

## The Question of Sufi Influence on the Early Kabbalah

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No mystical teaching so defines Jewish spirituality as does the Kabbalah. With its roots supposedly sunk in deepest Jewish history by some accounts stretching all the way back to Moses, Abraham or even Adam-the Kabbalah has remained at the center of Jewish worship from its true inception in the 13th century. Whether scholars believe it to have flowered into being with the Jewish spiritual renaissance of the 13th century, or thought that it was the recovered love of second century rabbinical elders, one central idea has never been challenged: That the Kabbalah was an entirely Jewish creation.

Some of the greatest Jewish scholars have, against mounting evidence to the contrary, held this to be just the case. For instance, A.S. Halkin, writing in the middle of the last century, stated that: "In all the vast literatures of the Kabbalah, there is no trace of a non-Jewish source or influence."<sup>1</sup> The pre-eminent Kabbalistic scholar of the 20th century, Gershom Scholem, addressed the specific issue of Sufi influence on the Jewish teachings, declaring that these Islamic mystics had no discernible effect on the development of the Kabbalah. As Scholem himself said:

"Nor is it possible to take seriously F. A. Thuluck's attempt to show that the Kabbalah is historically dependent upon Muslim Sufism. The philological and historical foundations of these investigations were much too weak to justify their author's far-reaching results and conclusions."<sup>2</sup>

He is referring to Thulock's treatise (written in Latin) *Commentatio de vi, quam graeca philosophia in theologia tum Muhammedanorum tum Iudeum exercuerit. II Particula: De ortu Cabalae* (Hamburg, 1837).

And Joseph Dan, editor of *The Early Kabbalah* (New York, 1986), echoing Scholem's denials, states that "Maimonides' son, Abraham (d. 1237), credited the entire Sufi tradition to the influence of the Islamic mystic. Originally thought to have been created between the 11th and 12th centuries, it was a mere couple of hundred years after the emergence of Islam and the Jewish world was not yet a thoroughly converted one. The early development of certain aspects of Islamic thought were of such an influence, allowing for openly porous relations between the two religions."

Scholem's, Halkin's and Dan's protestations notwithstanding, the Kabbalah did, in fact, blossom out of the peaty loam of earlier Sufi-oriented Jewish mystical exploration. Medieval Jewish/Sufi thinkers paved the way for the profound sea change in Jewish mystical thinking-and the appearance of the Kabbalah. The Kabbalah, when correctly understood, is very nearly a Sufi/Jewish amalgam, built through Jewish masters' respect for and education in a series of Sufi rituals, beliefs and even terms that were ultimately folded deep into the heart of Jewish worship.

Before looking at the Sufi influences on the Kabbalah-and they were legion-it is important to understand exactly what the Kabbalah was. "Kabbalah" literally meant "reception" of the traditional teaching-and it represented what was purported to be an age-old Jewish mystical tradition "rediscovered" in the 12th and 13th centuries. Though presented by the original authors as a series of venerable spiritual teachings ascribed to ancient Jewish masters of the early centuries of the Christian era, it was not; it bloomed into existence at the very time that it was claimed to be "uncovered." And without the Islamic mystic's influence on the language and (alleged) tale, myth, law and symbolism of second century Hebrew and Aramaic, as an entrance into the mysteries of spiritual union with God.

The Kabbalah was not a single book or tract. It was a tradition with a collection of pamphlets and treatises, ideas and myths that grew over time, from the writing of the *Sefer Yetzirah* in the 9th century through other Kabbalistic works such as the *Sefer Bahir*, *Sefer ha-Iyyun*, the *Zohar* and the flood of other tomes that followed upon these. Most of these texts were symbol-filled treatises of obscure imagery and obtuse instruction that, it was said, only the initiated could truly understand. Until the explosion of Hasidism in the 18th century, Kabbalistic lore would remain the purview of a small, mystical elite.

Despite the repeated protestations to the contrary, Sufism was infused into the Kabbalah from the outset. Sufism was endemic around the Mediterranean basin, surrounding Kabbalistic philosophers. Islamic mystics were not only ubiquitous in the areas where the Kabbalah emerged, but they had already blazed a trail in the same mystical directions in which the Kabbalah would follow. While Jewish mysticism of the visceral, prophetic sort had been a part of Jewish life since the time of the prophets, during the 9th century, the Sufis had been assiduously following a path of personal union with God. It is only natural that when the impetus for Jewish mystical thought burst forth, Jewish Kabbalists would look to their spiritual cousins for guidance in this area.

Earlier, Sufi-inspired Jews such as Moses, Abraham and Obadiah Maimonides, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Judah Halevi and many others had already generously borrowed Sufi and Islamic philosophical ideas while developing their "Jewish" mystical concepts, thereby taking the first steps in this journey towards a mystical synthesis. As such, it was hardly coincidental that the actual Kabbalists would look in this same direction.

As scholar Michael McGaha has pointed out:

"It was no coincidence that the earliest Kabbalistic writings and the work of (Sufi philosopher) Ibn Arabi appeared around the same time (late 12th-early 13th-century). Jewish refugees from Muslim Spain were bringing new life into the doctrines and imagery developed by the Sufis in Baghdad and later in Andalusia, creating the new system of mysticism known as the Kabbalah."<sup>3</sup>

The Sufi influence can be traced to the earliest Kabbalistic numblings. The *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation) was one of those medieval Jewish mystical texts that have baffled scholars with its obscure imagery and unclear genesis. Originally thought to have been created between the second and sixth centuries, it has only recently been dated with more specificity to the ninth or tenth centuries. In other case, it certainly predated and presaged-the writings of the earliest Kabbalistic works.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* emerged during a wonderfully amicable time between the two Biblical cousins, when Jews were included even in the highest intellectual circles of the Islamic caliph's court in Baghdad.<sup>4</sup> This was a mere couple of hundred years after the emergence of Islam and the Jewish world was not yet a thoroughly converted one. The early development of certain aspects of Islamic thought were of such an influence, allowing for openly porous relations between the two religions.

The small, anonymous *Sefer Yetzirah* (it is only a few chapters long) took on a great importance in later Jewish mysticism, having a strong influence on not only the early Kabbalistic writings, but on later Kabbalists throughout the Jewish world. The *Sefer Yetzirah* introduced many of terms and symbols that would grow into the full-blown Kabbalah. Not surprisingly, the redactors of the *Sefer Yetzirah* looked to the model of mystical piety closest at hand to help define their ideas of Jewish worship: Islamic Mysticism.<sup>5</sup>

As the teachings of this short book concern the obscure world of medieval mystical insight, much of the concurrences between the Sufis and the *Sefer Yetzirah* involve rather arcane ideas. For instance, the so-called Hebrew "Mother-letters" of the important third chapter of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, *alef, mem and sin*, each representing a primordial element-ether, water and fire-emerged from the Islamic mystical triad of *aya, mim and sin*. There is to say, the three letters in this chapter with the most significant mystical meaning stem directly from their linguistic counterparts in Arabic, where they held a tremendous, and similar, mystical meaning for certain Islamic esoteric schools. For the Jews, this triad corresponded to the three most important Saphirot (or way stations on the Tree of Life, which was the glyph representation of the movement of God's energies in the universe), from which all other life came into being.<sup>6</sup> For the Muslims, these three Arabic letters from which the Hebrew were taken stood for what in certain schools were seen as the three pillars of the Islamic spiritual world-*Ali*, Muhammad and Salman Pak (the first Persian to embrace Islam and a spiritual hero of the Shi'ites).<sup>7</sup>

The general linguistic theories behind so much of the *Sefer Yetzirah*'s ideas stem from studies of grammar pioneered by Islamic mystics in the eighth and ninth centuries.<sup>8</sup> Many of the ideas behind the mystical meanings of the letters in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, including the similarity evinced above, appear to have their genesis in the works of the Muslim alchemist and mystic Jabir Ibn Hayyan, though an odd twist finds that Ibn Hayyan. It is interesting to note in this context that Jabir also penned a treatise entitled *The Book in Which I Explicate the Torah*.<sup>9</sup>

Specific concurrences between Jabir's work and the *Sefer Yetzirah* include:

1. The centrality of the permutation of the word roots (in ascertaining mystical meaning in the Scriptures).
2. The close similarity of terminology for this permutation.
3. Classification of the letters and their articulation in the mouth — (ideas that were) unknown in Talmudic times, but pioneered by early Arabic grammarians. (This concerned translating the written words into meditation vehicles to achieve specific mystical states.)<sup>10</sup>

It's virtually impossible to overstate the importance of this Arabic grammatical/letter system on the development of Kabbalistic thought. The whole system of Kabbalistic ascendance towards God, mystical interpretation of the Scriptures and other important aspects of post-10th century Jewish mysticism stemmed directly from the new understanding of the Hebrew language that Arabic grammar brought to medieval Rabbis. That the linguistic theory of the *Sefer Yetzirah* is closely related to that pioneered by the Arabic grammarians of the eighth and ninth centuries is not surprising, if we keep in mind that educated Jews of this period paid Muslim scholars to teach them Arabic grammar.<sup>11</sup>

This short treatise also introduced the exact number of mystical pathways and way stations that were to define the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, with 22 pathways (each representing a Sufi Saphira) and 22 letters, of which there are exactly 22) and 10 "primordial dimensions of space. It is said of the totality of these Saphirot that their beginning and their end were connected one with the other and merged one into another. This primal decade thus constitutes a unity.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, this is just a very basic explanation of these Kabbalistic building blocks; each one of the ten has had innumerable tomes written about it-and has been the focus of ongoing conjecture for hundreds of years, with a continuing and growing corpus of work about the Kabbalah by 21st century mystics and even charlatans.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, an Islamic text of virtually the same name, *Sefer of Creation*-a book said to have been written during the time of the Caliph al-Manun (813-833)-predicated the *Sefer Yetzirah* by a century or so.<sup>14</sup> Like so many other mystical works from this period, it was attributed to scribes in antiquity, specifically Apollonius of Tyana, an ancient woodworker. The work shared much with the *Sefer Yetzirah*, as both were treatises on the secrets of the formation of the visible universe; both had a certain, scientific tone of voice and both were comprised of six sections, subdivided into brief explanatory phrases.<sup>15</sup> While there is not definitive proof that the Jewish *Sefer Yetzirah* was based on its Islamic namesake, the similarities are striking-and seem to imply yet another instance where a "novel" Jewish tract had drawn liberally from Islamic precursors.

Ultimately, this short and obscure text provided the impetus for most of the important facets of the budding Kabbalah. Later Kabbalists drew many of their basic concepts underpinning the growth of this system, as well as the terminology to describe them, from this short work.

The *Sefer Bahir*, which came along a couple of hundred years after the *Sefer Yetzirah*, is commonly thought of as the first truly Kabbalistic text, one in which the new forms and ideas of the later Kabbalah were fleshed out in more or less their final form. Widely attributed to an ancient Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Qaneh (c. 70), it was written in classic Jewish style, replete with the mystical parance and the numerology common to these obscure mystical texts. In it, the building blocks of later Kabbalistic thought were constructed.

But the direct influence on this tract-the provenance of which has often misled Jewish scholars-cannot be found among ancient Jewish texts. Indeed, while the earliest Kabbalists themselves spoke of influences such as "the appearance of the Holy Spirit," the revelation of the Prophet Elijah and unspeakable celestial mysteries,<sup>16</sup> the truth is banal. Like virtually all other medieval Jewish mysticism emanating from the Muslim world, these novel concepts in Jewish spirituality were imported, disguised, from the Sufis themselves.

Exhibiting the profound respect for Islamic mysticism that had become currency among medieval Jewish mystics, the redactor of the *Sefer Bahir* based even his most fundamental ideas on earlier Muslim thought. For instance, the anonymous Jewish author borrowed verbatim from Sufi sources the idea that the Holy Book represented a "blueprint of creation." Herein, the letters and even spaces between the letters were all symbols of God's power and thought, mystical creations that had to be understood on a plane far above the mundane meaning of the words themselves. According to this theory, it was the letters of the Holy Text themselves that were the dynamic principles of creation; the very breath of God as He exhaled life into a previously barren universe. Creation was like an infinite ocean, which at the moment of conception overflowed, filling the world with knowledge of God, thus giving "drink to the needy."<sup>17</sup> Of course, in expounding on this Sufi idea, the Jewish redactors of the *Bahir* did have the good sense to change the word for "Holy Book" from "Quran" to "Torah"

This Sufi-inspired idea that the letters of the Torah had hidden, mystical values led to the development of a completely new way in which to understand the entire Hebrew Bible. In the process of finding mystical meaning in the individual Arabic letters at the head of the *Surahs*, or chapters, in the Quran as well as in the text itself-and now Jewish mystics followed their lead.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, these ideas were based in the belief that the words themselves were formed according to the same laws that corresponded to the formation of physical and spiritual worlds. The ideas represented by the words were imbedded, as it were, in the letters of the words themselves. "The words of language were formed according to principles rigorously corresponding to those that governed the physical and spiritual constitution of the realities signified by the words. The simple elements of language (were) the key to all knowledge."<sup>19</sup>

Through earlier, Sufi-oriented Jews this Arabic "Science of Letters" migrated into Jewish mysticism and became fundamental to the outlook of the burgeoning Kabbalah. One of the earliest Jewish Rabbis to garner inspiration from this system was Hai Gaon (d. 1038). Well acquainted with the Persian and Arabic languages and with Arabic literature, he nonetheless warned against the study of Islamic philosophy. He went so far as to criticize his father-in-law, Samuel b. Hophni, "and others like him, who frequently read the works of non-Jews."<sup>20</sup>

However, in the category of "do as I say and not as I do," Hai Gaon borrowed extensively from the Islamic concepts underpinning the Science of Letters, though like virtually all other Sufi-inspired Jews, he attributed the whole matter to a Biblical prophet, in this case, Ezekiel. Ultimately, Hai Gaon's passage on the use of the "tradition of the forms of the Holy letters and in their inscription" exhibits specific concurrences with Arabic calligraphic techniques known in Baghdad and Damascus during the period in which he was active.

As scholar David Ariel notes:

"In *Wahabiyah*, a ninth century Damascene composed *The Book of Longing for Participation in Knowledge of the Symbols of Language* in which he presented a catalogue of ancient symbols. His writings were widely disseminated throughout the ancient Middle East and were even known among Jews, including Maimonides, who quoted him (in *the Guide for the Perplexed*). In this book (we find a passage that was reproduced exactly in Hebrew, in a work attributed to Hai Gaon). Thusly, the technique of magical and mystical calligraphy current among Muslims around Damascus and Baghdad beginning in the ninth century found its way into Jewish mystical traditions in the 12th and 13th centuries. This technique of mystical calligraphy in Islam was based on Sufi teachings on divine names."<sup>21</sup>

Of course, the original Science of Letters was based on Arabic grammar and alphabet-but as the two languages were quite similar, the *Sefer Bahir*'s writers had no trouble in applying those concepts to use ancient Jewish language, translating ideas found in the Muslim Science of Letters directly into Hebrew.

An even more radical innovation proposed by the *Sefer Bahir* was a new conception of the *Shekinah*, which, again, migrated easily from the realm of Sufism into the Jewish mystical sphere. The *Shekinah* itself was an idea well known in Jewish mystical circles and had, dating from Talmudic times, been identified with the presence of God. Medieval Jewish mystics, however, wanted to steer clear of anthropomorphizing God-or popularity is with the attribute of the Divine Power-and therefore they created another, variable meaning. According to Ha Saena also notes: "(10th century), the *Shekinah* was devoted an intermediary created by God that was approachable by humankind,<sup>22</sup> a kind of celestial emissary that was attainable through actual worship.

This not only solved the problem of not wanting to "humanize" God, but also opened up an avenue of approach for mystics. The *Shekinah* came to represent that aspect of God that led to prophetic experience, as well. Moses Maimonides had accepted Saadia's idea of the *Shekinah* and, coupled with later, Sufi additions, this led to the novel approach to and explanation for prayer that came to define the Kabbalah.

One Sufi idea that was wrapped into this new conception of the *Shekinah* was that of erotic imagery and "sexual union" with this divine power. The eroticizing of the mystic's relationship with God had recently re-entered Jewish mysticism via the Sufis. The *Sefer Bahir*, however, was the first Jewish mystical text to give this idea an official seal of approval, echoing the idea that sexual symbolism was appropriate for the description of the divine realm.<sup>23</sup> Divine union-as firsty proposed by the Sufis and then taken over by the Jewish mystics-came to be defined by an ecstatic, almost sensual experience between "lover" and the "beloved," or the Jewish mystic and the *Shekinah*. As Joseph Dan pointed out:

"The *Bahir* was the first Jewish mystical work to introduce the idea that sexual and familial symbolism was appropriate for the description of the essence of the divine realm. This sexual motif was to become one of the most central and distinctive themes of the Kabbalah."<sup>24</sup>

Lastly, the *Sefer Bahir* continued to describe the ideas that would become central to the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. In the *Bahir*, the anonymous compilers lently finishing out the system first proposed in earlier Sufi-inspired Jewish texts, defining a system of ten "words" or "sayings" that were used by God to create the universe and the human soul. These ten words, or sayings, were associated, no doubt, with the Arabic letters "aya, mim and sin), followed by seven lesser ones.<sup>25</sup> Herein, the *Bahir* also portrayed the emanation of these powers as a living tree, upon which the *Saphirot* (the *Sephiroth*) hung like olive ripen apples. Herein, the *Bahir* world was portrayed as "an enormous phalanx of intertwined limbs, roots, trunks, appendages, leaves, buds and sprouts,"<sup>26</sup> a fecund image that mirrors almost exactly a earlier Sufi image of the Islamic mystical "Tree of Life."

These ideas further solidified this conception of the pathways of the divine power as it tumbled down the ineffable sphere into the lowest world, where man lived. Ultimately, there was not a single Jewish Kabbalist that followed on the heels of the *Sefer Bahir* that did not base his ideas, at least to some extent, on the basic symbolism of this seminal treatise.

These two earlier texts set the tone for the most important Jewish mystical text penned, since the Middle Ages, and which would be the *Zohar* burst onto the scene in the late 13th century, soon after the *Sefer Bahir*'s emergence, and immediately supplanted it as the most important Kabbalistic work. Written in the name of the 13th century Spanish mystic, the *Zohar* expanded on earlier Kabbalistic ideas, running some 2400 closely written pages!<sup>27</sup> While not a complete book, in that it lacked a specific beginning, middle and end, its collection of commentaries, stories, anecdotes and even fragments of ideas were all held together by a common thread. They purportedly represented the sayings and beliefs of the second century Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai (c. 150), an historical figure who was buried not far from Safed, in the Holy Land.

While the *Zohar* was said to be the "rediscovered" lore from the legendary Talmudic age, in fact, the whole of the 2400 pages was compiled by Moses de Leon, working in Spain, circa 1280. His specific influences, well hidden beneath the double-talk, historical allusions and mystical patois of Ben Yohai's text, comprised the usual basket of medieval Jewish sources, many of whom had been strongly influenced by the Sufis themselves. Abraham Ibn Ezra, Moses Maimonides, sections taken from Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*, Bahya ibn Pakuda, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, and the *Sefer Bahir* all played important roles in the formation of the seminal tome.<sup>28</sup> Add in a tablespoon here and a few pinches there of more direct Sufic inspiration, and the *Zohar* becomes to take on that particular Jewish/Sufi hue that colors so much of medieval Jewish mysticism.

Teaching through fanciful stories placed in the mouths of the second century Rabbi and his followers, the *Zohar* unveiled a secret world of mystical truths, hidden behind jarring imagery and difficult to follow symbols and stories. Ultimately, for a period of several centuries, the *Zohar* ranked with the Bible and the Talmud as one of the triad of canonical Jewish texts. It stood out as the expression of all that was most deeply hidden in the innermost recesses of the Jewish soul.<sup>29</sup>

Although the author hid his Sufic inspiration behind the guise of a spurious second century Jewish author, thereby lending legitimacy for his fellow Jews to his novel ideas, at times de Leon went so far as to work directly from earlier Sufi texts. He couched specific terms and concepts borrowed from the Muslim mystics in Aramaic, the language of the second century Talmudic sages who allegedly penned the treatise.

The epic Sufi scholar, Ibn 'Arabi-who had died about 30 years or so before de Leon inked his mystical treatise-presaged many of the ideas that became central to the *Zohar*. Many of these conceptions, of course, originated with one of Ibn 'Arabi's spiritual mentors, the Spanish Sufi Muhammad Ibn Masarra (883-931). Specifically, both Ibn 'Arabi and de Leon:

1. Used the same poetic style and mystical imagery to describe the spiritual quest.
2. Considered mystical revelation as superior to all other oral religious tradition.
3. Posited that light is the symbol of God and His Divine manifestations, while darkness is the symbol of matter.
4. Continued to develop a system whereby letters and numbers had mystical values.
5. Believed that dreams offered a window into the shrouded mystery of death-and spiritual realization.
6. Believed that creation took place from a point or a circle emanating from the Infinite, and from this point all other circles or creations emanate in turn. Herein lay the genesis of the Kabbalistic idea of "Ein Sof," the ineffable power of God from which poured forth the ten *Saphirot* of the Tree of Life.
7. Considered that stars exerted an influence on human life.<sup>30</sup>

On this last point, De Leon used language that was strikingly similar to an explanation of the stars given by Ibn 'Arabi.<sup>31</sup>

One final aspect that the *Zohar* shared with Ibn 'Arabi concerned the Perfect or Primordial man, or that aspect of the "microcosm" of the human being that reflected the "macrocosm" of God. Of course, the ideas of the microcosm and macrocosm were back in Islamic literature a few hundred years and was found originally in Hermetic texts as well as early Islamic sources, but this idea was in the process of being ingested and elaborated on by the Jewish mystics. There were three specific aspects of this idea that the *Zohar* directly shared with Ibn 'Arabi. As Ronald Kiener describes it, the similarities are striking:

"According to the Sufi philosopher, 'a perfect man on the human level is a perfected rationalist who, by perception of the microscopic status of his being is collected by God's mystical initiation into the essential unity of man 'He-man' and God 'The One.' At the same moment the Perfect Man is a Logos, the gathered, revealed Self/ly which God Knows Himself and creates the world.' The *Zohar* contains all of these functions of the 'Primordial Man' (and, to the Jewish mystical tradition, a Perfect Man is one who has fulfilled worldly creation by bringing into the corporeality man and female). The *Primordial Man* is both, a Perfect Man and a Logos, the 'image' by which man knew the revealed God and by which the hidden God creates the subunar world."<sup>32</sup>

While there is no direct evidence that Moses de Leon had read Ibn 'Arabi's works, this seems to be proof of a clear influence. Ibn 'Arabi had become such an important stimulus in Spanish mysticism by the time of the redaction of the *Zohar*, that even if de Leon had not specifically read his Sufi philosophy, he certainly could have run across his ideas in the works of other Ibn 'Arabi influenced writers, both Jewish and Muslim. Even if de Leon had not run across the specific ideas of the Islamic mystic, these similarities show the reliance on a shared, Islamic source.

Also representative of his admiration for and even reliance on Islamic mentors, de Leon utilized ideas from some of the most important myths surrounding Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, to expound on the Jewish mystical ideal. Specifically, de Leon reinterpreted the idea of Muhammad's *miraj*, or Nocturnal ascent in Kabbalistic terminology. He attributed the Muslim account of the upward way and the soul's escape from the prison of the corporeal world, incorporating the model of the "straight line" (*kharr at-mustaqim*) of the Muslim mystic "ladder of ascension" from the Islamic mystic al-Batalayawi, inserting it as an idea central to the Kabbalistic Tree of Life motif. "The decisive proof that Moses de Leon took this term from al-Batalayawi lies in the fact that he links it with the ladder motif and the concept of the ascent of the souls of the departed to the supernal world. This is exactly what we find in al-Batalayawi."<sup>33</sup>

Fainter echoes of this same Islamic source material, as best represented in al-Batalayawi's work, can be found in later Kabbalists, either through the intermedium of the *Zohar* or, perhaps, from original Sufi sources. For instance, the image reappears in a passage of the anonymous commentary *Sefer ha-Temuna* (c. 1270), as well as in the idea of the "flow of emanation" of the *Kharr al-Mustaqim*, Kabbalists. The fact that these Jewish ideas were based on the Islamic precursor was born out by the use of specific terms, the *kharr al-Mustaqim*, which was used by the Jewish mystics and mirrors exactly the vocabulary of earlier Sufis.<sup>34</sup>

Other specific Sufi ideas and aphorisms found their way into this seminal Jewish work. One Sufi saying came to the *Zohar* via the work of Bahya Ibn Pakuda. The phrase, "To become like an ass of burden carrying books," stems from one of the most succinct and, in my opinion, delightful Talmudic Sufi sayings based on the Quran. According to the Sufis, "a donkey with a load of Holy books is still a donkey;" i.e., learning in and of itself does not elevate a person; they must have mystical inspiration to be counted among the truly wise. This saying appeared in Ibn Pakuda's *Duties of the Heart*, in the section "Gate of the Service of God," and almost certainly showed up in the *Zohar* via this Jewish intermediary.<sup>35</sup>

Moses also borrowed his ideas of the winding path of the mystic-as he metaphorically trundled the dangerous road towards a divine union with God-from the Sufis. In the *Zohar*, the author described the vision of a searcher moving through seven successive castles, arranged in concentric circles, one above the next, with each higher one being defined by ever more precious substances. De Leon's descriptions were specifically Sufic.

In his "castle" motif, the Jewish sage described the different stages that a mystic must pass on his way to mystical union with God-and linked these stages to the seven lower *Saphirot* of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. In point of fact, this representation was inspired entirely by the Sufis. First represented by the ninth century Sufi writer Abu'l-Hasan al-Nuri, in his treatise *Dwellings of the Hearts*, the seven-staged castles became a well-known image in subsequent Sufi writing-and were inserted into Jewish mysticism via Moses Maimonides and then the *Zohar*.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, the *Zohar* threaded Sufi inspired ideas into its 2400 pages from a variety of sources, some of them Islamic, and others via Sufi-inspired Jews. By this time, Sufism had become so endemic to Jewish mysticism-and the burgeoning Kabbalistic system that it would be impossible to continue developing this Jewish spiritual path without touching on Sufi precursors. But far from simply accepting Sufi ideas, Moses de Leon seems to have been especially attracted to the beautiful manner of Sufi worship-and enthusiastically drew on its precursors from a variety of sources.

We are left with the surprising conclusion that the Kabbalah, that central aspect of Jewish spirituality from the medieval salons of the Holy Land and Spain down to prayer gatherings in 21st century Philadelphia, Los Angeles and the Middle East, is riddled through with Sufi undercurrents and teachings. While today's Jewish and Muslim politicians and warmongers incite hatred and desperately try to drive each other into the Mediterranean Sea, contemporary Muslim and Jewish masters practice a shared version of the mystical path, whether they know it or not.

With the heart and souls of these two religions so closely linked through nearly a millennia of intermingling, should it not strike us as odd that the bodies of these two wonderful religions are at war? To imagine peace, we need only look into the dim and sometimes hidden past, to discover a story of mystical entanglement that reverberates still through the shared practice of Jewish and Muslim adepts.

## NOTES

[1] Halkin, "The Judeo-Islamic Age," in *Different Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People*, ed. Leo Schwarz, (New York: Random House, 1956), pg. 258.

[2] Gershem Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, (New Jersey: The Jewish Publication Society, 1987), pg. 6.

[3] Joseph Dan and Ronald Kiener, *The Early Kabbalah* (intro), (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), pg. 17.

[4] Ibid., pg. 4.

[5] Ibid., pg. 29-30.

[6] Michael McGaha, *Medieval Encounters III*, (1997), pg. 57.

[7] Steven Wasserstrom, "Sefer Yesira and Early Islam: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy III*, (1993), pg. 15.

[8] Ibid., pg. 1-30.

[9] Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pg. 30.

[10] Wasserstrom, *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy III*, pg. 3-4.

[11] Ibid., pg. 14.

[12] Ibid., pg. 14.

[13] Ibid., pg. 11.

[14] Ibid., pg. 14.

[15] Dan, *The Early Kabbalah*, pg. 7. Michael McGaha notes: "The first known use of (the term *Sepherim*) with mystical sense occurs in the following pun in the enigmatic *Sefer Yetzirah*: 'And He created His universe with the Three Books (Sepherim)' in which text (appears,) with number (Sepherah) and with communication (Sippur)." McGaha, *The Jewish Mystical Tradition*, unpublished manuscript, (2001), pp. 48-49.

[16] Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pg. 25-27. "The thirty-two paths of (Divine Wisdom) are the ten primordial numbers . . . and the 22 consonants of the Hebrew alphabet which are described . . . as the building blocks and elements of the universe. The 'paths of (Divine Wisdom)' are thus fundamental forces that emanate from it (and) in which (the Divine Wisdom) manifests Itself. They are . . . the instruments of creation."

[17] Ibid., pg. 27. In the words of the *Sefer Yetzirah*: "The appearance of the *Sephiroth* is like that of a flash of lightning and their goal is without end. His word is in them when they come forth (from Him) and when they return. They are the depths of all things: the depths of the beginning and the depth of the end, the depth of good and the depth of evil, the depth of above and the depth of below-and a single Master, God, the Faithful King, rules over all of them from His holy abode." Quoted in *ibid.*, pg. 28.

[18] As an example of the continuing, and even growing, fascination that seekers have with the Kabbalah, I proffer these quotes from a recent article in the *New York Times* entitled "A Surge in Popularity in Jewish Mysticism," Debra Nussau Cohen, 12/13/03 (A5): "It became official when Britney Spears appeared on the cover of Entertainment Weekly in November, wearing little but a white bustier, a poult look and a red string around her wrist; Kabbalah has entered the realm of pop culture. Of course, Maimonides laid the way in promoting Kabbalah . . . Much of the Kabbalah's popularity is with the New Age crowd, which blends the practices of many traditions." readable, dear reader, for Ha Saena also notes: "This can hardly be the fate that the Kabbalah's creators, Jewish mystics in the 13th to 16th centuries who wrote the *Zohar* and related writings, could have imagined for their teachings, which were intended to reveal the inner meaning of the Torah. And it has traditionalists up in arms. The phenomenon has been derided on some Jewish Web sites as 'McMysticism.' The connection between pop-culture Kabbalah and the real thing is the relationship between pornography and love," said Adin Steinsaltz, a Hasidic rabbi in Jerusalem.

[19] Wasserstrom, *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy III*, pg. 11. "The *Secret of Creation* was a pseudobiographical hermetic work said by the philosopher al-Razi (d. 925) to have been written at the time of al-Manum (d. 833)."

[20] Ibid., pg. 11-12.

[21] Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pg. 35.

[22] McGaha, *Medieval Encounters III*, pg. 52-53.

[23] Ibid., pg. 36.

[24] "La Science des Lettres," trans. Denis Gril in Ibn Arabi, *Les Illuminations de la Meccque*, ed. Chodkiewicz et al. (Paris: Deshayes, 1988) pg. 415, quoted in *ibid.*, pg. 36.

[25] Ben-Sasson, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

[26] Ariel, in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times II*, (Scholars Press, 1985), pg. 158-159.

[27] Untermyer, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

[28] Dan, *The Early Kabbalah*, pg. 29.

[29] Ibid., pg. 29-30.

[30] Ronald Kiener, "Ibn Arabi and the Qabbalah: A Study of Thirteenth Century Iberian Mysticism," *Studies in Mystical Literature II*, Volume 2, Number 2, 1982, pg. 45.

[31] *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism*, Alexander Altman and S.M. Stern (eds.), (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), pg. 67-68.

[32] Altman, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism*, pg. 67-68. In the *Sefer ha-Temuna* we get an idea of why in which the Sufi "ladder of ascension" was wrapped up with the imagery from Muhammad's night flight: "And the supernal sanctuary. Our Father Jacob, who was the ladder in his dream, knew that even as there is a Sanctuary in the world of emanation above, so there is a Sanctuary below, for it is written, 'and this is the gate of heaven'" (Genesis 28:17). And from this path the angels ascend and descend, and so do the souls; likewise."

[33] Isaac Myer, *Qabbalah*, (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1970), pg. 29.

[34] All information about the seven castles comes from "Naming the Nameless, Numbering the Infinite," YCGL 45/46, 1997/1998, pg. 42.

