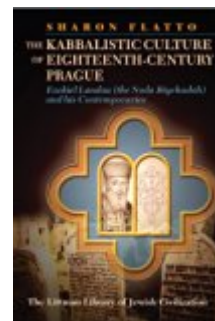


**Sharon Flatto.** *The Kabbalistic Culture of Eighteenth-Century Prague: Ezekiel Landau and His Contemporaries.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010. xii + 268 pp. \$54.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-904113-39-3.



**Reviewed by** Jean Baumgarten

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**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Kabbalah began to be widely disseminated, even popularized, in Ashkenazi communities. Some rabbis believe that the mystical texts contain deep truths and hidden meanings which should be disseminated to the largest audience. Others are opposed and believe that the study of Kabbalah should concern only the rabbinic elite and that it is impossible to properly reveal the secrets of the Torah to Jews who are not sufficiently imbued with religious culture and learning. Sharon Flatto's remarkable intellectual biography devoted to the life and work of Ezekiel Landau (1713-93), a central figure in Jewish religious life in Prague, is a major contribution to the understanding of the diffusion and the role of Kabbalah in Europe in the eighteenth century.

The book renews our knowledge of the cultural history of Ashkenazi society and, especially, of the Jewish community of Prague during the premodern period. Contrary to certain trends in contemporary historiography, Flatto reconsiders the "modernization," "secularization," and "accul-

turation" of Jewish society, showing the centrality, persistence, and creativity of traditional rabbinic culture. Without minimizing the importance of the social changes in Central Europe during this period of transition, as can be seen in the cultural role played by the Jewish Enlightenment and the legal significance of the Toleranzpatent of Joseph II, which opened a new era in the relationship between Christian society and Jewish communities, the author emphasizes the inner force of the rabbinic culture in which Kabbalah contributed to strengthening and renewing the tradition. Jewish mysticism spread among the rabbinic elite, but also among the Jewish masses and it became a fundamental aspect of their religious practices. While historians have mostly focused their studies on the diffusion of the Jewish Enlightenment into intellectual circles and on the decline of traditional Jewish life, Flatto shows that religious culture is replete with references to Lurianic Kabbalah, demons and angels, the transmigration of the souls, the exile of the Shekhinah, and the ultimate redemption. The Kabbalistic rituals and prayers

(in the domestic sphere or in the synagogue), the dissemination of texts related to mystical practices, including *tikkun shovavim* (penance atoning for demons created through sins) or *tikkun hatzot* (midnight vigil for the exiled Shekhinah), and of liturgical and ethical treatises, prayer books, and sermons or commentaries filled with mystical references, especially to the *unio mystica* (*devekut*) and the mystical intentions during prayers (*kavvanot*), show the impregnation of mysticism in the religious culture. The ethical texts present an ideal of ascetic living and piety focused on individual purification and collective repentance.

Ezekiel Landau represents, in this period of social transformation, an undisputed political and rabbinical authority, both through his works (such as the collection of responsa, the *Noda Biyehuda* [1776 and 1811], the commentaries on the Talmud, the *Tselah*, and the glosses on the Hayyim Vital's writings), and as a spiritual leader, great rabbi and leader of a rabbinic academy, and Halakhic authority who took a stand in the controversy between Jacob Emden and Jonathan Eybeschütz and criticized Hasidism and the ideas of the *maskilim* (Enlighteners) around Moses Mendelssohn. His political role in the public debates related to the reform of the social status of Jews in the Habsburg monarchy must also be noted. Landau played a fundamental role in the defense of religious orthodoxy. His writings, especially the sermons, are a direct response to deism and the Jewish Enlightenment, and a condemnation of the Germanization of Jewish culture.

An innovative aspect of the Flatto's book is the study of Landau's relationship to mysticism, which was not without some ambivalence. Landau wanted to restrict access to Kabbalah and, at the same time, to popularize it. Landau believed that Kabbalistic study should remain limited to the highly educated elite and, at the same time, wished to reveal the esoteric teachings and the deep secrets of the Torah. Because of his rejection of Sabbatianism, Frankism, and his criticism of

Hasidism, Ezekiel Landau is often portrayed as a fierce opponent of all forms of esoterism. His works shows, on the contrary, the centrality of Kabbalah and the fusion in his writings of Halakhah and mysticism. All of his books are filled with references to the major ideas of the Lurianic Kabbalah, especially the theurgical function of the *mitzvot* and the role of each Jew in the messianic process. Flatto's book shows, with erudition and accuracy, how Kabbalistic knowledge was shared by scholars, rabbis, Halakhic authorities, and also by the laity or the middle strata of Jewish society. She expands the understanding of the complexity, the diversity of the Prague Jew's *mentalité*--and their library of rabbinical sources--showing that their cultural baggage included a plurality of source material, not only ethical treatises and Halakhic, Talmudic, and biblical commentaries, but also a wide range of Kabbalistic notions taken from the Zohar, Isaac Luria, Hayyim Vital, and Moshe Cordovero.

The study of Ezekiel Landau's works, political commitments, beliefs, and religious teachings leads us to reconsider Jewish religious culture in eighteenth-century Europe. This book reflects the diversity of mystical trends and shows how rabbinic culture, filled with references to mysticism and Kabbalistic customs, prepared the community for the reception of mystical movements like Hasidism. Flatto aptly analyses Landau's relation to Hasidism. Even if he studied in the famous *kloyz* of Brody, he nevertheless criticized the evolution of the Hasidic movement, which threatened rabbinic authority and normative Judaism.

Sharon Flatto's book is an important contribution to the study of the cultural history of Jewish communities in Europe in the eighteenth century. *The Kabbalistic Culture of Eighteenth-Century Prague* leads us to reconsider the transformation of Jewish culture, viewed as a complex whole made up of a plurality of influences, of cultural and religious components, and full of contradictions and tensions. This remarkable research

demonstrates that the transformation of Jewish society was far from linear. The process of modernization did not prevent rabbinic culture from playing a leading role, as we can see through the adoption of Kabbalistic rituals and the continuation of traditional practices.

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