

Accounts by Abulafia

On the cutting edge of this trend, the first messiah-candidate of the era, Abraham Abulafia (1240–1292?) appeared in Iberia. He adapted the meditative and individualist practices of Islamic and Hindu circles to Jewish texts (including those of Maimonides), thereby seeking to unify the human with the divine (although this conflicts with the Jewish concept that humans cannot become divine). He was an active promoter of his own ideas and saw himself as a national redeemer, though he lacked any program to regain the land of Israel. He never gained much of a following in his lifetime, but his focus on the mysteries of the Hebrew alphabet and on the world itself, as configurations of the divine names, contributed to all later meditative practices, as well as to theurgical usages in Jewish mysticism and messianic events. Two autobiographical accounts illuminate his desires, intentions, and anguish and delimit his achievements. The first account, quoted here, is from the introduction to his book of commentary on a very early text, the *sefer yetzirah* [*Book of Formation*], the fundamental source of Hebrew alphabetical mysticism:

It has been my whole intention in all that I have written up to this point in this book, to arrive at that which I will now reveal to you. It is, that I am the man mentioned in the first introduction to this book. I was born in Saragossa in Aragon in the kingdom of Spain. Before I was weaned, that is, while I was yet nursing milk at my mother's breast and was among my brothers and sisters . . . I began to read the Bible with its commentaries and grammar, that is, the whole Written Torah, twenty-four books, with my father, my teacher of blessed memory. I went on to learn some of the Mishna and some of the Talmud with him and the greatest part of my education came from him. I was eighteen years old [Abulafia writes the number eighteen as the Hebrew word for *alive*] when he died. . . . I continued living where I had grown up for two years after my father's death. When I was twenty [Abulafia writes this as the word *yod*, the name of the first letter of the Tetragrammaton] and the spirit of God awoke me and impelled me, I left there and came straight to the Land of Israel, over sea and land. It was my plan to go to the Sambation river

but I was not able to get beyond Acco because of the conflict between Ishmael [the Arabs] and Edom [the Christians]. I left there and came back by way of the kingdom of Greece. There, on my way, I was married, and the spirit of God awoke me and I took my wife with me and set out to find what I sought, to study Torah. I was in Capua, five days' walk from Rome, and found there an admirable man, intelligent and wise, a philosopher and an expert doctor, named R. Hillel, may his memory be blessed, and joined myself to him. I learned a little of the science of philosophy from him and it was erased from my mind at once, completely. I sought with all my strength to learn it and studied it day and night and did not relent until I studied [Maimonides'] *Guide to the Perplexed* many times. I also taught it in many places. . . .

When I was thirty-one [Abulafia writes the number using the Hebrew word *El* = God], in Barcelona, God woke me from my sleep, and I began to study the *sefer yetzirah*, with its commentaries, and the hand of God rested upon me, and I wrote some books of learning and some books of wondrous prophecy, and my spirit was a lively thing within me and the spirit of God came within my mouth and a holy spirit fluttered within me and I saw many wondrous and awesome visions in signs and wonders and among them there were gathered about me jealous spirits and I saw false images and my thoughts took fright for I could find no other like me, none of my sort who might show me the way in which I should walk, and so I became in truth like a blind man at midday for fifteen years and the Adversary stood at my right hand to oppose me and I was maddened by what my eyes beheld and sought to fulfill the words of the Torah and to bring this second curse to an end for fifteen years [Abulafia writes the number this time with the letters of the divine name *Yah*], until God took pity on me and granted me the counsel of wisdom and was beside me and a help to me from 1240 to 1285 and preserved me from all manner of hardship. And at the beginning of the year "Elijah the prophet" [1285], God desired me and brought me to the Holy Palace, and it was during this time that I completed the book that I composed here in Messina, for my dear, pleasant, fine, intelligent, understanding pupil, who longs to learn the truth of the pure Torah, that is Sa'adia [my best student], for I detected that he clung to me so lovingly that he had the capability of remembering that which he learned from me, for forgetfulness is common, and had the capability of grasping what I knew and of being a help to his companions to aid them in intellectual achievement and to aid those who are like them with the mass of that which is written here [in this book]. And I know that if it had not been for those images, they would not have separated from me, and that those images were the cause of their leaving and their going away from me, and that those very images were divine causes whose purpose was to set me firm in my purpose again to lighten my heart and eyes to withstand the trials, for on account of them I kept watch over my mouth and my tongue and restrained them from speaking and my heart from thinking and returned to the appropriate place to which it was correct to return and to keep watch over the covenant that had been made and my comprehension and my mastery, which had been whole until then; and I gave praise to the name of the Lord my God and the God of my fathers, who has never left off his concern and his truth at any time, whose covenant is merciful, and who has granted such a thing to a heart that is dearer than mine in his concern. And so

it came to me, when I looked upon these fine things that are coming new into the world, to [write this and] return the hearts of fathers unto their sons and sons unto their fathers. (A. Jellinek, *Bet Ha-Midrash*, vol. 3, pp. xl–xliii [in Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1967])

This book is the fourth book of the explication of Razi'el [Abulafia's name for himself, the numerical equivalent (*gematria*) of his first name, Avraham], the third in composition, for Razi'el wrote the *Book of the Upright* (*sefer ha-yashar*) first and was in the city of Mt. Patros in the land of Greece and wrote it in the year 5039 [1279] of the creation of the world, and he was 39 years old then, in the ninth year since the beginning of his prophecy. But until that year he had not written a book that could at all be called prophecy, even though he had written many other books of art and some of them were of the secrets of the Kabbalah. And in that ninth year God stirred him to go to Great Rome, as he had commanded him in Barcelona in the year of *h'lh* [*Eloah*, the God] (5041), and on his way he had passed by Trani, where he had been taken captive by Gentiles on account of some slander that the Jews had laid against him, and a miracle was done for him and God took him up from there and he was saved and passed by Capua and there, in the tenth year of his leaving Barcelona, wrote a second book, the *Book of Life* [*sefer hayyim*]. And on the fifth month after Nisan, the eleventh month after Tishrei, that is, the month of *Av*, came [the two words are a palindrome in Hebrew] he to Rome and determined to go, on the day before Rosh Hashana, to the pope; and the pope, who was in Soriano, a certain city a day's walk from Rome, commanded all his gatekeepers that if Razi'el came there to speak with him in the name of all Jewry, that they should take him immediately, and that he should not at all look upon him, but that they should take him outside the city and burn him, and the wood [for the fire] was laid behind the interior gate of the city. And this thing was made known to Razi'el and he paid no attention to the words of those who spoke but went off to be alone and saw visions and wrote them down and began this book then and called it the *Book of Witness*, for it was a witness between him and God that he had given up his soul for dead on account of his love for God's commandment and was a witness as well concerning God, who had saved him from his enemies; for on the day of his going to appear before this pope, two mouths were born unto him, and when he entered the outer gate of the city a messenger came to him and told him that during that night the one who pursued his life [i.e., the pope] had died suddenly of plague; on that very night, he had been killed and died and Razi'el had been saved; and then he was taken captive by the Little Brothers in Rome and stayed in their monastery *koah* ["strength"; the equivalent in Hebrew of the number twenty-eight] days, for he was taken captive on the day of the Fast of Gedaliah in the year *h'lh* for it is the year of the nation [*om*, the sum of which is the same as the sum of *Eloah*] and he went free on the day of the New Moon of Marheshvan. And I have written this here to speak the praise of the Holy One blessed is he and his signs and miracles and wonders with Razi'el and with his faithful servants. (*sefer ha-edut* [*Book of Witness*], as published in the *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 36 (1887), p. 558)