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JEWISH MYSTICS, AN
APPRECIATION





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JEWISH MYSTICS—AN APPRECIATION.

It is to be hoped that the time has passed when the term "Jewish Cabbala" suggested the notion of a store-house of magic, black art, and witchcraft. It is no longer assumed by anybody to be a secret art of star-gazing, prognosticating, horoscoping, and soothsaying. Even such as have given only slight attention to the matter must have learned that there are many points of view from which the Cabbala may be considered, and that it may possibly have an interesting side even for the uninitiated.

It would be impossible to give even a cursory sketch of the Cabbala without diving down deeply into the intricacies of abstruse systems, without touching upon questions which require the most minute care of the specialist. A history of the Cabbala and its systems, of its various manifestations, applications, and influence, however exhaustively treated in detail, would, at most, elucidate one side of the question only. Another aspect would have to be investigated which would command a much higher interest. The purely human question would have to be entered into, and an attempt made to understand the workings of the intellect and the emotions, the interaction of religious thought and religious feeling, the wonderment at that which surpasses human intelligence and the craving to grasp its import, ethical principles and yearnings of the heart, which one and all are instrumental in calling forth the manifestations of man's mystical instincts.

But apart from such encyclopaedic consideration of the subject, there are certain points which well bear to be dealt with exoterically. There are, on the very fringe of the subject, two questions capable of being investigated,

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without the necessity of entering upon abstruse reasoning and obscure details. There is, first, the question whether the term "The Rise of the Cabbala," frequently used in Jewish literature to denote the period commencing with the twelfth century, is not somewhat ill-chosen; and, secondly, whether the judgment passed on the mediaeval Cabbalists by several Jewish writers on Jewish history is not altogether erroneous.

Regarding the first point—the so-called rise of the Cabbala about the twelfth century—it must be said that it is no longer a dogma of modern Jewish historiography. Prof. L. Ginzberg, in his article on the Cabbala in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, disposes of the notion that the Cabbala of the period alluded to was a newly risen star on the Jewish horizon. There is no abruptness in the genesis of the Cabbala of that time. It is a natural continuation of certain modes of thought and feeling which had never been absent; which, in one form or another, had all along prevailed in Judaism, and the actual rise of which may be said—from an historical point of view—to lose itself in the dim, distant regions of antiquity; and—from a psychological point of view—to be rooted in the construction of that eternally inscrutable enigma which is called the human soul.

In reference to the second point:—the way in which many Jewish scholars judge of Cabbalists and Cabbala, is one of condemnation only. The mystical element, which has played so important a part in the history of the Jewish religion, is anathematized. Mysticism, it is said, can only flourish in intellectual decay. Mysticism is represented as a poisonous plant of exotic origin, some seeds of which, having been wafted by an unfortunate wind upon Jewish soil, tended to cover large stretches of fertile regions with its outlandish, parasitical growth. The Cabbala is described as an importation from without, an enemy of all intellectuality, of all rationalism. The lurid light which it professes to cast upon questions of the highest impor-

tance, tends only to make the obscurity all the more palpable, so that the darkness can be felt. The Cabbala does not, indeed, hesitate to attack the most difficult problems in the arena of philosophy and metaphysics; but it tries to solve them, not by methodical reasoning, but by giving free license to unbounded imagination; by inventing supernatural situations and combinations, which are based upon nothing, and obscure instead of enlighten; to degenerate ultimately into an inane juggling with numbers and with the letters of the alphabet. Stripped of all circumlocution it comes to this: that the Cabbala is said to be nothing but religious mania with a method; lunacy raised to the dignity of a science.

And as for the results which such extravagance leads to, they are deplored as having been pernicious in the highest degree. They are represented as having marred the Jewish conception of the Deity in its absolute spirituality; as having introduced a gross anthropomorphism; an unsound idea of the soul and its duties; and curious notions about life after death. This, it is said, led again to absurd rites to the detriment of the exercise of essential religious duties. The Cabbala, in short, is represented as having become, since the thirteenth Christian century until comparatively recent times, a bad sore upon the body Jewish, paralyzing it to a great extent, and endangering its very existence.

But it is not all scholars that judged thus harshly of this phenomenon in history. There are some who admit that the Cabbala has also its good sides, that some of its developments had a genuine spiritualizing effect. They concede that the flight of its imagination was in many cases highly poetical; that its doctrines frequently conduced to intense religious devotion. But such gracious concessions do not go beyond admitting, that an avowedly bad case has its redeeming points; in accordance with the trite adage, that nothing is absolutely bad.

In the face of such absolute condemnation on the one

hand, and a condescending semi-defence on the other, I claim for the Cabbala, that the fact of its existence was a good thing, and not only a good thing but a necessity; that it is a thing of which Jewish historians ought to speak with pride. I assert that the Jewish intellect could not have been of the high order which we would fain believe it to have been, that it must have been feeble indeed, if, in certain contingencies, it had not taken shelter in the Cabbala.

But I do not wish to be misunderstood. It is not my intention to break a lance either for or against the validity of the various doctrines of the Cabbala. I shall even grant—for the sake of argument—that such mysticism was foreign to the doctrines and objects of Judaism. Let it be admitted—for the sake of argument—that it was Neo-Platonism, and some other more ancient systems, the shoots of which were grafted upon Jewish beliefs and customs, and that every doctrine put forth by the Cabbalists rested on error. Yet, even so, I aver that a Jewish historian, taking up the standpoint of uncompromising antagonism to the Cabbala, and even whilst combating its tenets, would, on the ground of historical justice, be obliged to find: that the fact that the Cabbala existed was an aspect of the Jewish mind of which he, as a Jewish historian, ought to be proud.

It is for this purpose that it may be useful to receive some sidelights from the contemplation of mediaeval Christian mysticism. It will be profitable for three reasons. First, there is some similarity in the causes which prompted Christian and Jewish minds alike to find solace in mysticism. In the second place, the fact that mediaeval Christian mystics looked for inspiration into the books of the Jewish Cabbala goes far to vindicate the significance of the latter. There is a third reason which is not so complimentary to us, and which issues from a hope that Jewish writers may take an example from the way in which Christian writers on the history of philo-

sophy treat their mystics. Nobody will suspect these Christian scholars of having themselves an inclination towards mysticism; and it is therefore worth noticing, aye, and imitating, the historical objectivity with which they assign to those mystics their proper place in the development of human thought.

Let us just inquire what the objects are which mysticism tries to accomplish. For mysticism is one of the instincts that enter into the composition of the human being. It has its uses and its abuses. It tries, in its own way, to find solutions to the host of enigmas by which our existence is surrounded. The questions of why, whence, whither, how great, how long, are constantly before us. The horizon of mental vision is limited; questions crop up on every side. Must we silently acquiesce in the fact of our existence, and the existence of everything else—that is, if we and everything else exist at all, for this has also been doubted—without ever being able to understand, whence everything took its origin, what it consists of, to what purpose it all tends, how this universe came into existence, what was its primary cause, how far it extends, how long it endures?

Of such questions there are two which mainly harass the mind; one, that of the genesis of the world, of the visible, palpable world; and the second, that about its originator. The former question is partly put to us by our perception through the senses, and both by the workings of our mind. They already forced themselves upon the attention of primitive man. But the primitive mind was unable to conceive abstract ideas; its ideas were conceived in a visible, material form; it could not draw a line of demarcation between things material and things immaterial. The senses had to supply answers to the questions that vexed the mind. The forces of nature became the primitive man's gods. Every luminary in the sky, every tree, every brook and river, every breath of wind represented to him, or was peopled by him with wonderful beings,

demons, gods. And when he tried to conceive his gods apart from the phenomena of nature, as beings endowed with free movement, action, and volition, his abstractions did not rise above the forms of men and animals. He may have exaggerated the size of the members of the body and their powers, but he would not carry his notions beyond those of colossal men and monstrosities. It was mythology which attempted to satisfy in this way the cravings for a penetration into the invisible.

A remarkable fact strikes us in connexion with this. The same race which formulated mythological fancies in the most attractive manner, the race whose fabulous theology and cosmogony appeals most to the sense of poetry, that very same race, of all ancient nations, has striven to free the intellect from the trammels of fancy, and attempted to solve the mysteries of existence by means of purely speculative philosophy. The ancient Greeks, the masters of the plastic representation of the Beautiful, who possessed the most poetical system of mythology, were also the first teachers of Logic and Metaphysics. They produced their Hesiodic and Homeric poems, and also their Socrates, their Plato, their Aristotle.

I must not stop to investigate to what extent, even among the ancient Greeks, imagination on the one hand, and Oriental influences on the other, formed a link between crude mythology—crude, however poetical a garb it may wear—and purely philosophical inquiries. It suffices to notice these two methods, the mythological and the philosophical, by which it was attempted to penetrate the mists that envelop us.

But there was another way in which to answer the questions of the why, the wherefore, the whither, and the whence. Religion answered these questions in its own way. It did not limit itself to the requirements of the intellect and the imagination; it embraced besides the cravings of the heart which strives to come into closer connexion with things divine. Europe, America, Austra-

lasia, and the greater part of Asia and Africa owes the most transcendental conceptions about God to the Israelite race ; the conceptions of God as creator, as the only God, who is incorporeal, omnipotent, omniscient, of infinite mercy. Henceforth, no more worship of the phenomena of nature, of demons, of things material. An answer is found to the highest metaphysical problems, the yearnings of communing with God are gratified, and the prospect is held out of a universal acknowledgement of God by all mankind.

It would be an error to suppose that the relations between philosophy and religion were always of a hostile nature. They often were in opposition to each other ; but, much more frequently, they lived together on terms of intimate good fellowship. They tried to supplement each other. Religion, or, rather, those who professed a certain religion, always liked to show, that whatever religious doctrines and religious practices they adhered to, they were not merely a matter of pure faith, but the necessary outcome of certain primary principles. Philosophy of religion arose ; it set itself the laudable object of harmonizing, of reconciling, conflicting elements. The question whether a reconciliation was possible was not asked. The attempt was made, and, marvellous to record, it succeeded ; at least to the satisfaction of those who were willing to adopt its results.

Thus for ages man has been questioning and answering. Phenomena were explored, knowledge was piled up mountain high. Each generation added to the store ; the range of vision widened, the secrets of nature were laid bare. Knowledge enabled man to enslave the forces of nature and make them serviceable to the construction of gigantic undertakings. But all these acquisitions were accompanied by an undercurrent of insecurity. The questions of the where, the whither, the why, and the what remained unanswered. Some scientists and philosophers of the present age have endeavoured to take stock of our

achievements towards the solution of these enigmas. They were constrained to admit the existence of limits to our knowledge which they despaired of man ever being able to traverse. The physiologist, Emil Du Bois-Reymond, concluded his lecture on *Die Grenzen der Naturkenntniss* with the following words: "In respect to the riddle: What is matter and force, and how are they enabled to think, the explorer of nature has no choice but to adopt as his motto: *Ignorabimus*." The same scholar gave, in 1880, a lecture at the Leibnitz-meeting of the Berlin *Akademie der Wissenschaften* before a gathering of scholars and scientists of the most advanced school. The lecture was entitled: *The Seven Riddles of the Universe*. The lecturer puts forward seven difficulties; he concedes reluctantly and doubtfully the possibility of being overcome at some future date, to only three of them, to wit: (1) the question about the origin of life; (2) the apparently intentional and teleological arrangement in nature; and (3) origin of thought, and—connected therewith—origin of speech. But he declares the other four difficulties to be insuperable; or, as he calls it, transcendent. They are: (1) the nature of matter and force; (2) the origin of motion; (3) the origin of simple perception through the senses; and (4) free will; in case we are not prepared to deny its existence altogether, but declare the subjective sense of freedom to be an illusion. The seven problems, he says, may be comprehended under one single problem, *the problem of the Universe*; and this time he concludes with the motto: *dubitemus*.

This it is what modern research was candid enough to admit; and it is that which has been given voice to at all times. Religion, and particularly Jewish religion, told of the existence of a partition which it is impossible to penetrate. Thus, for instance, the Mishna deprecates the attempt to understand the infinite space and time, saying that "he who ponders over the following four things might as well not have been born! What is above, what is below,

what is in front, and what is behind." But the human mind is like a child in leading strings. It is impatient of restraint. It refuses to acknowledge boundaries. It is surfeited with doubts, and thirsts for certainty. It is ashamed of asking and finding no answers. Thus Du Bois-Reymond's propositions were not allowed to pass unchallenged. He met with contradictions from many quarters; not the least important of his opponents was Ernst Haeckel, who attempted in his own way to give a solution of *The Riddle of the Universe*. But then, neither were Haeckel's conclusions allowed to pass unchallenged, and he himself found reason to modify certain of the results previously arrived at by him. The same old questions continue to be the subjects of meditation, and, when we glance at the literature which has sprung up, and revolves round them, in the comparatively short period of time that has elapsed since Du Bois-Reymond's pronouncement, we are bewildered by its extent.

But although religion was frequently satisfied with the acknowledgement of ignorance, and, as we have seen, some recent scientists and philosophers also; it was not the case with ancient, mediaeval, and comparatively recent philosophy. It certainly was not the case with the mystics.

It is not surprising that philosophy did not satisfy the mystically inclined mind. It found one system of philosophy supplanting another. Besides, pure philosophy appealed only to the intellect. But can it ever satisfy the soul's craving for communion with the divine? Can it slake the yearnings for a sight of the invisible, for comprehension of that which is incomprehensible? The mystic is dissatisfied with the philosopher who invites him and his problems to his intellectual laboratory, but leaves his thirsting soul as parched as before.

Let me illustrate this by a phase in the history of modern philosophy. Immanuel Kant opened an epoch in philosophy which cannot be said to have come to a close yet. This philosopher started his meditations on the basis

of the systems which preceded his. He found them insufficient; he rejected them one after another, and ended in—metaphorically speaking—constructing a great waste-paper basket, into which he unceremoniously bundled a number of previous philosophical tenets, after having torn them to rags and tatters. Fichte continued the work, and demolished the little that had been spared by Kant. But his follower, Schelling, went boldly forwards, discovered fresh insufficiencies, and ended by surrendering himself, hand and foot, to mysticism. The philosophical chrysalis had become metamorphosed into a mystical butterfly.

Such transition from philosophy to mysticism finds numerous counterparts in ancient and mediaeval times. The causes are identical. The German philosopher, Eduard Zeller, expresses them in the following terms: "The mystical turn of mind revolts against a science which wants to define, to demonstrate, to discuss everything; which wants to invest the divine mysteries with human notions. And these notions themselves were too dry and too poor to meet the requirements of the mystic's profound nature, to give expression to the inspirations of his genial mind. The strictness of the logical forms oppressed his thinking powers; which were, indeed, bright enough to notice the contradictions of many distinctions, but were yet too much limited by religious interests and dogmatical traditions to remove the last causes of these contradictions. He took refuge in dictatorial sentences of pious consciousness; in notions devoid of clearness, but ingenious and rich in fancies."

Such are the terms which a German philosopher applies to the mediaeval German mystics; they are the estimate by a Christian philosopher of the Christian mystics of his country. They are the words of an antagonist of mysticism, who maintains that such mystic speculations "cannot possibly have any lasting influence upon the conditions of knowledge, because they undertake to solve the most

complicated and comprehensive questions by means of unclear notions and dogmatic propositions which have not been proved. Instead of well-defined ideas, they offer a confusing mass of fluctuating figures ; instead of scientific research, fanciful fictions ; instead of intelligible series of thoughts, apocalyptic riddles."

We see how outspoken Zeller is in his deprecation of mysticism as compared with pure philosophy. We must not stop to inquire whether the boundary line between mysticism and philosophy can in reality be so sharply defined ; whether "fanciful fictions" were not, more or less, important auxiliaries in the construction of both ancient and modern philosophical systems ; how much, for example, Leibnitz's monadology owed to a lively phantasy ; how considerably Haeckel, when setting up his alleged solution of the Riddle of the Universe, drew upon his powerful imagination. It is enough for us to notice how so uncompromising an opponent of mysticism as Zeller does not look down with contempt upon the mystics of his country. Far from it ; together with other historiographers of philosophy, he tries to dive down into the souls of these men, to understand their doctrines, and to assign to them their place in the pantheon of men of profound thought. There is no condescension here on his part ; there is an honest attempt to discover in their endeavours an influence for the good ; and he points to them with pride as members of the race to which he belonged.

Our Jewish mystics have not received such delicate handling at the hands of some of our modern Jewish writers. It would not be difficult to explain why the method of pitying condescension, or of merciless condemnation, or even supercilious ridicule, has been applied by Jews to Jewish mystics. I must, however, add that there were others who considered them from a much more reasonable point of view. Nor must it be forgotten that among Christians also the cases are by no means rare, that men who deserved the gratitude of contemporaries

and posterity, were not appreciated for the good they had attempted to accomplish, but lived in the memories of men as wizards and magicians, as, for example, Roger Bacon and Theophrastes Paracelsus.

The commencement of methodical mysticism loses itself in the fogs of ages. A real or supposed Pythagoras is said to have acquired some profound mystical doctrines when travelling in the East. Whoever Pythagoras may have been, or whether there ever was a Pythagoras : so much is certain, that there existed a Pythagorean school of philosophers. Pythagoras, or his school, considered the essence and principle of all things to consist in numbers ; numbers were the elements out of which the universe was constructed. All the various forms and phenomena of the world have numbers for their bases and their essence. On the foundation of numbers a cosmogony was constructed. Pythagoras was said to have been the first who taught the harmony of the Spheres, and the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul is also connected with his name.

We are just as ignorant as to the time when Jewish mysticism crystallized itself into a system. It may have originally been based on Chaldaean doctrines, but it was of a specifically Jewish character long before Christian mysticism had developed itself. The principal elements which the Jewish mystic had to blend together were reason, mystical promptings, and his Torah. This latter element, the Torah, served as a wholesome check to an untrammelled license in his speculations. If he was induced to adopt the priority of matter, his scriptural loyalty confined him to the priority of certain matter only. If God is to him the dwelling-place of the Universe, the Universe is not the dwelling-place of God. God, says Philo, is called *המקום*, the Place, because he enclosed the universe. He is himself not enclosed in anything. Mystical speculations continued to develop themselves for centuries before they led up to mediaeval Cabbala. There were the ten Sefirot, which were explained as the ten

agencies through which God created the world: Wisdom, Insight, Cognition, Strength, Power, Inexorableness, Justice, Right, Love, and Mercy. There were notions about spirits and angels. There was the doctrine of the mysterious powers of the Hebrew alphabet. This mystical use of the letters of the alphabet bears an analogy to the Pythagorean method of explaining the universe through numbers. The book *Yetzira* plays an important part from the very earliest times. The letters of the alphabet were considered to resolve the contrast between the substance and the form of things.

Such doctrines, and many more, were further cultivated for centuries. They prevailed during the period of the Geonim. They existed in Babylon and in Italy, and from Italy they were carried to Germany. Jewish mysticism in Germany in the thirteenth century was not at all unlike the Jewish mysticism that prevailed in Babylon about the beginning of the ninth.

This is not in accord with those writers who aver that the Cabbala of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was an entirely new departure in Judaism. It has been maintained that about that time the Cabbala arose as a new system of fantastic doctrines, that were invented by some mystics, and that this system succeeded in obtaining recognition among large numbers of Jews. It is said that it grew apace, that it assumed formidable dimensions, and finished by obscuring the horizon of the Jewish mind, and to replace clear notions by fantastic fabrications and puerile games with numbers and the letters of the alphabet.

I do not intend now either to endorse or to contradict these views, except on the one point: about the novelty of the departure. The new Cabbala was nothing but a continuation and further development of the mysticism that prevailed at the time of the Geonim. It is true that about that time the Cabbala derived additional authority from the belief that it was rooted in an antiquity of quite a different nature. People believed that at the beginning

of the twelfth century the doctrines of the Cabbala had been revealed by the prophet Elijah to Jacob Ha-Nazir; that the latter had transmitted the new revelations to the great Rabbi Abraham ben David of Pasquières, whose son, Isaac the Blind, and the latter's alleged disciple Azriel, divulged them to larger circles. We smile perhaps at the *naïveté* of those who earnestly believed in such stories. But it requires a certain amount of *naïveté* of a different kind to assume that Isaac the Blind had been the inventor and originator of the mediaeval speculative Cabbala. It is much too complicated a work to owe its origin to the efforts of one man. The works of Azriel contain traces which point to origins of a much earlier date. Further investigations have shown, as I said before, that these doctrines existed in Babylon and Italy, and from Italy they were carried to Germany about the beginning of the tenth century. As to Isaac the Blind, we cannot say more than that he contributed largely to make the Cabbalistical tenets public property.

I shall not give a catalogue of names of those who were the bearers of the Cabbala of that period, nor of the books in which their doctrines had been laid down. Those who have given attention to the subject will have read about the book *Azilut*, the earliest book in which the speculative Cabbala is expounded. Its doctrines of the four graduated worlds, and of the concentration of the divine Being, and its angelology, are entirely based on the book *Yetsira*, and do not differ much from the view held on these matters by the Geonim. The author of the article Cabbala in the Jewish Encyclopaedia says that it is probably a product of the Geonic period.

Another book in which the doctrines of the speculative Cabbala are fully expounded is the book *Bahir*. Its author is unknown; but, as was the case with a number of Cabbalistical books, an author was found for it. It was ascribed to one of the Talmudical Sages. Probably the book had no author, but a compiler, who placed the

doctrines that had been current in several schools of thought upon a dialectical basis. The book *Bahir* has the merit of having given to the Jewish scholars of the time an opening towards a thorough study of Metaphysics, which had, until then, been carried on only on the lines laid down by Aristotle. It is not necessary to give here a description of the book *Zohar*, and the opinions for and against it. The Spaniard Azriel (1160-1238) made the metaphysical aspects of the Cabbala accessible to the Jewish philosophers of his time. The notion was current at that time, that we are only able to predicate of God, that which he is not; that all attributes of God cannot go any further than abrogate from him corporeal and material imperfections. This idea was followed up by Azriel. He starts from the negative attributes of God, and calls God the *En-Sof*, the One without End, the One without Limitation, the absolutely infinite One, who can only be comprehended as the negation of all negations.

If we desire to gain an independent judgment about the value, the motive, and the effects of such speculations, the best method will be again to cast a glance upon similar phenomena in quite different spheres of thought. Let us see what Christian mediaeval mysticism of that age, and of subsequent ages, had to say about them.

Towards the end of the thirteenth century the Dominican monk Master Eckhart proclaimed from the pulpit in the German language views which brought him into serious conflict with his ecclesiastical superiors. He had a thorough knowledge of Aristotle, Neo-Platonism, and the Scholasticism of his time. He had taught in Paris with great success. After visiting Rome he returned to Germany, and, for a number of years, taught and preached in Saxony, Bohemia, and Cologne. Proceedings were instituted against him, and he made a public recantation, but appealed, at the same time, to the Pope. He only escaped the papal condemnation by dying before it could take effect. The condemnation then fell upon his teaching.

Following previous doctrines, he distinguishes between God and the Godhead. God has a beginning and an end, but not the Godhead. God, or the Godhead, is exalted above all understanding; he has no existence; he is above every existence. He has no predicate; nothing can be attributed to him, which could not with greater reason be denied of him: he is a non-God, a non-person, a non-form. He is everything, and nothing of everything. When dwelling in the nothing of nothing, he is not God, but the Godhead, unpersonal, unbeknown to himself. In order to become known to himself it is necessary that there should be in him, together with existence, nature and form. Before things were created, God was not God. He was obliged to communicate himself; God can do without creatures just as little as creatures can do without him. All things are equally in God, and are God himself. Only nothingness distinguishes the things from God.

Compared with these, and suchlike enunciations of Eckhart's, the obscure sayings of the Jewish mystics are bright daylight. People rightly consider Azriel's saying: the *En-Sof*, the absolute Infinite, can only be comprehended as the negation of all negations, to be obscure. But how does it compare for obscurity with Master Eckhart's expositions? And we must not forget, that Eckhart manages somehow or other to evolve out of his theory of God's self-conception, besides the revelation of God in a world, also the difference of persons in God, as the Christian Church teaches in the doctrine of the Trinity. It would be easy enough to declare the whole of Eckhart's mysticism to be senseless phantasy. But let us listen to the words of the great German writer on the history of philosophy, whom I had occasion to quote above, about that, which, if it were written by a Jewish mystic, would have been stigmatized by many a Jewish writer as a farrago of nonsense.

"Scholasticism," Zeller says, "had forcibly united two incongruous elements; a faith which was under the

guardianship of the ecclesiastical powers, and a science ruled by the tradition of the schools. Both elements had suffered by the unison. It had created a theology in which the sentiment of piety gained no satisfaction. . . . The Neo-Platonic idea of God in its original conception had removed the Deity to a distance, where it could not be reached by mortal beings; where, for itself, it would have no need of creatures; and the universe was brought forth by him only by the way, by an overflow of the divine power. Eckhart, on the contrary, was so much alive to the Christian idea of an intrinsic and real communion of man with God, that he was quite unable to conceive his God without universe and man. . . . This doctrine of Master Eckhart is certainly not a strictly philosophical system. It issues rather from religious motives than from scientific ones; and instead of an inquiry into reality which assumes nothing for granted, it starts partly from the Christian dogma, partly from previous speculations, especially Neo-Platonism. Yet has his doctrine, as compared with others, so much a character of its own, and it encounters the domineering system with so much boldness and independence, that we have every reason to see in it the first attempt of a German philosophy; the first vigorous flight of the German mind, which felt itself strong enough to think of emancipating itself from science, as it then existed, which was Romanic both in origin and substance; to excogitate a new form of research, more in accordance with its genius and its wants."

I do not wish to use harsh terms about the views laid down in the books on Jewish history which deal with that which is called "the rise of the Cabbala." Those Jewish mystics, who rejected the Jewish mediaeval scholasticism, which was called then, and is called still, Jewish philosophy; namely, the forcible harmonization of Aristotelianism and the Jewish faith, and welcomed instead the book *Bahir*, and the doctrines of Azriel; these Jews may be glad if they meet with no worse epithets than haters of

light and lovers of darkness. But the time will come when Jewish writers on Jewish mysticism will be animated by the same sentiments of impartiality, and true, scientific fairness as those which dictated the passages of the German philosopher which I have just quoted.

Systematic Christian mysticism in the later Middle Ages commenced with Eckhart, and its zenith was reached in the methods of Jacob Böhme, the cobbler of Görlitz. There was a series of mystics between them; and they occupy a conspicuous, and by no means contemptible, niche in the history of philosophy. The question might be asked, why such tender regard is paid to men whose doctrines no one is prepared to adopt? The reason is this. It was recognized that it was a necessity in the graduated education of Europe that such mysticism should arise. Is it imaginable that it was possible for the human mind, the learned human mind, to loosen itself at a moment's notice from the insufficiency and inanity into which mediaeval scholasticism had sunk, and with one swoop to arrive at sound methods in philosophy and science? Is it thinkable that learned Europe should go to sleep one night steeped in the conditions of science, as it was understood by the followers of an Albert the Great or a Thomas Aquinas, to rise the next morning as adepts in the methods of an Immanuel Kant or a Darwin? It is not thus that revolutions in the dominions of learning and cognition take place. Mediaeval scholasticism on the one hand, and the achievements of a Galileo and a Descartes on the other, are wide and far apart. Their bridging over is not a question of time; it is a question of transition, of intermediary stages, of evolution. According to the natural construction of the human mind, mysticism was one of these stages, through which an effete scholasticism had to be metamorphosed into a methodical philosophy and study of nature. It was a psychological necessity that mysticism should form one of the links between dogmatic philosophy and an independent exploration of nature, of metaphysics, and of

the human mind. These are not arbitrary *a priori* assumptions, posited for the purpose of explaining by their means real or imaginary facts. They are historical facts, which force themselves upon the attention of the observer.

This it is what the writers of the history of philosophy—may they ever so much have been opposed to mysticism—have seen ; this is the reason why they acknowledge the merits of those Christian mystics, who were, in this manner, instrumental in paving the way for the development of science of the present day. This it is what our Jewish historians do not seem to have understood in regard to our own mystics. What then ought we to have preferred to this “rise of the Cabbala” ? As little as it was possible for a Master Eckhart or a Jacob Böhlme to be a Galileo or a Leibnitz, just as impossible was it for Isaac the Blind or Azriel to be a Hegel or a Herbert Spencer. The only alternative they had was, either to continue modelling and remodelling the old harmonizing methods of the age, which were then called philosophy, or to turn to mysticism, to the natural stepping-stone from a fruitless scholasticism to independent scientific research. And, in doing so, our Jewish mystics had a great advantage over their congeners. If it is true, as Huxley expresses it in connexion with the progress of science, that “by a happy conjunction of circumstances, the Jewish and the Arabian physicians and philosophers escaped many of the influences which, at that time, blighted natural knowledge in the Christian world,” how much more true is it that the Jewish mystics were preserved from many a block against which the other mystics could not help stumbling, by their written and traditional Torah, by the Midrashic and Geonic literature and its developments, upon which they were able to fall back.

The Cabbalists of this period were also influential in another way. They gave a direction to the Christian mystics. To some of these latter the Jewish Cabbala came as a revelation. They were no longer able to construe

Christianity on the lines of a tottering Scholasticism. Whither were they to turn for that which they called rationalizing their dogmas? They discovered that by means of some modifications they might force the Cabbala into their service. A circumstance favoured them. Several books of the Cabbala went under the fictitious names of some ancient sages as their authors. Now there were in those days a comparatively large number of Jews that had turned Christians, and who, in their renegade zeal, were more popish than the pope. They wrote books against Jews and Judaism, and some occasionally tried their hands at the manufacture of Cabbalistical books, into which they smuggled some veiled representation of the Christian dogmas. The Christian mystics eagerly took hold of the Cabbala for their purposes.

Foremost among them was the Italian count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. When quite young, he had been a pupil of the Jewish scholar Elijah del Medigo of Candia. But this master could not satisfy his mystical propensities, because he belonged to that section of Jews that were hostile to the Cabbala. He turned to another master, Joachim Allemano, Rabbi of Constantinople, who lived in Italy. Pico was determined to find proofs of Christianity in the Cabbala; and what cannot be accomplished if one tries hard enough? And in his case it was not so very hard after all. He did not so much enter into the metaphysical side of the Cabbala as into its formal methods. By transposing at will the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and by a free use of their numerical values, he managed to produce results most convincing to himself.

It was the same with the German mystic Agrippa von Nettesheim, and with the celebrated Johann Reuchlin, to whom the Cabbala had come from Italy.

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim was born in Cologne in 1486. His career was "half scientific, and half political, but always stormy." He was first a soldier, and followed the armies of the Emperor Maximilian. He was

knighted, studied law, medicine, and languages. As professor in Hebrew at Dôle, in France, he publicly expounded Reuchlin's work on *the Miraculous Word*. Then the monks persecuted him, and he came to London and lectured there. After many vicissitudes he thought he had at last settled down in Metz. But he had to leave that town for two reasons: first, because he had the audacity of opposing the common opinion that the holy Anna had had three husbands; and, secondly, because he had dared to defend a woman that had been accused of sorcery. When Louisa of Savoy, the mother of Francis I, appointed him as her physician, she wanted him also to be her astrologer. He was shocked at the idea and indignantly refused; but at the very same moment he was engaged in setting a horoscope for the Constable of Bourbon, for whom he prophesied a brilliant victory over France. He was expelled, and there was quite a rush to receive him elsewhere. He received offers from two German princes, from the King of England, and from Margaret, the governess of the Netherlands. He accepted the latter's invitation, and but a short time after he terminated his chequered career at the age of 47 years. One of his books bears the title of *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus declamatio* (a dissertation on the nobility and excellency of the female sex). The reader may decide whether this was penned by the scientific side, or by the political side, or by the mystical side, or by the purely human side, in the character of this versatile man. The book has been translated into English; I believe, twice. But his chief work is that on the occult philosophy. Here he handled the letters of the Hebrew alphabet with unheard of freedom. The book is full of tables, and schemes of transposition of letters; and in this manner he manages to prove whatever he wishes.

The celebrated Reuchlin was a man of unfathomably higher significance than Agrippa von Nettesheim. He also started his career with the study of the Cabbala. He

approached a great Rabbi with the request to supply him with books on the Cabbala, but the Rabbi replied that no such books existed in his place; he moreover advised him to have nothing to do with mysticism. Reuchlin wrote two Cabbalistical books; the one entitled *De Arte Cabalistica*, and the other *De Verbo Mirifico*, the *Wonderful Word*. In the latter book he also gives free scope to an arbitrary transposition of letters, and inserts between the four letters of the tetragrammaton the letter ψ , so as to obtain the name Jeshuah; a composite name, to which he ascribes all sorts of miraculous properties. Great as he was as a humanist, his contributions to philosophy were feeble; and he assisted in fertilizing the ground for the new sprouting up of modern science more by his humanism—the other powerful lever in the upheaval of modern thought and science—than by his mysticism. Mysticism, not less than humanism, paved the way for a new era of independent research in philosophy and the knowledge of nature. Thus we see in Theophrastes Paracelsus's life and endeavours—which Robert Browning wished to make intelligible to the English public in a remarkable poetical composition—a striking illustration of the transition from the old to the new methods along the paths of mysticism. There were Jacob Böhme, Nicholas Cusanus, Giordano Bruno, who was burnt at Rome, who gradually led up to the possibility of a pure philosophy, and of science based upon research and experiment.

Looking back upon our Jewish mystics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries I cannot help considering them of deserving a higher place in the history of philosophy than a Master Eckhart, and a Jacob Böhme; they had certainly much loftier aspirations than such men as Agrippa von Nettesheim. In estimating these Cabbalists I abstained from discussing the claims of the mystical element in human nature to a voice in the consideration of the highest problems; I did not touch upon the question what part these mystical instincts play in the systems of

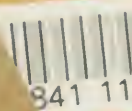
our most advanced metaphysicians and physicists. I have placed myself upon the standpoint of those who are uncompromisingly antagonistic to mysticism. But I aver that from this very standpoint our Cabbalists have been unjustly treated by most of our modern Jewish writers. Much has been said about the dire influences which the Cabbala has exercised upon the development of Judaism. Even if we were—for the sake of argument—to admit the existence of these abuses; these could not neutralize the merits of those whom the inexorable order of nature forced into the channels of the Cabbala. And it is more than questionable whether the influences of the Cabbala were as pernicious as they are painted. Thus I have heard people enlarge with great concern upon the immorality which the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul has in its train. I need only point to some of our Rabbis who held this doctrine; for example, to the learned R. Isaiah Hurwitz, better known as the Sh'loh, who indeed attained as great a height of ethical and religious perfection as is ever vouchsafed to man to attain. I will quote a few sentences on this doctrine of the transmigration of the soul, written by an author of quite a different stamp; who will say that such sentiments can possibly lead to immorality of any description?

“Why should it be impossible,” says this author, “for every individual to have appeared more than once in this world? Is the hypothesis ridiculous for this reason only, because it is the oldest? Because the human intellect alighted upon it from the beginning, before it was distracted and weakened by the sophistry of the school?—Why is it impossible for me to have once before taken here all those steps towards my perfection which can bring to men merely temporal punishments and rewards?—Why should I not return as often as I am capable of receiving new knowledge, of achieving new capabilities? Do I take away with me after one appearance so much, that it would not be worth while to come again? Is this the reason?—Or

is it, because I forget that I have been here already? How happy I, to forget it! A remembrance of my previous conditions would permit me to make a bad use of those in which I now move. And have I then forgotten for ever that which I must forget for the present? Or is it because too much time would be lost for me?—Lost indeed! What time am I then obliged to lose? Is not all eternity mine?"

What mystic may have said this? What Cabbalist may have spoken these words? They are not the words of any Cabbalist or mystic. They are the words of no less a person than Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the great Lessing, the clear-headed critic, the calmly reasoning philosopher. They are the concluding sentences of his treatise on *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (*the Education of the human race*). Disagree with Lessing if you will, but you will not be able to say that he needed to be ashamed of these sentiments.

I shall conclude with Lessing's words. I am strongly of opinion that our Cabbalists have not always been fairly treated by Jewish writers of the present time. The whole subject requires an entire overhauling. But about this we need not be concerned. Jewish historiography is a comparatively recent growth. Time will assuredly show where the truth lies. And if anything, surely history is able to say: "Is not all eternity mine?"



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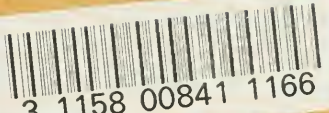
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