

The Formation of Jewish Mysticism and Its Impact on the Reception of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia in Contemporary Kabbalah¹

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Introduction

Jewish Mysticism was invented in Europe, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this period, Western, mostly Jewish, scholars applied the Christian theological term »mysticism« to describe Kabbalistic, Hasidic and other Jewish cultural formations, and created an academic discipline dedicated to the study of »Jewish mysticism«. The formative assumption of this discipline is that various Jewish cultural phenomena, first and foremost the Kabbalah, are specific Jewish expressions of a universal, mystical phenomenon, which is perceived as a subjective experience of a direct encounter with a metaphysical reality, constituting the essence, or the climax of religious experience.

In this paper I will argue that the perception of Kabbalah as »Jewish mysticism«, which regulated the way Kabbalah is studied and researched in academia, in turn had a significant impact on the doctrines, practices and self-perception of contemporary Kabbalah practitioners. This paper will demonstrate how the modernist perception of Kabbalah as »Jewish mysticism« affected the academic study of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, and contributed, through the agency of the scholars of »Jewish mysticism« to his reception by contemporary practitioners of Kabbalah. Following a short survey of the history of Kabbalah, and of the genealogies of the category »Jewish mysticism«, I will discuss the »discovery« of Abulafia by Jewish scholars in the second half of the 19th century, and his construction as a central Jewish Mystic in the 20th century academic study of Kabbalah, along with the recent publication of his writings, and his canonization in several forms of contemporary Kabbalah.

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Kabbalah and the Construction of Jewish Mysticism

During the 13th century, various cultural practices were perceived and constructed as belonging to an ancient, esoteric and sacred Jewish tradition, called »Kabbalah« (a Hebrew word that signifies »reception« or »something received«). Since then, down to our own day, different theories and rituals, dealing with diverse topics such as the structure of the Divine system, the significance of Jewish law, the power of divine names, and the ways to attain prophetic revelations were developed and transmitted as belonging to this ancient body of knowledge. Up until the 16th century, Kabbalah was studied and practiced mostly within elite Jewish circles on the Iberian Peninsula. Following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal, and the development of print culture, Kabbalistic theories and practices were dispersed among Jewish intellectual elites in most Jewish communities around the world. In this period, Christian scholars also studied Kabbalistic texts, and Christian forms of Kabbalah were developed. During the 17th and 18th century, Kabbalistic theories and practices were no longer restricted to select circles, but transmitted and practiced in different forms in all segments of the Jewish population.

Since the late 18th century, Jewish circles in Western *and* Eastern Europe that adopted the cultural values of the Enlightenment, rejected vehemently the Kabbalah and engaged in a cultural struggle against its followers, mostly against the East European Hasidic movement. Kabbalah was portrayed by members of the Jewish enlightenment movement, the *Haskala*, as an irrational, immoral and Oriental component of Judaism that should be purged in order to enable the restoration of an enlightened Judaism and its integration into modern Western Europe.²

Under the impact of the Jewish enlightenment movement, Kabbalah was rejected from the literary canons and religious practices of Jewish circles that adopted modern European values and life forms. Nonetheless, Kabbalah maintained its central place in the cultural practices of Jewish groups that were opposed to, or were less influenced by Western modern values, mostly the Hasidic circles in Eastern Europe, and the Jewish communities in Asia and North Africa. Kabbalah is still central today among the descendents of these groups, in Israel and the United States. Apart from the centrality of Kabbalah in these traditional circles, in recent years there is a considerable revival of interest in Kabbalah, in

2 On the rejection of Kabbalah by the Jewish enlightenment see Boaz Huss, »Admiration and Disgust: The Ambivalent Re-Canonization of the *Zohar* in the Modern Period«, in: *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. by Howard Kreisel (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006), pp. 205–207.

other sectors of Israeli Jewish society and of Jewish communities outside of Israel, as well as in Western culture in general.³

In the second half of the 19th century, some Jewish intellectuals who stemmed from the circles of the *Haskala* movement – and were integrated in European culture – developed a more positive perception of Kabbalah and Hasidism. These scholars accepted the »enlightened« representation of Kabbalah as irrational and Oriental, but, operating from a romantic and national perspective, regarded these characteristics as positive, rather than negative attributes.⁴ In this context, Jewish scholars borrowed the depiction of Kabbalah as »mystical theology« from earlier Christian Kabbalists and Theosophists, and identified Kabbalah and Hasidism, as well as some other Jewish cultural formations, as mystical phenomena. Gradually, the term »Jewish mysticism« became prevalent and was accepted as the main category under which Kabbalah was described, discussed, and researched in the 20th century.⁵ The perception of Kabbalah and Hasidism as Jewish expressions of a universal mystical phenomenon still dictates the academic study of Kabbalah around the world, and the way Kabbalah is perceived in contemporary Western culture.

The term »mysticism« is derived from the Greek word that was used by the Church fathers and medieval Christian theologians to denote Christological Bible hermeneutics, the Christological significance of religious rituals and the direct knowledge of divine matters. In the Modern period, the term »mysticism« is also used with reference to non-Christian cultures and is perceived as referring to subjective, private experiences of union or direct encounter with a transcendental reality. Christian theologians and Western scholars of religious studies developed this modern ecumenical perception of mysticism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The term »mysticism« was adopted by non-Christian and non-European intellectuals and national leaders, who described aspects of their

3 On 20th century and contemporary forms of Kabbalah see: Jonathan Garb, ›*The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth Century Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Carmel & Shalom Hartman Institute, 2005) [Hebrew]; Jonathan Meir, »Wrestling with the Esoteric: Hilelel Zeitlin, Yehuda Ashlag and Kabbalah in the Land of Israel«, in: *Judaism, Topics, Fragments, Faces, Identities: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Rivka Horwitz*, ed. by Haviva Pedaya & Ephraim Meir (Beer-Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2007), pp. 585–647 [Hebrew]; idem, »The Revealed and the Revealed within the Concealed: On the Opposition to the ›Followers‹ of Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag and the Dissemination of Esoteric Literature«, in: *Kabbalah* 16 (2007), pp. 151–258 [Hebrew]; Boaz Huss, »The New Age of Kabbalah: Contemporary Kabbalah, The New Age and Postmodern Spirituality«, in: *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 6 (2007), pp. 107–125; Jody Myers, *Kabbalah and the Spiritual Quest: The Kabbalah Center in America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2007).

4 On the ambivalent »re-canonization« of the Kabbalah in the late 19th and early 20th century, see Huss, »Admiration and Disgust«, op.cit. (note 2), pp. 207–237.

5 See Boaz Huss, »The Mystification of the Kabbalah and the Myth of Jewish Mysticism«, in: *P'eamim* 110 (2007), pp. 9–30 [Hebrew].

culture as »mystical« in the framework of the re-formation of their national traditions in Western terms.⁶ This was also the context of the designation of Kabbalah as »mystical« and the formation of »Jewish mysticism« by modern Jewish intellectuals.

References to Kabbalah as »mystical« appear for the first time in the writings of Christian scholars in the 17th and 18th centuries.⁷ Yet, it seems that Christian Kabbalists in this period used the term »mystical« in its medieval sense, and that references to Kabbalah as such were not central prior to the 19th century, when the term »Jewish mysticism« appeared for the first time.⁸ The category »Jewish mysticism« became prominent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries within the framework of *fin de siècle* Neo-Romantic and Orientalistic discourse and the emergence of Jewish nationalism and Zionism in Europe.⁹ By identifying Jewish cultural phenomena as »mystical«, Jewish intellectuals used the positive symbolic value of »mysticism«, and its growing popularity, in order to present Judaism in a favorable light and to rebut its portrayals as legalistic and anti-spiritual. Jewish national and Zionist thinkers regarded »Jewish mysticism« as the vital force of Judaism in the Diaspora, which was distinct from the elite rabbinical

6 On the history of the term »Mysticism« see: Lois Bouyer, »Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word«, in: *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. by Robert Woods (London: Athlone, 1981), pp. 42–55; Michel de Certeau, »Mysticism«, in: *Diacritics* 22 (1992), pp. 11–25; Leigh Eric Schmidt, »The Making of Modern Mysticism«, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71 (2003), pp. 273–302.

7 The notion of mystical Kabbalah (as one of three forms of Kabbalah) appears in the title of Henry More's *Conjectura Cabbalistica: Or, A Conjectural Essay of Interpreting the Mind of Moses According to a Threefold Cabbalah viz. Literal, Philosophical, Mystical, or Divinely Moral* (London: J. Fletcher, 1653). Kabbalah was described in the early 18th century as »Mystical Theology« by Jean Basnage (Jean Basnage, *The History of the Jews from Jesus Christ to the Present Times* [London: J. Beaver & B. Lintot, 1708], p. VII). In Diderot's *Encyclopedia* Kabbalah is described as a Mystical Doctrine. See: *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris: Briasson, 1752), vol. 2, p. 476.

8 See Franz Joseph Molitor, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* (Frankfurt a. M.: Hermann, 1827), pp. 44, p. 135.

9 The term mysticism, in reference to the Kabbalah, is prevalent in many studies of Jewish scholars, which were written in the second half of the 19th century. See for instance: Adolph Jellinek, *Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik* (Leipzig: Colditz, 1853); Isaak M. Jost, *Geschichte des Judenthums und seiner Secten* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1857–1859), vol. 3, pp. 65–81 (a chapter entitled: »The Mystical Direction«); Abraham Geiger, *Das Judenthum und seine Geschichte* (Breslau: Schletter, 1871), pp. 64–78 (a chapter entitled: »Mysticism«). The term »Jewish Mysticism« becomes prominent in the early decades of the 20th century. See for instance: Erich Bischoff, *Die Kabbalah, Einführung in die jüdische Mystik und Geheimmwissenschaft* (Leipzig: Grieben, 1903); Martin Buber, »Die Jüdische Mystik« (the introduction to his *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* [Frankfurt a.M.: Rütten & Loening, 1906], pp. 5–19); Samuel A. Hirsch, »Jewish Mystics: An Appreciation«, in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* 20 (1907), pp. 50–73; Harry Sperling, »Jewish Mysticism«, in: *Aspects of Hebrew Genius*, ed. by Leon Simon (London: Routledge, 1910), pp. 145–176; Joshua Abelson, *Jewish Mysticism* (London: Bell, 1913).

and philosophical traditions, and which expressed the authentic national spirit of Judaism.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the positive evaluation of Jewish mysticism, the attitude of Jewish westernized scholars to Kabbalah and Hasidism involved typical Orientalistic ambivalence. Jewish mysticism was valorized as a significant component of Jewish culture in the past, but its »present-day« expressions were regarded as insignificant and degenerated.¹¹ According to Gershom Scholem, the founder of the modern academic study of Jewish mysticism, the true legacy of Jewish mysticism was found not amongst Kabbalists, but in the Zionist movement and the secular building of a modern Jewish Nation.¹²

The perception of Kabbalah and Hasidism as mysticism shaped the way these cultural phenomena were, and still are, studied in academia. Notwithstanding the developments and new perspectives in contemporary Kabbalah research, the common assumption that still governs the field is that Kabbalah is the Jewish expression of a universal mystical phenomenon. The perception of Kabbalah as a form of mysticism has also, as I will demonstrate in this article, a significant impact on the way Kabbalah is perceived and practiced in many contemporary Kabbalistic circles.

Kabbalah and Hasidism, and the social circles that practiced them, were marginalized in modern Israeli culture as well as in the main Jewish denominations in the United States. Yet, in the last few decades there is a growing interest in Kabbalah in many circles and a resurgence of Kabbalistic practices. Among the various factors that have contributed to the contemporary revival and reconstruction of Kabbalah, the modernist perception of Kabbalah as »mysticism« and its academic field of study play an important and complex role.

Many Kabbalists in the 20th century have rejected their identification as mystics while strongly opposing the academic, secular study of Kabbalah. Such opposition still exists in some Kabbalistic groups today. Yet, many other contemporary practitioners of Kabbalah embrace this identification, rely on academic studies of Kabbalah, and shape their practices and doctrines according to the modern perceptions of the nature and significance of »Jewish mysticism.« The reliance on the modernist perception of Jewish mysticism is prominent and explicit among neo-Kabbalistic and Neo-Hasidic groups who operate within the framework of New Age culture, mostly in the United States, but also in Israel (and some other Western countries). Yet, the impact of the categorization of Kabbalah as mysticism can be discerned, although, in more subtle and complex

10 Huss, »Admiration and Disgust«, op.cit. (note 2), pp. 212–213.

11 Boaz Huss, »Ask No Questions: Gershom Scholem and the Study of Contemporary Jewish Mysticism«, in: *Modern Judaism* 25 (2005), pp. 142–143, pp. 146–148.

12 Ibid., pp. 145–146.

forms, in groups which operate within Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewish circles.

Following modern perceptions of religiosity and mysticism, many contemporary Kabbalists accentuate the private, individualistic, and universal nature of Kabbalah, rather than its public, ritualistic, and particularly Jewish features. Kabbalah is perceived by many of its present day practitioners mostly as a path to personal growth, psychological and physical well being, and individual spiritual enlightenment. Contemporary consumers of Kabbalah are usually interested more in the inward search for the divine self than in the hermeneutic activities, theosophical speculations, and strict observation of Jewish ritual that were central in earlier forms of Kabbalah.¹³

Abraham Abulafia and the Academic Study of Jewish Mysticism

The perception of Kabbalah as »mysticism« and the impact of the scholarship of Kabbalah on its present day practice comes to the fore in the renewed interest in Abraham Abulafia and his »Ecstatic« Kabbalah.¹⁴ Abraham Abulafia, a 13th century itinerant Jewish scholar, developed a unique system – which he called »Prophetic Kabbalah« – which was based on medieval philosophical notions (mostly, derived from Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*), practices and doctrines of the late medieval Ashkenazi Pietists (*Hasidei Ashkenaz*), the concepts of the enigmatic *Sefer Yezirah* (the *Book of Creation*), as well as probably some Sufi doctrines and practices. In his prolific writings, Abulafia offered various methods that usually involved contemplation and recitation of letter combinations and were directed at attaining prophecy through union of the human mind with the divine intellect.¹⁵

Abulafia, who had messianic aspirations (which led him to attempt to meet Pope Nicholas III in 1280), was rejected by other 13th-century Kabbalists and

13 Huss, »The New Age of Kabbalah«, op.cit. (note 3), pp. 114–116.

14 The revival of interest in Abulafia in contemporary forms of Kabbalah was noted by Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds*, op.cit (note 3), pp. 218–219.

15 Major studies of Abulafia include: Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); idem, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia – Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000). On the possible Sufi influence on Abulafia see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 103–169; Harvey J. Hames, »A Seal within a Seal: The Imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia's Teachings«, in: *Medieval Encounters* 12 (2006), 2, pp. 153–172.

banned by the prominent Jewish leader Rabbi Solomon ben Aderet (the Rashba), who condemned him in very harsh terms:

There are many frauds that I have heard and seen. One of them was the scoundrel, may the name of the wicked rot, whose name was Abraham. He proclaimed himself a prophet and messiah in Sicily, and enticed many people with his lies. If I had not been able to slam the door in his face, with God's mercy, both with my own letters and with those of many congregations, he would have been able, with his many invented and false ideas which resemble high wisdom to the fool, to cause much damage.¹⁶

Due to the difference between his system and other forms of Kabbalah and his rejection of the Kabbalistic theory of the *sefirot* (divine emanations), and as a result of both the Rashba and later the Kabbalists condemning him,¹⁷ Abulafia never entered the Kabbalistic canon. Although his writings exercised a considerable influence on later forms of Kabbalah,¹⁸ he is rarely mentioned by his name

16 Aharon Zelnik (ed.), *Rashba Responsa* (Jerusalem: Machon Or ha-Mizrah, 1997) [Hebrew], no. 548. See Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (Boston & York Beach: Weiser Books, 1989), pp. 59–60.

17 In the early 16th century, Rabbi Yehuda Hayat sharply criticized Abulafia and cited Rashba's responsum in his introduction to his commentary to *Ma'arechet ha-Elohot* (Mantua: Meir Bein Ephraim & Yakov Ben Naftali, 1558), fol. 3a. Rabbi Joseph del Medigo cited Hayat's condemnation of Abulafia, in *Mezrafa-Hochma* (Basel, 1629), fol. 13b–14a. Recently, these condemnations were repeated by a prominent contemporary Kabbalist, Rabbi Yakov Moshe Hillel (the head of *Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat Shalom*), as a response to the publication of Abulafia's writings (which will be discussed below). See: Yakov Moshe Hillel, *Sefer Ahavat Shalom* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 2002), p. 100, note 46. See: Meir, »The Revealed and the Revealed within the Concealed«, op.cit. (note 3), p. 241, note 522.

18 On Abulafia's influence on the prominent 16th-century Kabbalists Moshe Cordovero and Hayim Vital, see Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1977), p. 181; idem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1988), p. 378, note 14. On Abulafia's influence on Hasidism, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 62–67; idem, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 55–60. On his influence on Lithuanian Kabbalah, see idem, »R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov and R. Abraham Abulafia«, in: *The Vilna Gaon and his Disciples*, ed. by Moshe Halamish, Yoseph Rivlin & Raphael Shuchat (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003), pp. 173–184 [Hebrew]. Abulafian writings were also studied by the Kabbalists of the Beth-El school; see Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 378, note 12; idem, *Catalogus Codicum Cabbalisticorum Hebraicorum* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1930), p. 33 [Hebrew]. See also Moshe Idel, »Abraham Abulafia, Gershom Scholem and Rabbi David Cohen (the Nazirite) on Prophecy«, in: *The Path of the Spirit: The Eliezer Schweid Jubilee Volume*, ed. by Yehoyada Amir (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2005), vol. 2, p. 834, note 59 [Hebrew]. Abulafia's writings were also used by Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, op.cit. (note 15), p. 10; Chaim Wirszubski, *Between the Lines* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), pp. 34–60 [Hebrew].

in Kabbalistic writings,¹⁹ his writings were not printed until recently, and his system was not perceived as part of traditional Kabbalah.

While Abulafia played a peripheral role in traditional Jewish Kabbalistic circles, he became very central in the academic tradition of Kabbalah scholarship. Abulafia was »discovered« by German Jewish scholars, who were among the first to perceive Kabbalah as a form of mysticism in the second half of the 19th century. Meyer Heinrich Landauer, who encountered Abulafia's writing in the manuscript collection of Munich library, was the first scholar to describe Abulafia's life, works and doctrines, in an article that was published posthumously in 1845.²⁰ Landauer was enthusiastic about his discovery of Abulafia's writing and suggested that he was none other than the author of the most central and sacred Kabbalistic text, the *Zohar*. Although Adolph Jellinek rejected Landauer's attribution of the *Zohar* to Abulafia,²¹ he took interest in Abulafia, dedicated a few short studies to him, and published some of his writings.²² Jellinek, who was one of the first Jewish scholars to perceive Kabbalah as Jewish mysticism,²³ called Abulafia »an enthusiastic mystic in the full meaning of the word, a sort of Jewish Sufi«,²⁴ and described his system as »letter and number mysticism« (»Buchstaben-und Zahlenmystik«).²⁵ Although he referred to Abulafia as

19 Some of the explicit references and citations from Abulafia's works, such as that of Rabbi Hayyim Vital in the fourth chapter of *Shaarei Kedusha*, were not printed until recently. One exception is the positive mention of Abulafia in the 18th century bibliographical work, *Shem Ha-Gdolim* of Rabbi Hayyim Joseph David Azulai (Hida). See Hida, *Shem ha-Gdolim* (Warsaw: Isaac Goldman, 1876), part 2, p. 37 [Hebrew]. This source is cited by the contemporary orthodox printers of Abulafia's writing, as a justification for their venture. See Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Heshek* (Jerusalem: Torah Hacham, 1999), pp. 8f. [Hebrew]; idem, *Hayei ha-Olam ha-Ba* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 1999), p. 11 [Hebrew].

20 Meyer Heinrich Landauer, »Vorläufiger Bericht über meine Entdeckung in Ansehung des Sohar«, *Literaturblatt des Orient* 6 (1845), pp. 345, 380–384, 417–422, 471–475, 488–492, 507–510, 525–528, 542–544, 556–558, 570–574, 587–592, 709–713, 748–750. See Eveline Goodman-Thau, »Meyer Heinrich Hirsch Landauer – Eine Brücke zwischen Kabbalah und aufgeklärtem Judentum«, in: *Kabbalah und die Literatur der Romantik: Zwischen Magie und Trope*, ed. by Eveline Goodman-Thau et al. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1999), pp. 251–255; Ronald Kiener, »The Vicissitudes of Abulafia in Contemporary Scholarship«, in: *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After*, ed. by Peter Schäfer & Joseph Dan (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1993), pp. 147–149.

21 Adolph Jellinek, *Moses ben Schem-Tob De Leon und sein Verhältnis zum Sohar* (Leipzig 1851), pp. 6–8. Idem, *Auswahl*, op.cit. (note 9), pp. 25–26.

22 Ibid., pp. 16–26 (German section), 13–28 (Hebrew section); idem, *Philosophie und Kabbalah* (Leipzig: Heinrich Unger, 1853), pp. V–XIV, 1–25, 32–48; idem, »Sefer ha-Ot, Apokalypse des Pseudo-Propheten und Pseudo-Messias Abraham Abulafia«, in: *Jubelschrift zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag des Prof. Dr. H. Graetz* (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1887), pp. 67–85.

23 Jellinek, *Auswahl*, op.cit. (note 9), pp. 3–4. See Huss, »The Mystification«, op.cit. (note 5), p. 52.

24 »... ein mystischer Schwärmer im wahren Sinne des Wortes, eine art jüdischer Sufi«, idem, *Philosophie und Kabbalah*, p. V.

25 Idem, *Auswahl*, op.cit. (note 9), pp. 19, 20, 21.

an »eccentric-fanatic«,²⁶ he asserted that »notwithstanding his ecstasy, one finds in his writings also very penetrating observations, elevated ideas, and ingenious comparisons; like a lightning, bright and clear views often penetrate the abstruseness of his writings«²⁷. While Jellinek showed an ambivalent stance towards Abulafia, the great Jewish historian of the late 19th century, Heinrich Graetz, described Abulafia in harsh negative terms, calling him (similar to Jellinek), a pseudo-messiah and »an eccentric brain«²⁸. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a much more positive, even enthusiastic, portrayal of Abulafia appeared in the writings of two East European Jewish scholars, Shimon Bernfeld and Azriel Günzig.²⁹ Günzig described Abulafia as »a person of great talents, with a mind full of lofty ideas and high sentiments, secrets, and endless imagination«³⁰; and Bernfeld, who accepted (partially) Landauer's theory and assumed that parts of the *Zohar* were written by Abulafia,³¹ described him as »a thoughtful person, who contemplated eternal truths and had an enthusiastic moral and poetical nature«.³²

Gershom Scholem expanded the research into Abulafia and his school, established his image as a Jewish mystic, and proliferated the perception of his system as representing »Ecstatic Kabbalah«. Scholem already took interest in Abulafia's writing in the early stages of his career.³³ In his autobiography, he related that he read Abulafia's writing when he wrote his dissertation (1920–1921), tried to perform some of the methods Abulafia prescribed in his writings, »and found out that they stimulated alterations in states of consciousness«.³⁴

One of Scholem's first articles, written after his immigration to Palestine in

26 Ibid., p. 18.

27 »Und trotz seiner Extase findet man in seinen Schriften auch sehr scharfsinnige Bemerkungen, erhabene Ideen und geistreiche Vergleiche: wie ein Blitz dringen oft durch das Dunkel seiner Schriften helle und klare Anschauungen durch«; Idem, *Philosophie und Kabbalah*, op.cit. (note 22), p. VI.

28 »ein excentrischer kopf«; Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden* (Leipzig: Oskar Leiner, 1863), pp. 222–228; idem, »Abraham Abulafia, der Pseudomessias«, in: *Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 36 (1887), pp. 557–558.

29 Kiener, »The Vicissitudes«, op.cit. (note 20), pp. 151f.

30 Azriel Günzig, »Rabbi Abraham Abulafia«, in: *Ha-Eshkol* 5 (1905), p. 87 [Hebrew].

31 Shimon Bernfeld, *Da'at Elohim* (Warsaw: Ahiasaf, 1899), pp. 398–399 [Hebrew].

32 Shim'on Bernfeld, *Bnei Aliyah* (Tel Aviv: Dvir 1930), p. 74 [Hebrew].

33 Moshe Idel, »The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism«, in: *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After*, ed. by Peter Schäfer & Joseph Dan (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993), pp. 118–119.

34 Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982), p. 161 [Hebrew]. This story does not appear in the English and German versions of the book. Scholem's wife, Fania, related in an interview that: »while we were in Munich, he [Scholem] experimented according to Abulafia's instructions. He held his head between his knees, breathed according to a certain order, recited words and letter combinations, etc. He said later that indeed an alteration of consciousness occurred«; Yoram Harpaz, »Casting a Large Shadow (2)«, in: *Kol*

1922, was dedicated to the book *Sharei Zedek (Gates of Righteousness)*, which was written by a disciple of Abulafia.³⁵ Later, Scholem published *Sulam ha-Aliya (Ladder of Ascension)*, written by a 16th century Kabbalist, Rabbi Yehuda Albotini, who adopted Abulafia's methods.³⁶

The most comprehensive, and influential discussion of Abulafia in Scholem's work appeared in his »Abraham Abulafia and the Doctrine of Prophetic Kabbalism,« the fourth chapter of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, which was first published in 1941.³⁷ Scholem depicted Abulafia favourably, as having a »remarkable combination of logical power, pellucid style, deep insight and highly colored abstruseness which characterizes his writing«,³⁸ He described Abulafia as »the outstanding representative of ecstatic Kabbalah«,³⁹ calling his doctrine a »mystical theory«⁴⁰ and his method for attaining prophecy, »technique of meditation.«⁴¹ Following the psychological perception of »mysticism «in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,⁴² Scholem described Abulafia's system as an inward journey: »Abulafia . . . casts his eyes round for higher forms of perception which, instead of blocking the way to the soul's own deeper regions, facilitate access to them and throw them into relief.«⁴³ Scholem adopted the notion of mystical experience as an altered state of consciousness, and asserted that the purpose of Abulafia's discipline »is to stimulate, with the aid of methodological

ha-Ir, 19 January 1990, p. 50 [Hebrew]. I am grateful to Jonathan Meir and Doron Cohen for these references.

- 35 Gershom Scholem, »Sharei Zedek: A Kabbalistic Treatise from the School of R. Abraham Abulafia, attributed to R. Shem Tov (Ibn Gaon?)«, in: *Qiryat Sefer* 1 (1923), pp. 127–139. Parts of the text were printed in the article, pp. 132–139. The book was attributed to Rabbi Shem Tov of León, but probably written by Rabbi Nathan ben Saadiah Harar. See: Moshe Idel, »R. Nathan Ben Saadiah Harar, the Author of Sharei Zedek«, in: *Shalem* 7 (2002), pp. 47–58 [Hebrew].
- 36 Gershom Scholem, *Catalogus*, op.cit. (note 18), pp. 225–230; idem, »Chapters from Sefer Sulam ha-Aliyah of R. Yehuda Albotini«, in: *Qiryat Sefer* 22 (1945/6), pp. 161–171 [Hebrew].
- 37 Scholem, *Major Trends*, op.cit. (note 18), pp. 119–155. In this chapter, Scholem included two excerpts from Abulafia's school translated into English, one from Abulafia's *Hayei ha-Olam ha-Ba* (ibid., pp. 136–137) and one from *Sharei Zedek* (ibid., pp. 147–155). Later summaries of Scholem's 1965 lectures on Abulafia were published, with several excerpts from Abulafia's writing. See: Gershom Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temuna and of Abraham Abulafia* (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1966) [Hebrew].
- 38 Scholem, *Major Trends*, op.cit. (note 18), p. 124.
- 39 Abulafia was described as an »ecstatic« already in Gershom Scholem's »Eine kabbalistische Erklärung der Prophetie als Selbstbegegnung« in: *Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 74 (1930), pp. 285–290, p. 286.
- 40 Scholem, *Major Trends*, op.cit. (note 18) p. 130.
- 41 Ibid., p. 125.
- 42 William B. Parson, »Psychologia Perennis and the Academic Study of Mysticism«, in: *Mourning Religion*, ed. by William B. Parsons, Diane Jonte-Pace & Susan Henking (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008) [forthcoming].
- 43 Scholem, *Major Trends*, op.cit. (note 18), p. 132.

meditation, a new state of consciousness; this state can best be defined as an harmonious movement of pure thought, which has severed all relation to the senses«. ⁴⁴ As we have seen above, Scholem described the result of his own practice of Abulafia methods as an alteration of the state of consciousness. ⁴⁵ Following the perception of mysticism as a universal religious phenomenon, Scholem describes Abulafia's teachings as »but a Judaized version of that ancient spiritual technique which had found its classical expression in the practice of the Indian mystics who follow the system known as Yoga«. ⁴⁶

Although Scholem presented Abulafia's »Ecstatic Kabbalah« as one of the nine major trends of »Jewish Mysticism«, Abulafia did not play a central role in his research, and he dedicated few studies to the doctrines and writings of his school. Scholem, whose historiography of the Kabbalah was shaped in a nationalist/Zionist discursive framework, found much more interest in what he perceived of as the mythical and Gnostic trends of Jewish mysticism, which he saw as expressing the vital national force of the Jewish nation in the Diaspora, than in the ecstatic, universalistic and psychological approach he found in Abulafia's writings. Moshe Idel, who observed the decline of interest in Abulafia's Kabbalah in the later work of Scholem, and the total disinterest in Ecstatic Kabbalah among Scholem's disciples ⁴⁷, wrote:

Kabbalah in general was described, at least implicitly, as a mythical, symbolic, theosophic kind of thought, influenced historically by Gnosticism or, in some other formulations, phenomenologically similar to it, and devoid of extreme unitive experience and locutions. None of these characteristics, which were deemed to describe Kabbalah in its entirety, fit the nature of ecstatic Kabbalah. ⁴⁸

Since the late 1970s, Abulafia became much more central in the academic field of Kabbalah studies, especially through the work of Moshe Idel, the leading scholar of Jewish mysticism today. Idel criticized Scholem, and especially his disciples,

44 Ibid., p. 133.

45 See note 34.

46 Scholem, *Major Trends*, op.cit. (note 18), p. 139. In his 1965 lectures, Scholem wrote that »objectively, there is no doubt there is a phenomenological proximity between the Kabbalistic-meditative type and the meditative type amongst the Sufis and their Hindu sources.« (Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temuna*, op.cit [note 37], p. 164). Scholem raises the possibility that Abulafia adopted some of his techniques from Sufis he met during his travels in the East, but says there is no evidence for that. Abulafia was described as a »Jewish Sufi« already by Jellinek, see note 24 above.

47 Idel, »The Contribution«, op.cit. (note 33), p. 121.

48 Ibid. See also, p. 123: »The main move of Scholem's school can be characterized as a mytho-centric approach which marginalized the presence of the ecstatic elements, had tended to diminish the importance of the impact of the philosophical concepts and was inclined to reduce the role of the experiential, mystical and magical elements in the Kabbalistic materials.«

for neglecting and marginalizing Abulafia's Kabbalah.⁴⁹ Idel allotted Abulafia and the Ecstatic Kabbalah a central place in his perspective of Jewish Mysticism. Idel, who wrote his PhD dissertation on Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah in the late 1970s and since then published numerous monographs on Abulafia, has produced studies and articles on Abulafia and the school of Ecstatic Kabbalah which have contributed much to the perception of Abulafia as a central Jewish mystic and to the diffusion of his writings, doctrines, and techniques. In his prolific studies, Idel expanded the research of Abulafia's life and writings, studied extensively other Kabbalists who followed Abulafia's doctrines, and demonstrated the impact of Abulafia's Kabbalah on later Jewish mystical trends. Idel accepted and developed the perception of Abulafia's Kabbalah as »Ecstatic Kabbalah«, accentuated its practical and experiential aspects, and argued for the centrality of mystical union in this school.⁵⁰ While Scholem regarded Abulafia's ecstatic form of Kabbalah as one of the nine major trends of Jewish mysticism, and perceived it as one of two opposing schools of thought in 13th-century Sephardic Kabbalah (the other being the theosophical school, represented by the *Zohar*),⁵¹ Idel argued »that there are two major trends in Kabbalah, the theosophical-theurgical and the ecstatic«, and presented Abulafia as »a main representative of ecstatic Kabbalah«⁵².

Thus, Abulafia, who was rejected from the canons of traditional Kabbalah and discovered by 19th-century Jewish German scholars, was constructed in the 20th century as a Jewish mystic and an ecstatic Kabbalist, thus coming to be considered as the representative of one of the two major trends of Jewish mysticism.

Rabbi David Cohen's Interest in Abraham Abulafia's Writings

As I mentioned previously, Abulafia was placed under a ban by the leading Kabbalist of his time, the Rashba, and although he exercised a considerable influence on later forms of Kabbalah, he did not, at least until the late 20th century, enter the Kabbalistic canons. It was only through the agency of the above-mentioned scholars that Abulafia's doctrines and especially his techniques became familiar among modern Kabbalists and Jewish mystics.

49 Ibid., pp. 120–124.

50 Kiener, »The Vicissitudes«, op.cit. (note 20), pp. 157–159.

51 Scholem, *Major Trends*, op.cit. (note 18), p. 124.

52 Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, op.cit. (note 18), pp. xi–xii. See also idem, »The Contribution«, op.cit. (note 33), pp. 127–130.

One of the first instances of a 20th-century Jewish mystic who became acquainted with Abulafia's writing through scholars of Jewish mysticism – and was highly impressed by them – was Rabbi David Cohen, who was known on account of his ascetic practices as *ha-Nazir* (the Nazarite). Cohen, who studied in traditional Yeshivas in Lithuania, and later in Academic institutes in Russia, Germany and Switzerland, became a disciple of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the most prominent thinker of Religious Zionism, and immigrated to Jerusalem, in 1922. An entry in his diary from 1925, which was only recently published, enthusiastically relates his introduction to manuscripts of Abraham Abulafia and his disciples through Gershom Scholem (both lived on the same street at the time):⁵³

I became familiar with the manuscripts of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia of blessed memory and of his disciples, through a researcher of Mysticism (Prof. Scholem who visited me with Ram in our house, on Saturday). And when I took them in my hands, they became for me a strong, firm and steadfast stimulant. My spirit rumbled, and became sanctified, purified and elevated, as I found my logic and the ways of my understanding in the auditory prophetic logic, the prophetic Kabbalah (of Abraham Abulafia) ... I was changed and I became a new person. All day long, I must not keep quiet: I must strive and be strong again; I must expect the benevolence of the uppermost Divine revelation through chanting during the night. I can see that prophetic revelation from the mouth of Holiness, the God of Israel, which is necessary and expected in this generation of revival and redemption, is not far from us. Through preparation by way of chanting the grace of holy names, by combing the melody of their letters, courage, courage, courage and creation will be created, and the word of God will be revealed.⁵⁴

It is not surprising that Cohen, for whom the quest for prophecy was central and whose Jewish theological ideology was influenced by a modern perception of mysticism, was so enthusiastic to find Abulafian manuscripts. As Dov Schwartz observed, Cohen described his encounter with Abulafia as a revelation, or illumination, which was followed by a sense of transformation into a »new person.«⁵⁵

53 Gershom Scholem also tells of his meeting with David Cohen in his autobiography: »Opposite us, lived Rabbi David Cohen, a noble person, a disciple of Rabbi Kook, who was known amongst the Ashkenazi population of Jerusalem as 'The Nazarite'. He studied Kabbalah, one may say, in the exact opposite way than I did ... All my efforts to understand his way of thinking were in vain. But the common ground between us was that the writings of Abraham Abulafia, from the 13th century, made a great impression on us«. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, op.cit. (note 34), pp. 203–204.

54 Harel Cohen & Yediyah Cohen (eds.), *Mishnat Ha-Nazir* (Jerusalem: Nezer David, 2005), p. 75. (I am grateful to Eliezer Baumgarten, who turned my attention to this publication). This passage from Cohen's diary was first published and discussed by Dov Schwarz, *Religious Zionism between Logic and Messianism* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1999), p. 178; this passage was also discussed by Idel, »On Prophecy«, op.cit. (note 18), p. 824–825.

55 Schwarz, *Religious Zionism*, op.cit. (note 54), p. 179.

In his major work, *The Voice of Prophecy – The Hebrew Auditory Logic*, which was only published in 1970, Cohen includes Abulafia in his description of the history of Kabbalah: »Abraham Abulafia . . . published the verbal, auditory, prophetic Kabbalah, which the upper prophetic wisdom elevates into an inner speech, that cleaves to the divine speech, as the divine voice never ceases.«⁵⁶ It is clear from this passage, as Dov Schwartz asserted, that Cohen regards Abulafia as the precursor of his own mystical system, whose essence he described as »the Hebrew auditory prophetic logic«.⁵⁷

Moshe Idel has recently argued that Cohen probably knew about Abulafia previous to his meeting with Scholem through the writing of David Neumark and Adolph Jellinek.⁵⁸ Be this as it may,⁵⁹ it is still clear that a prominent practicing Jewish mystic of the 20th century became acquainted with Abulafia's writings and that they had a significant affect on his religious ideology and practice⁶⁰ through the agency of the academic scholarship of Kabbalah. Nonetheless, the case of Cohen's reception of Abulafia is a unique case among early 20th-century Kabbalists. It was only in the last decades of the century that Abulafia's writing became more influential and entered the canons of contemporary Kabbalah.

Abulafia's Kabbalah in the Jewish Renewal and New Age Movements

The central place allotted to Abulafia and the ecstatic Kabbalah in Idel's research, is part of the new perspectives and directions of study that were offered in the field of Kabbalah research in the 1980s as part of a struggle of a new generation of scholars (who included Moshe Idel, Yehuda Liebes, Elliot Wolfson, Charles Mopsik, and others) to gain a central position in the field of the academic study of Kabbalah. The repositioning of Abulafian Kabbalah at the center of Jewish mysticism was related to the decline of Scholem's grand narrative of the history

56 David Cohen, *The Voice of Prophecy – The Hebrew Auditory Logic* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1970), p. 158. In his discussion of Abulafia, *ibid.*, pp. 158–160, Cohen cites only Jellinek's editions of Abulafia's writings.

57 Schwarz, *Religious Zionism*, *op.cit.* (note 54), p. 176.

58 Idel, »On Prophecy«, *op.cit.* (note 18), p. 820, note 6; pp. 823f., pp. 828f. See also Schwarz, *Religious Zionism*, *op.cit.* (note 54), p. 179, note 35.

59 Abulafia is not mentioned in Cohen's first publication, in German, from 1920. See Idel, »On Prophecy«, *op.cit.* (note 18), p. 825.

60 Schwarz, *Religious Zionism*, *op.cit.* (note 54), pp. 304–305; Idel, »On Prophecy«, *op.cit.* (note 18), pp. 828–831. While Schwarz describes Cohen's doctrine as a modern transformation of Abulafia's prophetic Kabbalah, Idel claims that Abulafia's influence on Cohen is significant, but limited.

of Jewish mysticism, in which Abulafia did not play an important role, and the diminishing of the power of the nationalist-Zionist discourse that shaped Scholem's historiography.⁶¹ The emphasis of contemporary Kabbalah scholars on the more psychological, ecstatic, experiential and practical aspects of Kabbalah in general, and in Abulafia in particular, is related also to the emergence of new forms of Western spirituality, New Age culture and Jewish Renewal movements in the last decades of the 20th century, that promoted psychological, ecstatic and experiential forms of spirituality.

In the same period in which Idel dedicated his academic research to Abulafia and his school, a growing interest in Abulafia can be discerned among Jewish circles, mostly in the United States, that were part of the new spiritual culture of the 1970s and the emerging Jewish Renewal movement. These circles, which became familiar with Abulafia's mainly through the work of Scholem, regarded Abulafia as a central representative of Jewish mysticism, and practiced his techniques, which they perceived as Jewish forms of meditation and yoga. In a 1980 review of »The Return of Jewish Mysticism« it is observed,

All across the United States, as well as in Western Europe and Israel people in groups, or studying alone, have begun to search the Torah as well as the mystical texts for insight into meditation, breathing, chanting, and even Yoga-style exercise. »Abraham Abolafia, a medieval Spanish kabbalist, did yoga«, a chiropractor tells me excitedly.⁶²

Already in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a group of Jewish poets and artists in California (Among them David Meltzer, Jack Hirschman, Jerome Rothenberg and Bruria Finkel), who learned of Abulafia from Scholem's *Major Trends*, became fascinated by his teaching, translated some of his writings (from Scholem and Jellinek's editions), practiced his methods, and integrated them into their poetry and art.⁶³

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, a liberal Jewish Orthodox theologian, who was a prolific writer and translator, and died prematurely in 1984, published three books on Jewish meditation.⁶⁴ In his *Meditation*

61 See: Amos Funkenstein, »Israel between the Thorns«, in: *Zion* 60 (1995), pp. 335–347 [Hebrew]; Boaz Huss, »A New Age of Kabbalah Research: Book Review of Ron Margolin, *The Human Temple*; Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Issues Forth from Eden*; Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism*, in: *Theory and Criticism* 27 (2005), pp. 246–253 [Hebrew].

62 C. Ascher, »The Return of Jewish Mysticism: Try it, You'll Like It«, *Present Tense* 17 (1980), 3, p. 37. Cited in: Christine A. Meilicke, »Abulafianism among the Counterculture Kabbalists«, in: *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 9 (2002), p. 82.

63 Christine A. Meilicke, »California Kabbalists«, in *Judaism Today* (Winter 1999–2000), pp. 24–31; idem »Abulafianism«, op.cit. (note 62), pp. 71–101. For Bruria Finkel's work, see her website: <http://www.bruriafinkel.com/>

64 Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible* (York Beach, Maine: S. Weiser, 1978); idem, *Medita-*

and *Kabbalah*, published in 1982, which became the most influential source for the reception of Abulafia in Jewish renewal and related movements in the English-speaking world, Kaplan dedicated a long chapter to Abulafia and his school. Kaplan described Abulafia's life, writings, and teachings, and translated many excerpts from his works based on the texts published by Jellinek and Scholem as well as texts found in manuscripts.⁶⁵ Kaplan, who in his discussion of Abulafia relied mostly on Scholem's research, downplayed Abulafia's messianic aspirations, emphasized his influence of later mainstream Kabbalists, and cited Rabbi Hayim Yoseph David Azulai's (Hida) praise of Abulafia's *Hayei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, concluding that:

In view of this opinion, the general trend among knowledgeable Kabbalists has been to accept the teachings of Abulafia, even though his methods are considered to be very advanced and dangerous. His manuscripts have been copied and circulated among many Kabbalists, and they form an important part of the curriculum in some secret schools. While Abulafia's personality may be questioned, it is generally recognized that he was in possession of authentic traditions and that he recorded them faithfully and accurately.⁶⁶

Kaplan asserted that he wrote his books on Jewish meditation as a response to the growing interest of American Jews, who were ignorant of the Jewish system of meditation, in Eastern religion.⁶⁷ Following Scholem, he described Abulafia's methods for attaining prophecy as meditation techniques that alter the normal state of consciousness and lead to a mystical experience.⁶⁸ Interestingly, Abulafia's methods are not central in Kaplan's 1985 *Jewish Mysticism: A Practical Guide*. Nonetheless, the Abulafian methods that were translated in his *Meditation and Kabbalah* became the source for many contemporary practical guides for Jewish meditation. Prescriptions for how to use Abulafia's techniques that are based on Kaplan's translations are found in numerous books and websites.⁶⁹ Thus, for instance, Jay Michaelson prescribes on his website, *learnkabbalah.com*:

One of Abulafia's simplest practices, popularized by Aryeh Kaplan, involves a series of head movements and breath, combined with pronouncing the Divine name. The shortest version works by sounding out different Hebrew vowels together with the tetragrammaton (Y-H-V-H). When you do the practice, you'll want to sit comfortably in a place where you will not be disturbed, and allow the eyes to close. One begins with the first letter of the Divine name, Yood, and pronounces with the yood the vowels Oh, Ah, Ay,

tion and Kabbalah (York Beach, Maine: S. Weiser, 1982); idem, *Jewish Meditation – A Practical Guide* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).

65 Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, op.cit. (note 64), pp. 55–111.

66 Ibid., p. 59. See p. 8, and idem, *Jewish Meditation*, p. 47.

67 Idem, *Jewish Meditation*, op.cit. (note 64), p. v-vi.

68 Idem, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, op.cit. (note 64), p. 81.

69 See for instance: David Cooper, *Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Boulder: Sounds true, 2005) and Leonora Leet, *Renewing the Covenant* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1999), pp. 40–94.

Ee, and Oo. Each vowel has a corresponding head movement, which resembles the way the vowel mark is written in Hebrew: with Oh the head moves up and back to center, Ah to the left and back to center, Ay to the right and back to center, Ee down and back to center, and then Oo forward, backward, and back to center. Move your head with the breath: on each inhale you move away from center, then on the exhale, pronouncing the sound, you move back.⁷⁰

The perception of Abulafia as an ecstatic mystic and of his methods to achieve prophecy as meditation techniques, his description as a Jewish Yogi and Sufi, and, to a certain degree, the fact that he was rejected by the Jewish religious establishment, all contributed to the reception of Abulafia and his »meditation techniques« in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in Jewish American circles that are related to the Jewish Renewal and New Age culture.⁷¹ A literary expression of the fascination of American Jews with Abulafia comes to the fore in Myla Goldberg's best selling novel *Bee Season*, which depicts a Jewish American Rabbi who is obsessed by Abulafia and teaches his techniques to his eleven years old daughter.⁷²

In recent years, interest in Abulafia is found also among non-Jewish spiritual and New Age movements, and his works are being translated into English, by the Ever Burning Light organization (related to the Universal Life Church).⁷³ An expression of the contemporary construction of Abulafia as a universal, New Age-style mystic, comes to the fore in the website of Reverend Chava Aima, who describes herself as »ordained minister of the esoteric mysteries, practitioner of shamanic arts, initiate of Kabbalah, Alchemy, Kundalini and Tantra Yoga«:

For nearly 20 years I have studied and practiced the divine philosophies of Kabbalah,

70 http://learnkabbalah.com/abraham_abulafia.

71 Interestingly, Abulafia's Kabbalah is not central in the doctrines and practices of the Kabbalah center, and their leader, Rabbi Philip Berg. Yet, Abulafia is mentioned in Berg's writings. See for instance: Philip Berg, *Kabbalah for the Layman* (New York: Research Center of Kabbalah, 1982), vol. 1, p. 147; idem, *The Power of Aleph Beth* (New York & Jerusalem: Research Center of Kabbalah, 1988), vol. 1, p. 265, vol. 2, p. 83 (I am grateful to Jody Myers and Gemma Kwantes for this information).

72 Myla Goldberg, *The Bee Season* (London: Flamingo, 2001). See especially pp. 171–173; 179–181, 187–191, 194–195). The book was adapted into a film starring Richard Gere and Juliette Binoche. See: <http://www.foxsearchlight.com/beeseason/>.

73 This organization is described as »A ULC (Universal Life Church), non-denominational, scholarly association«. <http://www.everburninglight.org/Home.html>. The texts, published in 2007, translated by various translators, include: *Get Ha-Shemot (Divorce of the Names)*, *Ner Elohim (Candle of God)*, *Sefer ha-Or (The Book of the Sign)*, *Sheva Netivot Ha-Torah (The Seven Paths of Torah)*, and *Or ha-Sechel (Light of the Intellect)*, as well as Yehuda Albotini's *Sulam Aliyah (Ladder of Ascent)* and Natan ben Saadayh Harar's *Shaarei Zedek (Gates of Righteousness)*. See: <http://www.everburninglight.org/Kabbalah-sources-in-English.html>. In their prefaces and comments to the texts, the publishers depend on academic studies of Abulafia, especially on the work of Moshe Idel.

Hermetic Arts and Sciences, Alchemy, and Rosicrucianism from the West, and Advaita, Kundalini and Tantra yoga from the East. . . The Kabbalistic tradition which I have found most useful in moving toward divine consciousness is *Ecstatic Kabbalah*, founded by Rabbi Abraham Abulafia. The core methods found in Ecstatic Kabbalah are similar in many ways to visual meditative techniques used by saints, sages, and mystics throughout the world. Rabbi Abulafia (1240–1291) was a holy man and prophet who lived in Spain and Italy, and traveled widely. He taught the sacred science of divine realization to students of all religions. The Rabbi attained union with the Divine Self through specific ecstatic practices, and proclaimed, »*I am the messiah*», indicating his loss of identity with the personality and his absorption into fully divine consciousness.⁷⁴

The Canonization of Abulafia in Contemporary Kabbalah

In the last decades of the 20th century, at the same period in which Abulafia became central in the academic study of Kabbalah, as well as among New Age and Jewish Revival Neo-Kabbalists, several Kabbalists who operate within Jewish Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox society integrated Abulafian doctrines and methods in their teaching, and started publishing, for the first time, complete editions of the writings of Abulafia and his school.

R. Isaac Ginsburgh, a *Chabad* Hasid, and one of the prominent contemporary Kabbalists in Israel, combines in his teachings Hasidic and Kabbalistic ideas with an ultra-nationalistic ideology and New Age terminology.⁷⁵ He cites Abulafia in his books, homilies, and website⁷⁶ and refers to him as »one of the greatest medieval Kabbalists«. ⁷⁷ Ginsburgh's interest in Abulafia is related to his intensive use of *gematria* (numerical value of Hebrew letters, which is a central feature in Abulafia's writing) as well as to his interest in meditation techniques. Although he does not specify how he became acquainted with Abulafia's writing, it is probable that Ginsburgh (who was born in the United States) became familiar with them through Kaplan's writing. Abulafia is also mentioned in the writings of other contemporary orthodox Kabbalists, such as Ariel Bar Zadok, the head of the *Yeshivas Benei Nevi'im*, who teaches Kabbalah according to the Lurianic

74 <http://www.alchemicalyoga.com/Philosophy.html>.

75 See Huss, »The New Age of Kabbalah«, op.cit. (note 3), p. 113.

76 See for instance, Isaac Ginsburgh, *Esá Einai* (Rehovot: Gal Eiani, 1998), pp. 78–79 [Hebrew]; idem, »The Abulafia Cycle« in: http://www.inner.org/audio/aid/E_011.htm. See: Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds*, op.cit. (note 3), p. 218, note 139; Yehiel Harari, *Mysticism as a Messianic Rhetoric in the Works of Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburgh*, PhD. Dissertation (Tel Aviv University, 2006), pp. 119, 141, 156 [Hebrew].

77 <http://www.inner.org/heart/heart.htm>.

system of Rabbi Shalom Sharaabi and his school⁷⁸; and Avraham Greenbaum, a *Breslov* Hasid and director of Azamra Institute, who lists Kaplan's *Meditation and the Bible* and *Meditation and Kabbalah* among the ten best books on Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah.⁷⁹ A combination of Abulafian motifs and the Kabbalah of Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag (a prominent 20th century Kabbalist, who never mentioned Abulafia in his writing) is found in the art work and lectures of Avraham Lowenthal from Safed, who relates that he encountered Abulafia through Kaplan's work, an encounter that he says changed his life.⁸⁰

The most remarkable expression of the contemporary reception of Abulafia and his school is the publication of Abulafian writings by Kabbalists who operate in Israeli *Haredi* (ultra-orthodox) frameworks.⁸¹ In 1989, two writings of Abulafia's school, *Sulam ha-Aliyah* and *Shaarei Zedek*, (the two Abulafian texts that were published, in academic publications by Gershom Scholem in the first half of the 20th century) were published by *Yeshivat Shaar ha-Shamayim* (the Gates of Heaven Yeshiva),⁸² one of the most prominent and conservative Kabbalistic academies in Jerusalem. It is interesting to note that the first Abulafian texts to be published in a *Haredi* publication were not written by Abulafia himself. Probably it was easier to break the unofficial ban on Abulafia by publishing texts of his school – not his own writings. Yet, the editor, Yoseph Elazar Elimelech Porush, refers explicitly to the relation of these texts to Abulafia, and in his introduction he relies on the words of the Hida as well as on the citations from Abulafia by R. Hayyim Vital in order to justify their printing.⁸³

Another publication that anteceded and facilitated the publication of Abulafia's writings was the printing of the fourth chapter of R. Hayyim Vital's *Shaarei Kdusha*, which was omitted from its previous printings and was based to a large extent on Abulafia's writings.⁸⁴ In this work, published in 1988 in a collection of

78 See for instance his »Lessons in Prayer and Meditation« at: <http://koshertorah.com/PDF/lessons-in-prayer.pdf>. See: Grab, *The Chosen Will Become Herds*, op.cit. (note 3), p. 219, note 139.

79 <http://www.azamra.org/Kabbalah/starting.htm>. Interestingly, the Ever Burning Light organization, mentioned above (note 73), includes Azamra Institute in their list of special thanks. See: <http://www.everburninglight.org/Special-thanks.html>.

80 See his lecture at <http://www.shemayisrael.co.il/ranweber/altv/omanim1.php>. See also his website: <http://www.safedart.com/artists/loewenthal/artist.html>

81 A prominent contemporary Kabbalist, R. Yakov Moshe Hillel, the head of Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat Shalom, condemned the printing of Abulafia's writing. See note 17 above. Interestingly, in 1988, Hillel sponsored the printing of Rabbi Natenel Safrin's edition of the fourth chapter of Hayyim Vital's *Shaarei Kdusha*, which includes citations of Abulafia's writing. See: *New Writings by Rabbi Hayyim Vital* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom), 1988.

82 Yoseph Elazar Elimelech Porush (ed.), *Sefer Sulam ha-Aliyah and Shaarei Zedek* (Jerusalem: Shaarei Ziv, 1989).

83 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

84 See note 81 above.

writings of Vital, the editor, Rabbi Natanel Safrin (a descendant of the Hasidic dynasty of Kumarno), discussed in his introduction the inclusion of Abulafia's writings in Vital's work, and justified its publication by quoting Hida's defense of Abulafia.

In 1999, Rabbi Matityahu Safrin, the son of the above mentioned R. Natanel, published two writings of Abraham Abulafia himself, *Or ha-Sechel* and *Sefer ha-Heshek*.⁸⁵ In the introduction to *Sefer ha-Heshek*, the editor's father, Rabbi Natanel, described Abulafia as an »ancient authority«: »Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, may the memory of the righteous ones be blessed, was one of the ancient authorities, who lived 700 years ago. The time arrived now for his writings to be revealed in print«.⁸⁶ The editor, Rabbi Matityahu, cited the Kabbalists and Hasidic masters who referred to Abulafia and quoted his writing, including the above-mentioned citation of Hida.⁸⁷

During exactly the same years, at the turn of the millennium, Amnon Gross, a *Breslov* Hasid, brought to print most of Abulafia's writings, in 13 volumes.⁸⁸ In the introduction to *Hayei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, Gross justifies his venture by relying on Hida as well as the other kabbalists who cited Abulafia, especially R. Hayyim Vital.⁸⁹ At the end of *Sefer ha-Ziruf*, Gross also published his own Abulafian treatise, *Mahshevet Hoshev* (*Clever Reckoning*), in which he tries to clarify Abulafia's system to contemporary readers.⁹⁰ Gross, who refers to his own practice of Abulafia's methods,⁹¹ addresses his publication to potential practitioners of Abulafia's methods who are seeking after prophetic revelations: »For those who study the art of letter combination, and who yearn for the path, this book is the staircase that leads up to the ascension to the altars of prophecy.«⁹² In the

85 Abraham Abulafia, *Or ha-Sechel* (Jerusalem: Torat Hacham, 1999); idem, *Sefer Ha-Heshek* (Jerusalem: Torat Hacham, 1999).

86 Ibid., p. 4.

87 Ibid., pp. 8–10. R. Matityahu Safrin refers also to the discussion of his father concerning Abulafia, in his introduction to Vital's *Shaarei Kdusha*.

88 Abraham Abulafia, *Hayei ha-Olam ha-Ba, Ve-Zot le-Yehudah* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 1999); idem, *Imrei Shefer* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 1999); idem, *Gan Na'ul, Sheva Netivot ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 1999); idem, *Otzar Eden Ganuz* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 2000); idem, *Mafteah ha-Hochmot, Mafteah ha-Shemot* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 2001); idem, *Mafteah ha-Sefirot, Mafteah ha-Tochehot* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 2001); idem, *Hayei ha-Nefesh, Metzaref la-Kesef ve-Kur la-Zahav* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 2001); idem, *Or ha-Sechel, Shomer Mitzvah* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 2001); idem, *Metzaref ha-Sechel, Sefer ha-Ot* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 2001); idem, *Sitrei Torah* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 2001); idem, *Ner Elohim, Get ha-Shemot* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 2002); idem, *Sefer ha-Heshek, Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon, ha-Melamed* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 2002); idem, *Sefer ha-Ziruf* (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 2003) [Amnon Gross's *Mahshevet Hoshev* is also included in this volume].

89 Idem, *Hayei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, op.cit. (note 88), pp. 11–18.

90 Idem, *Sefer ha-Zeruf*, op.cit. (note 88) pp. 155–177.

91 Idem, *Mafteah ha-Hochmot, Mafteah ha-Shemot*, op.cit. (note 88), pp. 2f.

92 Idem, *Metzaref ha-Sechel, Sefer ha-Ot*, op.cit. (note 88), p. 2.

introduction to *Sefer ha-Heshek* he presents his printing of Abulafia's works as annulment of a decree (*bitul gzeira*), which has messianic significance:

Hereby we give a blessing over a completed task. May the name of the king of kings the holy one blessed be he, be praised, as he had pity and compassion over us, and annulled the decree over this house, the house of our Rabbi, Abraham Abulafia, and turned it into an altar for the unification of the holy one blessed be he, his divine presence, and the whole of the people of Israel. Soon we shall ascend the walls with songs and dances, and offer sacrifices, »for Torah shall come forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem« (Isaiah 2.3)⁹³

Porush, Safrin, and Gross do not mention in their publications of Abulafian writings modern scholars of Kabbalah or the work of Aryeh Kaplan. Nonetheless, their decision to publish the same texts that were previously published by Gershom Scholem, the references to historical data that was discussed in the scholarly research of Abulafia (such as the name of the Pope whom Abulafia tried to meet: Nicholas III)⁹⁴ as well as the criticism of pseudo-Kabbalists who study Abulafia,⁹⁵ indicate that the *Haredi* printers of the Abulafian corpus were aware and responded to the scholarly research on Abulafia as well as to the contemporary interest in his Kabbalah in the Jewish renewal movement.

The recent comprehensive printing of the Abulafian writings, the practice of his methods in various Jewish and non-Jewish circles, and the references to Abulafia in contemporary literature, art and cinema,⁹⁶ indicate the central place Abulafia has gained in the present day perception, and practice, of Kabbalah. The canonization of Abulafia in contemporary culture is dependent, to a large degree, on the modern perception of Kabbalah as mysticism, on the discovery of Abulafia's writing by 19th-century Jewish scholars, and on the centrality of his Kabbalah in the 20th century academic construction of Jewish mysticism.

93 Idem, *Sefer ha-Heshek, Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon, ha-Melamed*, op.cit. (note 88), p. 1.

94 Abulafia, *Sefer Hayei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, op.cit. (note 88), p. 8.

95 Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Ziruf*, op.cit. (note 88), p. 155.

96 Apart from the integration of Abulafian motifs by the writers and artists mentioned above (the Californian Kabbalists, Myla Goldberg, and Avraham Lowenthal), a famous reference to Abulafia (as the name of Belbo's computer) is Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989). An earlier poetic depiction of Abulafia's life is found in: Moshe Feinstein, *Avraham Abulafia: Po'emah Historit* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1956) [Hebrew]. Moshe Idel has lectured on »Abraham Abulafia and Modern Literature« at the conference »Kabbalah and Modernity«, held in Amsterdam, July 2007.