, col. 193f.); Joseph Hyon, *Perush Tehilim*, Saloniki, 1522, p. 166; Isaac-Abravanel, *Perush Ezekiel*, Pisaro, 1520, ch. 20; *idem*, *Ma'ayanai ha-Yeshua'*, *Ma'ayan 12*, ch. 2. Cf. Ben Sasson, *ibid.*, pp. 216-219.

yearned for spiritual redemption and expressed various degrees of detachment from mundane life while striving to attain cultural segregation and a comprehensive spiritualization of all Jewish life<sup>4</sup>.

Other attempts to confront the new realities of this post-expulsion period, can be found in messianic propaganda such as the apocalyptic writings of Abraham ben Eliezer Halevi<sup>5</sup> and his circle; in the homilistics of Shlomo Turiel about the coming Redemption<sup>6</sup>; in letters purporting to reveal the ten lost tribes<sup>7</sup>; in the detailed messianic calculations by the anonymous author of *Galia Raza*<sup>8</sup>; in the pseudo-Zoharic writings of Joseph ibn Shraga<sup>9</sup>; and in the chronicles of Eliahu Kapsali<sup>10</sup>, to name but a few. Their common contention defined the expulsion as the foundation and backdrop for the coming redemption, and the associated catastrophes, as pre-messianic tribulations<sup>11</sup>. This apocalyptic trend was further elaborated by Isaac Abravanel in *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, and later by Solomon Molkho who offered a political-messianic interpretation of the expulsion in his letters and revelations<sup>12</sup>. This interpretation was based in part on the views of the apocalyptic writers aforementioned, but pro-

4. Some representatives of these tendencies: Yehudah Hayat, the author of *Minhat Yehudah, Ma'arekhet Elohut*, Mantua, 1558, introduction (cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* VII, 1005); Immanuel of Benvenuto, the editor of various kabbalistic books; Simon ibn Lavi, *Ketem Paz*, Jerba, 1940.

5. Abraham Halevi, *Mišra Kitrin* (Constantinople 1510); cf. *Kiryat Sefer* II, 1925, pp. 101-104, 269-273 and *Kiryat Sefer* VII, 1930, pp. 149-165, 440-456.

6. See G. Scholem, "A Homily on Redemption by Shlomo of the House of Toriel", *Sefunot* I, 1951, pp. 62-79.

7. A. Neubauer, "The Ten Lost Tribes", *Kovetz Al-Yad* 4, 1888, p. 35. A. Yaari, *Igrot Eretz Ysrael*, Tel Aviv, 1950, pp. 175-177 and 184-185, cf. D. Tamar, "A Letter Concerning the Ten Lost Tribes", *Sefunot* VI, 1962, pp. 305-310. Aescoli, *op. cit.*, pp. 316-328.

8. Cf. R. Elior, *Galia Raza*, critical edition, Research projects of the Institute of Jewish Studies, The Hebrew University, publication series I, Jerusalem, 1981; *idem*, "The Dispute on the Position of the Kabbalah in the 16th Century", *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, I, 1981, pp. 177-190.

9. British Museum Manuscript Add. 27034 p. 3-4a; cf. G. Scholem, "R. Joseph ibn Shraga", *Kiryat Sefer* 7, 1930, pp. 151 f. and *Kiryat Sefer* 8, 1931-2, pp. 262-265; *idem*, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* X, col. 243-244; A. Marx, *R.E.J.* 61, 1911, pp. 137 f.

10. Cf. British Museum Manuscript Add. Or. 19.971. C. Berlin, "A Sixteenth Century Hebrew Chronicle", *Studies in Jewish Bibliography ... in Honor of J.E. Kiev*, New York, 1971, pp. 21-44.

11. Cf. G. Scholem, *Kabbala*, Jerusalem, 1974, pp. 67-79. Rabbi Joseph ben Shaltiel ha-Cohen wrote in 1495: "I suppose that the troubles that happened to the Jews in the Christian world from 1490-1495 ... are the pre-messianic tribulations". Vatican manuscript 187, end of *Sefer ha-Pliah*. This explanation is to be compared with the exegesis of I. Abravanel on Isaiah 43:6 (Pisaro 1520) and with *Ketem Paz* p. 12a.

12. Cf. Solomon Molkho, *ḥayat Kane* (Amsterdam 1660?); *idem*, *Sefer ha-Mefo'ar*, Saloniki, 1529; cf. Aescoli, *op. cit.*, pp. 266-280.

ceeded to integrate realistic means and political dimensions into the messianic apocalypse<sup>13</sup>.

We shall focus our attention on one dimension of the many solutions offered, i.e., the mystical ideology behind the radical spiritualization within religious life which occurred at the turn of the century and continued during the course of most of the sixteenth century wherever exiles from Spain settled.

The primary contention is that this spiritualization was motivated by intensive messianic expectation and was founded on the vital connection as formulated in *Tikkuney Zohar*, between the revelation of the kabbalistic secrets through the propagation of the *Zohar* and the attempts to hasten the coming of the Messiah.

This connection not only was discussed in every kabbalistic book of the sixteenth century but was also pondered on its actual implication on the coming redemption<sup>14</sup>. It was first stated in *Minḥat Yehudah* in 1498: "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".

The process of spiritualization of religion was propagated by the Kabbalah and the kabbalistic teachers who intended to generate a fundamental change in Jewish religious life in accordance with the spiritual introspection inherent to mystical thought. This process was expressed realistically in terms of a struggle to establish a new position for the Kabbalah in relation to the *peshaṭ* and the Halakha<sup>15</sup>.

After the expulsion from Spain, kabbalism underwent a complete transformation. It acquired a new orientation when it formed a conjunction with the contemporary messianic tendencies<sup>16</sup>. The kabbalists suggested a

13. Messianic movements were organized around kabbalists such as Solomon Molkho and Asher of Lamlien. Cf. Graetz, *History of the Jews* (Hebrew) vol. 7, p. 401. E. Kopfer, "The Visions of R. Asher ben Meir, known as Lamlien", *Kovetz Al-Yad*, N.S. 18, 1976, pp. 387-423.

14. Cf. Yehuda Ḥayaṭ, *Minḥat Yehudah*, introduction; *Galia Raza*, p. 64. Moses Kordovero *Or Yaqqar*, vol. II, Jerusalem, 1962, p. 104. Shlomo Turiel, "Homily" (n. 6 above), p. 63.

15. Different aspects of this struggle can be found relating to the controversy around reincarnation: cf. E. Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbalah Literature*, ed. J. Hacker, Tel Aviv, 1976, pp. 370-396; in the contemporary rabbinical responsa relating to the status of the Kabbalah (cf. J. Katz, "Post Zoharic Relations Between Halakhah and Kabbalah", *Da'at* 4, 1980, pp. 54-74 and R. Elijor, "The Dispute...", *art. cit.*), as well as the polemic concerning the publication of the *Zohar* (cf. I. Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and its Branches*, Jerusalem, 1982, pp. 79-130); J. Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah*, Jerusalem, 1984.

16. Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends ...*, pp. 244-251.

new interpretation of religious life and a new historical perspective on the destiny of the people of Israel, while boldly challenging, and firmly criticizing, the common, predominant perception of religion. Kabbalism strived to establish its claim to spiritual priority within all aspects of Judaism. This becomes immediately apparent in the transformation of the Kabbalah from the elitist-esoteric concern of an elect few, into a popular doctrine readily available to wide circles. The former esoteric theosophical interest in the earlier Kabbalah, living harmoniously, side by side with the conventions of the Halakha, disappeared, and in its place we find a doctrine promoting radical changes in Jewish life for the purpose of advancing the messianic era<sup>17</sup>.

The kabbalistic literature that was written from the turn of the sixteenth century onwards, and the diversified testimonies of strong contempt and opposition<sup>18</sup> that the new orientation of the Kabbalah raised in different quarters, testify to the various stages in the formation of alternative religious norms. The culmination of these efforts is to be found in the introduction to Hayyim Vital's magnum opus *Etz Hayyim*<sup>19</sup>. This introduction is a bold religious document, expressing a transformation of religious awareness. Unlike the rest of this work, the introduction is not a part of the Lurianic Kabbalah but rather a summary of the struggle for the new position which the Kabbalah sought to attain in the sixteenth century. Each of the contentions presented in his introduction was stated previously in the kabbalistic literature of the generation of the expulsion. In other words, the introduction to *Etz Hayyim* does not announce the new spiritual point of view of the sixteenth century but sums it up.

Vital wrote his introduction to *Etz Hayyim* as a program to transform the religious world in which he was living. He wished to change the accepted order-of-priorities which viewed halakhic interpretation as the focal point of Judaism, and which placed the Kabbalah alongside the

17. *Mishra Kitrin*, Constantinople, 1510, p. 176; cf. *Ketem Paz*, pp. 12a-13b, 20b, 68a, 135a, 171a; *Galia Raza*, ms. Oxford, Opp. 104 p. 174a; *Ma'arekhet Elohut*, introduction.

18. Cf. Eliahu Mizrahi, *Responsa*, Constantinople, 1560, article 1 p. 2b; *Minhat Yehudah*, introduction; *Ohel Mo'ed*, ms. Cambridge, Add. 673 (8) 1/2 pp. 13a-b, 18b, 54b, 55a; Solomon Molkho, *Sefer ha-Mefo'ar*, p. 51, author's apology, *Galia Raza*, ms. Oxford Opp. 526, f. 50b and ms. Oxford Opp. 104, ff. 111b-112a; *Ketem Paz*, pp. 23b, 144a, 171a, 208b; Jacob Yaabetz, *Or Hayyim*, Warsaw, 1871, p. 6a; Jacob Cohen of Gazolo, *Sefer Tikhune Zohar*, Mantua, 1558, printer's note.

19. Hayyim Vital, *Etz Hayyim*, Warsaw, 1890, introduction to the Gate of Introductions, pp. 1-10; cf. G. Sed-Rajna, "Le Rôle de la Kabbale dans la tradition juive selon Hayyim Vital", *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 168, 1965, pp. 177-196; J. Katz, "Halakha and Kabbala as Competing Subjects of Study", *Da'at* 7, 1981, pp. 61-63.

Halakha but only in a marginal, esoteric role. He strove to amend the misconception of perceiving the Torah only as Law, and to restore it to its true pre-eminent spiritual position. He identified the spiritual perception of the Torah with the Kabbalah, in which he included the talmudic *ma'ase merkavah*, the *Zohar*, and also kabbalistic books based upon holy visions, and current divine revelations<sup>20</sup>.

The kabbalists attempted to clarify the relationship between the spiritual archetype of the Torah, and the law, i.e., between the eternal holy Torah through which the world was created and between the Pentateuch which we possess. They contended that undoubtedly, it was not the literal Torah — peshat — which possesses holy substance and creative cosmic powers, but rather there must exist some inner meaning which expresses this dimension to *ma'ase merkavah* (Ezekiel's vision of the throne) and *ma'aseh bereshit* (the creation) as well as to the holy names of God:

“The literal Torah, its stories, its laws and its commandments, when they remain literal, express no awareness and knowledge of the Lord, blessed be he; on the contrary, there are laws and commandments which the rational mind cannot fathom, almost all the Biblical commandments and especially their legal details are unbearable for the mind — and, if this is so, where is the splendor of the Torah, its beauty, and its greatness?”<sup>21</sup>.

This inner meaning, “its splendor, beauty, and greatness”, in their opinion, is to be found in the Kabbalah of the *Zohar*. The kabbalistic argument is based upon the assumption that the scriptures and the law possess a concealed stratum. Discovering and deciphering this layer is the paramount vocation of the kabbalistic literature<sup>22</sup> as well as the expression of its messianic perspective. Thus the scholarly tendencies concerned entirely with the law and with the peshat, or with arbitrary reasonable interpretation, are a direct contradiction to the basis of the mystical perception and its messianic perspective and should be rejected, opposed, and contested.

Hayyim Vital was writing under the inspiration of the renowned four-

20. Cf. *Etz Hayyim*, p. 2. Vital writes in his introduction: “The inner soul of the Torah is called the secrets of the Torah which are called *ma'ase merkavah*, which is the Kabbalah”.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 5; cf. Matitiahu Delacroix, *Book of Memorials*, ms. Oxford, Opp. 439, introduction: “Why did the Torah tell in length the stories about the sinners ... if it does not allude to hidden secrets?”; cf. Eliahu Ginzano, *Iggeret Hamudot*, “All the commandments are hints to heavenly secrets from the depth of reality, which were not given in vain, even the stories which seem literal have significant value”, cf. *Galia Raza*, p. 65.

22. G. Scholem, “The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism”, *On the Kabbala and its Symbolism*, New York, 1965, pp. 32-86; cf. pp. 66-70 for the radical meaning of the new spiritual conception; cf. *idem*, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, New York, 1971.

teenth century kabbalist books *Raya Mehemna* and *Tikkuney Zohar* which he and his contemporaries believed to have been written in the second century by Simon Bar Yoḥay. Their anonymous author formed a polarization between two aspects of the Torah which he named Etz ha-Ḥayyim and Etz ha-Da'at, the Torah of the tree of life and the Torah of the tree of knowledge<sup>23</sup>.

The former represents the superior spiritual, eternal holy Torah which will be prevalent in the messianic future, while the latter relates to the inferior Torah which we already possess and which emphasizes its literal dimensions and its legal aspects. The theories of *Raya Mehemna* and *Tikkuney Zohar* were discussed comprehensively by Baer, Scholem, Tishby, and others in relation to fourteenth century Spain, and kabbalistic theology. The current research of G. Sed-Rajna and J. Katz<sup>24</sup> has concerned itself with some implications of the two dimensions of the Torah as elaborated by Vital. However, it seems that the role of the two Torot or the polarization between law and spirit within the new status which the Kabbalah attempted to attain in the sixteenth century, has not been sufficiently appreciated.

R. Ḥayyim Vital argued that the Kabbalah is the Torat-Etz-Ḥayyim while the Halakha, or in his words the Mishna and the peshat, are Torat-Etz-ha-da'at. Vital re-affirms the inherent hierarchy existing between the two Torot and he promulgates the superior Torat-Etz-Ḥayyim as expressed by the Kabbalah. Furthermore, he contended that the literal perception of the Torah and Halakha as prevailing in all aspects of daily life, to be an expression of the era of the exile, while the Kabbalah is the expression of the new messianic era, thought to be immanent. He concluded that the coming of the redemption depends primarily on the study of Kabbalah and of the acknowledgement of its authority, validity and priority.

In addition to the identification between Kabbalah and Torat-Etz-Ḥayyim on one side, and between Kabbalah and the Torah of redemption on the other, Vital and his contemporaries viewed the Kabbalah as the current expression in the successive heritage of the oral law as well as the ancient mystical tradition of *heikhalot* literature and *ma'ase merkavah*.

Vital, the chief formulator of the Lurianic Kabbalah, presents in his introduction a summary of the opinions of kabbalists from the time of the expulsion until his own time. The introduction contains not a hint of the novel Lurianic perception but rather, a summary of the opinions of R.

23. *Etz Ḥayyim*, introduction, p. 5.

24. G. Sed-Rajna, *art. cit.*; J. Katz, *Da'at* 7, 1981, pp. 37-68.

Yehuda Hayat, who wrote *Minḥat Yehudah* at the turn of the century; the contentions of the anonymous author of *Ohel Mo'ed* (circa 1500), as well as the ideas of Asher of Lamlien (circa 1500), of Solomon Molkho (circa 1530); the contentions of the Libyan kabbalist Simon ibn Lavi who wrote *Ketem Paz* (circa 1550); the Byzantine author of *Galia Raza* (written between 1543-1553); the arguments of Matitياهو Delaqoṭ (circa 1560), and Solomon of Turiel on redemption (circa 1560).

The common denominators uniting all these kabbalists, living through and after the expulsion and spread throughout the diaspora, were: (1) the negation of the concept that the Torah taken literally has sufficient religious and spiritual meaning and provides true knowledge of God; (2) the denial of the relevance of rational criteria of the human mind in interpretation of the Torah in its inner meaning, divine perspective, and messianic vocation.

The kabbalists developed and elaborated this new hierarchy between the Halakha and the Kabbalah. They argued that the former signifies *Torat-Etz-ha-Da'at* and therefore originates from a lesser divine source in a like manner as *Meṭaṭron* and the world of creation, therefore, the *Mishna* and the *peshaṭ* reflect material interests and are confined to anthropocentric concerns, to the period of the exile and to this world alone. The Kabbalah signifies *Torat-Etz-Ḥayyim* and originates from the highest divine source, "the world of emanation". It is considered to be the eternal divine Torah and encompasses theocentric concerns and relates to the coming messianic era.

Vital states: "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..."<sup>24</sup>. He did not hesitate to state bluntly: "Regarding the *Mishna*, there can be no doubt that the *Mishna'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. the Kabbalah] since all literalness is only of this world and belongs to the lesser material affairs"<sup>25</sup>.

Thus, they contended that the literal perception of the scriptures was a severe misconception and distortion of their true nature. Further, they argued that not only the scriptures but also the entire Talmud is also based upon the secrets of the Torah—and thus those who disregard this important foundation when studying, are "blind and thoughtless and evil doers". Vital concludes:

25. *Etz Ḥayyim*, introduction, p. 2; cf. introduction pp. 4-6.

“As it was said according to the *Zohar*, in the portion of Pinḥas, the Tannaim and the Amoraim compiled all of the Talmud upon the basis of the secrets of the Torah. There can be no doubt that those who study only the babylonian Talmud are groping like a blind man against a wall, they are studying only the outer wrappings of the Torah and they have no eyes to discern the inner secrets of the Torah which are hidden within. Not at random did they rule what is impure and what is holy, what is prohibited and what is permitted [...] rather, from the esoteric dimension of the Torah they judged as the kabbalist knows [...] those who are engaged in the Mishna without contemplating its secrets and arbitrarily pass judgement without relating to its esoteric aspects and hidden secrets are blind...”<sup>26</sup>.

The kabbalists attempted to endow the Torah with meaning above its literality and beyond its legal dimensions, as well as to transcend its perspective, beyond post-historical and rational considerations. However, it should be strongly affirmed that these thinkers were not anti-nomian — rather—they wished to argue that, lacking another dimension beyond the law, behind the peshat, by reading the Bible only as law, all true religious significance is lost and all messianic expectations are denied.

The Kabbalah thus suggests a new criterion for the true meaning of the Halakha and contends that the legal literature which for all appearances seems to have been founded upon reason and tradition, is actually founded upon the secrets of the Kabbalah and as such it should be studied, and acted upon. The anonymous author of *Galia Raza* claims: “The peshat is insufficient to explain the Talmud properly; it can only be elucidated by its secrets and esoteric meanings”<sup>27</sup>.

The argument as to the mystical meaning of the Talmud was first raised in the fourteenth century in the books of the *Kana* and *Pliah*<sup>28</sup>. Later, it was further elaborated in *Galia Raza* and *Ketem Paz*<sup>29</sup>. *Galia Raza* was written to exemplify the correct interpretation of the peshat according to its true mystical meaning. The author argues:

“Hence, we have evidence that the measures of the ritual bath were constituted esoterically according to the secrets, thus we ought to believe faithfully that all the quantities and all the measures that our sages constituted in all our commandments, are allusions to heavenly, spiritual matters and that the earthly rates are paralleled in heavenly measures”<sup>30</sup>.

The kabbalists strove to shatter and undermine the legitimacy of rational consideration and the literal perception utilized to understand the

26. *Ibid.* p. 5; cf. *Galia Raza*, p. 8, introduction.

27. Ms. Oxford Opp. 104, f. 75b.

28. Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends ...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 211 and 244.

29. *Ketem Paz*, p. 12a-b.

30. *Galia Raza*, p. 30.



Halakha, to explain the reasons for the commandments and to interpret the Law. They emphasized the esoteric stratum behind the Biblical stories, the mystical reasoning behind the commandments, and the kabbalistic interpretation of halakhic consideration.

However it should be stated that the struggle is not between Kabbalah and the Halakha but between two different principles of interpretation of the Halakha: the mystical-spiritual interpretation with its eschatological perspective on the one hand and the rational-literal interpretation with its realistic perspective on the other.

The severe criticism of the *peshat*, which included sharp attacks on its exponents, is obviously a criticism of the dominant traditional establishment and accepted authority which was organized around *peshat* and *din*, literalism and law<sup>31</sup>. There can be but a small doubt that it was the eschatological orientation, which dominated this generation, that inspired this daring criticism of the rabbinical establishment, as well as the literal-legal system, and motivated a new perception of spiritual priorities and the religious hierarchy. This radical tendency, challenging the study of *peshat*, is best exemplified in Vital's description:

"When the lesser scholars of the Torah observe the major scholars pre-occupying themselves with the pursuit of the literal meaning of the text (*peshatim*) rather than with the study of the Kabbalah [they must conclude] that the major scholars have degenerated into the heresy of denying the validity of the truth while insisting that the only meaning of Torah is 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>.

This description reflects a criticism that was shared by many kabbalists, on the rabbinical authority. As a result an alternative power was proposed; the kabbalists were formulating a new religious authority—an authority drawn not from knowledge, tradition or rabbinical power, but rather from pneumatic inspiration: "The secrets of the Torah and its esoteric being cannot be acquired by man in material study, only from the

31. It is interesting to note that Vital, who transferred the strong social and religious criticism from *Tikkuney Zohar* and *Raya Mehemna* to his own generation, viewed the scholarly renaissance of the literal-rational studies of his period with deep criticism. He refused to relate to the external developments (which were concerned with the system of *peshat*), occurring in Safed, Damascus, Turkey and Italy, as possessing any spiritual significance. On the contrary, he saw them as a distortion of religion and as a misunderstanding of the new pre-messianic reality.

32. Cf. *Etz Hayyim*, introduction, p. 4.

divine abundance as emanated from his supreme holiness by celestial messengers and angels or by Elijah the prophet ...”<sup>33</sup>.

The kabbalists emphasized that their own spiritual authority was based upon the ancient tradition of the *Zohar* in conjunction with divine revelations and holy visions. These were considered to be various types of contemporary prophecy. This is borne out fully by the statements with which they introduce their works.

Asher of Lamlien wrote in his letter to Moses Hefetz in 1500—“I am the lowest of people, writing these letters, not through my wisdom but only according to the secrets that I have been shown from Heaven”<sup>34</sup>.

Solomon Molkho wrote: “After I was sealed with the seal of my creator, I was shown great secrets and I was told the holy secrets of the Kabbalah and my heart was illuminated”<sup>35</sup>. Later on he wrote: “As regards the vision that I reported from Monastir...”.

Yehudah Albotini stated in the introduction to his book *Sullam ha-'Aliyyah* (Ladder of Ascension): “I write this to record that which I was shown from Heaven”<sup>36</sup>.

The anonymous author of *Galia Raza* repeated a number of times that “everything I wrote was prompted by a revelation from Heaven which I experienced in my sleep by means of nightly visions”<sup>37</sup>.

Joseph Karo, while reporting the words of his *maggid* (celestial mentor), a personification of the Mishnah, wrote: “therefore listen to what I command you for I am the Mishnah speaking through you—I come to reveal to you sublime and esoteric matters”<sup>38</sup>.

Regarding Solomon Alkabetz, the celestial mentor assures Joseph Karo that, “whatever he wrote to you in the name of his redeeming angel is true”<sup>39</sup>.

33. *Ibid.* p. 6; cf. Moses Kordovero, *Raya Mehemna*, with the commentary *Or Yaqqar*; ms. Modena 1-16 Li, f. 31b: “[...] It has been said that the Torah is the supreme spiritually emanated substance which expanded into the lesser worlds. It is divine perception and it cannot be attained except by prophecy since it is not within the realm of human, corporeal knowledge. Its precepts do not spring from material reason as natural matters perceived by empirical perception, but it is divine and its principles are from prophecy [...]”.

34. Cf. E. Kopfer, *art. cit.*, p. 412.

35. Solomon Molkho, *Hayat ha-Kane*, Paris, 1938, p. 5.

36. Judah Albotini, *Sullam ha-'Aliyyah*, in *Kiryat Sefer* 2, 1924-1925, p. 138. *Idem*, *Kiryat Sefer* 22, 1945, pp. 161 f. G. Scholem, *Catalogue of Kabbalistic Manuscripts*, Jerusalem, 1930, pp. 225-230; cf. M. Benayahu, “R. Yehudah Albotini”, *Sinai* 36, 1955, pp. 239 f.

37. *Galia Raza*, ms. Oxford Opp. 104b, 146b; cf. R. Elijor, *Galia Raza*, *op. cit.*, introduction p. 15, text pp. 9, 11, 157.

38. Joseph Karo, *Maggid Meisharim*, Jerusalem, 1960, pp. 37, 51. Cf. R. J. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic*, Oxford, 1962, pp. 9-23, 257-286.

39. *Maggid Meisharim*, p. 157 f.

Thus, inspired by direct revelation and freed from the confines of tradition, the new Kabbalah was able to suggest new ideas and methods, attributed to a divine source: "Blessed is the Lord of Israel who revealed unto me those sublime secrets that had never been revealed to any man since Simon Bar Yoḥay"<sup>40</sup>.

The kabbalists bitterly contested human reason as the legitimate and sole source of authority. Their authority was based upon contemporary divine revelations linked to the tradition of revelations from the earlier kabbalistic literature and the mystical-visionary conceptions of the *Zohar*.

This new visionary Kabbalah was reflected in a number of books, such as the *Answering Angel*, the Visions of R. Asher of Lamlien, Solomon Molkho's *Ḥayat Hakane*, *Galia Raza*, Joseph Karo's *Maggid Meisharim*, Ḥayyim Vital's *Book of Visions*<sup>41</sup>.

This literature reflects one of the most prominent characteristics of the period—the preference of spiritual reality of vision and revelation, over the disappointing and arbitrary historical reality. This tendency culminated in transcending historical circumstance, rational consideration, and reality into revelation, redemption and meta-history.

Pneumatic inspiration and revelation were not awaited passively, but actively initiated and encouraged by mystical and magical means, by the use of sacred names and by practical Kabbalah<sup>42</sup>.

It appears, that the kabbalistic texts, written under visionary inspiration, were primarily interested in eschatological prospects and their relation to the dualistic perception. The active motivation behind many of the induced visions and the spontaneous revelations (or reading the Torah as *Torat Etz-Ḥayyim*), was the desire to achieve an accurate understanding of the eschatological process alluded to in the verses of the Torah as well as the hidden meaning behind historical events. One of the basic principles in the perception of redemption of all generations is the conception of the redemption as the final result of a catastrophe, of a tremendous struggle, as a conflict between the forces of good against the forces of evil, both on Earth and in Heaven<sup>43</sup>.

40. *Galia Raza*, pp. 9 and 39.

41. Cf. R. J. Werblowsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-83, "the answering angel"; G. Scholem, "The Maggid of Joseph Taytazak", *Sefunot* 11, 1967-1978, pp. 47-112; M. Idel, "Inquiries into the Doctrine of Sefer ha-Meshiv", *Sefunot* 17, 1983, pp. 185-266.

42. We possess vast literature of mystical and magical instructions for the purpose of attaining the different stages of revelation or prophecy, books such as Vital's *Gates of Holiness* and Albotini's *Ladder of Ascension*, belong to this category.

43. Cf. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, New York, 1971, pp. 1-36, *idem*, *Devarim Bego*, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-198.

This struggle is often pictured in apocalyptic terms, and likewise in psychological terms as a spiritual redemption in which man frees man himself from inner evil. At other times, it is perceived as a struggle between the universal principles of good and of evil.

The traditional Jewish perception of redemption (except that of Maimonides and his followers) has often described the image of the opponent as Satan, the Hated One, thus the concept of redemption has always included the conquering and humiliation of this figure<sup>44</sup>. The theological assumption pressed and emphasized in the sixteenth century is that both the holy and the profane are immanent in Heaven and Earth. The kabbalists read the scriptures as expressing the dialectics of this duality and interpreted the commandments as reflecting the dual ontological perception of reality, and thus, giving assistance to holiness in its struggle with evil. It was Joseph Karo who stated: “[...] all of the Torah is composed of the positive law and the prohibitory law; positive law refers to the holy spheres and prohibitory law is relegated to the evil spheres of the Satan [...]”<sup>45</sup>. Simon ibn Lavi preceded him in suggesting that: “[...] the laws of purity and impurity are the principle and foundation of all the Scriptures since the knowledge of purities and impurities is the secret of the holiness and of defilements”<sup>46</sup>. The author of *Galia Raza* argues that — “on this matter [of duality] all the Torah is founded”<sup>47</sup>.

The new kabbalistic interpretation of the hidden stratus of the *peshat* relates mainly to two points:

- 1) the dualistic perception which views the world in its entirety as divided between the domains of holiness and evil, *qeddushah* and *kelipah*;
- 2) the search for this dualistic perception as found in the Scriptures and its significance in the struggle between the two forces, while viewing it as various stages of the messianic process which will inevitably culminate in the coming of the Messiah.

The dualistic ontology, as inspired by the *Zohar* and elaborated in the various visions and revelations, was the central idea around which all the eschatological historiography was anchored. Moses Kordovero set out in *Or Yaqqar* that: “[...] by perfection of the [kabbalistic] worship, the

44. J. Dan, “The Beginning of the Messianic Myth in 13th Century Kabbala”, in *Messianism and Eschatology*, Jerusalem, 1984, p. 251f; for a description of the later stages of this perception in the Lurianic Kabbalah cf. I. Tishby, *Torat ha-ra’ we-ha-kelipah be-qaballat ha-Ari*, Jerusalem, 1965, pp. 62-143.

45. Joseph Karo, *Maggid Meisharim*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

46. *Keiem Paz*, f. 12b.

47. *Galia Raza*, p. 49f.

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>48</sup>.

The kabbalistic writers of the post-expulsion period tried to force apocalyptic meaning into every word of the Scriptures. This can be exemplified best by Abraham Ben Eliezer ha-Levi’s contention: “Behold—Scripture in its entirety is filled with allusions to the future redemption”<sup>49</sup>. But gradually, the two concepts of exile and redemption lost their concrete, political, historical meanings and were identified with the cosmic principles of holiness and Satan while arguing that exile is the result of the victory of the evil-forces over the holy ones. All religious life was oriented to assist the holy forces (incarnated in the *shekhinah* as the representative of holiness and redemption), and to combat the *kelipah* and *sitra ahra*, that dominate the exile. In other words, the messianic expectations were not passive but active and were not directed towards historical planet and realistic aims but rather towards Heaven<sup>50</sup>. The prayers, the performance of the commandments and principally the study of the Kabbalah—all composed from divine words and endowed with absolute powers—were all infused with messianic meaning or with the perception of struggle between the two cosmic forces. The secret function of kabbalistic worship was to serve as a magical weapon to be wielded in the continuing, everlasting struggle. The prayers, the commandments, study of the Scripture and above all the study of the Kabbalah, were weapons which were endowed with unlimited powers of purification and destruction, so that they might annihilate all the forces of defilement and strengthen all the powers of holiness. Thus the basic concept of traditional Jewish theology concerning exile and redemption lost its historical significance and realistic perspective and acquired a purely spiritual character, concerning itself with a mythical, spiritual state.

The post-expulsion and visionary Kabbalah offered a comprehensive historiosophical perception of the history of the people of Israel, based upon a mythical dualistic conception of the forces of good and evil. This Kabbalah applied the new spiritual authority derived from holy visions to interpret the scriptures according to an eschatological orientation. As such, it explained the commandments and laws according to their contribution to the forthcoming messianic conflict between holiness and the forces of

48. *Or Yaqqar*, IV, p. 155.

49. Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi, *Mishra Kitrin*, f. 16a.

50. Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

evil. This perception suggests that the entire history of the people of Israel is occurring between the opposite poles of exile and redemption. Exile and redemption are not considered realistic, historic events but rather the reflection of the mythical struggle between the forces of evil and of holiness. The historical passage from exile to redemption was presented as stages in the struggle between the two cosmic forces. The historiosophical perception transcends realistic historical events. It expresses a deep conviction that there is a hidden history which strives towards an apocalyptic era. The messianic expectations became the historiosophical framework for all the history of Israel which were then interpreted according to eschatological destiny<sup>51</sup>. The study and teaching of the Kabbalah became the means of hastening the advance of the messianic era by revealing the true hidden meaning of the scripture and the law.

In summary, the five principal characteristics of this new form of mystical interpretation were:

- 1) the acute messianic expectation that motivated the majority of the changes in religious life in the sixteenth century;
- 2) the struggle to attain a new authoritative position for the Kabbalah as the hidden meaning of the scriptures and the law and as their dominant legitimate interpretation, while challenging the prevailing legal system with its literal interpretation;
- 3) the comprehensive process of spiritualization which was accompanied by the revival and expansion of the dualistic ontology as the leading interpretative perception of the hidden meaning of the Torah, of the law and of history;
- 4) the development of the visionary Kabbalah and the pneumatic authority of the vision and of esoteric experience as an alternative to the existing legal authority and rational criteria. Those visions were acknowledged as the prime source of inspiration and authority to the new perceptions of the law according to *Torat Etz-Hayyim*;
- 5) the formation of a new historiosophical perception arguing the inner meaning of external events and emphasizing the messianic perspective of history.

These factors created a fundamental change in religious norms which was characterized by a detachment from realistic confinements and historical considerations — a change without which neither Lurianic Kabbalah

51. Cf. R. Elijor, "The Doctrine of Metempsychosis in *Galia Raza*", *Studies in Jewish Mysticism presented to Isaiah Tishby*, Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, III (1-2), 1984, pp. 207-240.

nor the Sabbatian movement could have come about. Lurianic Kabbalah was not a pioneering messianic strain within Kabbalah, as is commonly believed, but rather the culmination of a gradual detachment from historical and rational frameworks and constant messianic preoccupation which characterized the post expulsion period.

## RÉSUMÉ

L'Expulsion d'Espagne qui contraignit les expulsés à changer de langue et de milieu culturel et religieux, les obligea aussi à rechercher un nouveau sens à l'existence juive en diaspora et à élaborer de nouveaux cadres de référence spirituels. Incapables de trouver remède à leur désarroi dans la simple explication des faits ayant conduit à l'Expulsion, ils penchèrent vers l'interprétation méta-historique et spirituelle de l'événement. L'Expulsion à leurs yeux devient rien moins qu'une étape d'un long processus historique — la phase initiale du processus de Rédemption.

C'est ainsi que l'espérance messianique qui se répandit parmi les Expulsés après 1492, jointe à l'effondrement d'anciennes structures et à l'érosion de valeurs spirituelles établies de longue date, allait donner naissance à un vif besoin de réinterprétation des bases normatives de la vie juive.

Le sens véritable de la Torah fut redéfini à la lumière de la Kabbale qui explique sa pérennité et son origine divine par sa dimension mystique et non par son contenu littéral et halachique. La Kabbale et non la Halakha renferme le sens ultime de la Torah; la découverte de ses mystères et la diffusion du Zohar ne pourront qu'accélérer la Rédemption.

Cette rencontre entre messianisme et mysticisme provoqua, au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, une certaine spiritualisation de la vie juive tandis que la Kabbale cessa d'être un enseignement ésotérique pour attirer de larges cercles d'érudits.

Revendiquant la centralité du mysticisme dans tous les aspects de la vie juive et reléguant à un rang subalterne la lecture littérale de la Torah, les Kabbalistes, notamment R. Haim Vital, présentèrent la Torah comme un mystère (*sod*) et conclurent à l'existence d'une face cachée des *misvot* et à celle d'un cours messianique de l'histoire.

Ces nouvelles visions mystico-messianiques ne passèrent pas sans susciter des critiques. Il ne s'agissait pas à proprement parler d'un antagonisme entre la Kabbale et la Halakha mais plutôt d'un affrontement entre deux types d'exégèse, l'exégèse spiritualiste aux accents eschatologiques et l'exégèse rationaliste. Les Kabbalistes furent amenés à donner à l'Expulsion une signification historique puisant ses sources dans le Zohar et dans une perspective dualistique et messianique tandis que leurs contradicteurs firent appel à des cadres de référence traditionnels fondés sur la tradition légaliste et l'autorité rabbinique, bien ancrés dans une saisie rationnelle du réel. La nouvelle conjoncture favorise la vision mystique. Le pouvoir visionnaire et le désir de Rédemption prirent la place du rationalisme réaliste, stimulant les tendances méta-historicistes de toutes sortes.