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*Kabbalistic Revolution: Reimagining Judaism in Medieval Spain* constitutes a worthwhile and edifying contribution to contemporary scholarship on medieval Jewish mysticism. It focuses on the late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Castilian Kabbalah, when the *Zohar* (*Book of Splendor*), the crown jewel of Jewish mysticism, emerged. Although Hartley Lachter readily acknowledges that the kabbalists of the period under consideration, including well-known luminaries such as Moses de Leon and Joseph Gikatilla, were indebted to their predecessors, he contends that in response to external pressures they “sought to construct an empowered Jewish identity.... I wish to uncover how these kabbalists understood the world and created a way of imagining their place in it through the production of a new cultural form” (p. 7).

Lachter lays out his theory in five well-defined chapters. These chapters are preceded by a substantial introduction and followed by a summary conclusion and an interesting postscript on New Age Kabbalah and the academic assessment of this phenomenon. In the introduction, Lachter contends that hitherto the study of Kabbalah has taken two distinct tracks: “the phenomenology of ideas and historical criticism.” Moreover, he argues that these two modes of scholarly inquiry have often diverged and hence the results of prior scholarship tend to be one-sided and thereby impoverished. He writes that the focus on the history of ideas “has often led to a diminished interest in the social, political, and cultural location of kabbalistic ideas and texts” (p. 4). Accordingly, Lachter positions his book as a remedy to this deficiency and he views the “kabbalistic revolution” of the book’s title as a double entendre, referring not only to the efforts of the kabbalists but also to his scholarly methodology. If this really were the case, then Lachter’s goal would be admirable; however, he does not support his contentions by discussing examples of prior, myopic scholarship on the period, which warrants his corrective.

The most sustained treatment of the historical context of late thirteenth-century Kabbalah is found in chapter 1, “Masters of Secrets: Claiming
Power with Concealed Knowledge.” Lachter identifies three elements of medieval Christian society that he contends propelled the kabbalists: esotericism, anti-Jewish polemics, and Aristotelian rationalism. Although he tries valiantly to tie all three of these to his assigned time frame, beginning in the 1270s, the evidence that he cites is unconvincing. Lachter initially argues that the flourishing of scientific and philosophical inquiry during the rule of Alfonso X of Castile (1252-84) acted as a catalyst for subsequent Jewish mystical writers. He notes that Alfonso’s interests were not confined to the exoteric sciences but also encompassed “the notion of retrieving and making use of esoteric, secret, or lost forms of knowledge” (p. 18). In support, Lachter discusses a work entitled Lapidary, composed between 1243 and 1250, which was commissioned by Alfonso prior to the start of his reign. This Arabic work on the magical properties of stones was acquired by Alfonso from an unnamed Jew and was subsequently translated into Castilian by Alfonso’s Jewish physician, Yehuda Mosca. The pre-1250 Jewish provenance of this work undermines Lachter’s thesis that Christian esotericism prompted a Jewish reaction after 1270 by establishing that by the middle of the thirteenth century, Jews in Castile were engaged in esoteric endeavors that influenced the Christian milieu and not vice versa. Lachter also lists a series of Hermetic, Neoplatonic, and Neopythagorean texts that were circulating during Alfonso’s rule, which were also translated into Hebrew, but he does not directly connect any of them to specific kabbalistic writings.

Lachter’s contention is that not only did the Castilian kabbalists promote themselves as superior masters of esoterica, in contradistinction to their Christian counterparts, but their writings also served to combat the anti-Jewish polemics of medieval Christendom. In this regard, he initially discusses the widely disseminated polemical tract Dialogi Contra Iudaeos, composed in 1110 by Petrus Alfonsi, a Spanish Jewish apostate. He then refers to another anti-Jewish treatise, Adversus Iudaorum Inveteratam Duritiem (Against the Chronic Obstinacy of the Jews), penned by Peter the Venerable, a French abbot, also from the first half of the twelfth century. Even Lachter is forced to acknowledge that “although it cannot be demonstrated with certainty that either Petrus Alfonsi’s Dialogi or Peter the Venerable’s works directly informed the composition of the kabbalistic texts composed in Spain in the late thirteenth century, it is reasonable to assume, given the widespread popularity [of] some of these anti-Jewish tracts, that the kabbalists of Castile and across the Iberian peninsula were likely aware of such lines of argumentation” (p. 25). Moreover, he does not attempt to demonstrate direct influence of these twelfth-century anti-Judaic polemics on late thirteenth-century texts, and he does not address the possibility that the early thirteenth-century kabbalists were aware of them as well.

The third element that Lachter identifies as impinging upon the Jewish luminaries of the period was Aristotelian rationalism. Although he does mention the development of Christian scholasticism as a contributing factor, he also correctly focuses on the challenge to Jewish theology posed by Maimonides’s philosophical writings. The critical gloss by Gikatilla on Maimonides’s Guide of the Perplexed and the extensive critique of philosophy by Moses de Leon that Lachter quotes are both relevant and insightful. Nevertheless, Maimonides was constantly criticized by kabbalists and non-kabbalists alike, beginning with R. Abraham b. David of Posquieres at the end of the twelfth century and throughout the thirteenth century, usually with more virulence than these specific examples.

Thus, Lachter’s attempted historical contextualization of late thirteenth-century Kabbalah, arguing that it was specifically those kabbalists who faced special pressures from their Christian milieu, is unconvincing. If one were so inclined, one could use all three defining issues identified by Lachter and explore how each played out in the
life and writings of the Catalonian luminary and kabbalist R. Moses b. Nahman, aka Nahmanides (1194-1270), who predates the period under consideration. As Lachter notes in passing (p. 31), the esoteric tension in Nahmanides's writings is unmistakable. He was also a principal actor in the Maimonidean controversy (1230-35), which revolved around Maimonides's advocacy of Aristotelian principles. Finally, Nahmanides was coerced by King James I of Aragon to participate in a disputation in Barcelona in 1263 with the apostate Pablo Christiani. After he immigrated to Israel in the aftermath, he finished writing his commentary on the Torah, with its numerous kabbalistic allusions, though the dating of this material is uncertain.

The middle chapters of the book offer illuminating presentations of key aspects of the mystical writings of the period. Chapter 2, “Secrets of the Cosmos: Creating a Kabbalistic Universe,” lays out in great detail the kabbalistic doctrine of the ten sefirot, the constellation of ten strata of intradivine activity, and the ways in which the divine energy flows downward to the created world. In chapter 3, “Secrets of the Self: Kabbalistic Anthropology and Divine Mystery,” Lachter posits that the “kabbalistic conception of the self can be understood as a Jewish doctrine of incarnation” (p. 81). Chapter 4, “Jewish Bodies and Divine Power: Theurgy and Jewish Law,” explores how the kabbalists offered mystical interpretations of the biblical commandments, thereby highlighting the connection between the performance of religious ritual and the cosmic road map of the sefirot. This presentation is enhanced by Lachter's lengthy citations from an unpublished manuscript by Gikatilla, which includes a discussion of the dramatic impact of Abraham’s actions. By adhering to God's command, Abraham was able to draw blessings down from the apex of the sefirotic realm to the mundane regions, thereby sustaining the world. This is seen as paradigmatic for the universal significance of the performance of mitzvot by all Jews, thereby highlighting their supreme importance in the divine scheme. Chapter 5, “Prayer Above and Below: Kabbalistic Constructions of the Power of Jewish Worship,” elucidates how themes developed in the prior chapters play out in respect to Jewish prayer.

Whereas all of the major themes treated in these chapters were central to late thirteenth-century Kabbalah, they are also evidenced in the earlier kabbalistic writings, as Lachter frequently notes. Instead of establishing that late thirteenth-century Kabbalah created “a new cultural form,” he has merely highlighted the development of an existing kabbalistic enterprise. While one could argue that the literary genius and artistic merits of the Zohar surpassed its predecessors, that approach is not pursued by Lachter, nor does it support his thesis of a Jewish reaction to the Christian environment.

One of the principal strengths of Lachter’s presentation is the plethora of Jewish texts that he translates and explicates—many of which are gathered together herein for the first time. One corpus of writings that he effectively mines are the anonymous commentaries on the ten sefirot. While these works certainly offer insights into the mind-set of the Spanish kabbalists, it is impossible to precisely situate and date most of them. For example, Lachter cites one of these works, from a manuscript that was copied in 1286. It is only in the footnotes that he acknowledges that Daniel Abrams analyzed this popular text and argued that it stemmed from earlier in the thirteenth century and from Catalonia and not Castile (p. 183n44). Given the prevalence of kabbalistic writing in Catalonia in the first half of the thirteenth century, it is likely that some other anonymous treatises from this grouping cited by Lachter are likewise outside of his designated parameters. A second corpus of texts that Lachter utilizes, the Iyyun (Contemplation) writings, is similarly problematic. He cites these works without assigning specific dates to any of them, but implies that they fall within the late thirteenth century. Gershom
Scholem, who was the first to identify these treatises preserved primarily in manuscripts, assigned them to early thirteenth-century Provence, and this assessment has been reaffirmed by Oded Porat, who recently published transcriptions of these works. I, however, have argued that both internal and external evidence points to Castile in the first half of the thirteenth century as their place of origin.[1]

Although Lachter claims to offer a history-based corrective to earlier studies of the material, with the exception of the introduction and chapter 1, his presentation generally lacks historical specificity. For example, he does not bother to delve into the biographies of the writers whom he cites. The most glaring oversight is his cursory treatment of Todros b. Joseph Abulaafia (ca. 1220-98). Although Lachter quotes from Todros’s kabbalistic writings on several occasions, he neglects to point out that Todros was also the head of Castilian Jewry of the period. He was a courtier in King Alfonso X’s court and even accompanied the king on his official visit to France in 1275. Moreover, Yehuda Liebes has marshalled significant data in support for his hypothesis that the central figure of the Zohar, R. Shimon bar Yohai, was modeled after Todros.[2]

Additionally, one is surprised that Lachter neglects to make any mention of Todros’s lifelong friend and kabbalist, Moses of Burgos. This omission also extends to Moses’s important teachers, the brothers Jacob and Isaac Ha-Kohen. All three of these individuals hailed from Castile and have left extensive, seminal kabbalistic writings. Perhaps Lachter considers them, especially the Cohen brothers, to have been active earlier than the rather arbitrary date of 1270 that he sets as the starting point for his analysis.

Lachter regularly notes throughout that many of the themes that he explores have precedents in the writings of Catalanion kabbalists, including the Geronese circle of Nahmanides, Ezra, and Azriel, all of whom were active earlier in the thirteenth century. Thus, Lachter’s claim that a kabbalistic revolution began in 1270 is overblown, as is his thesis that this mystical enterprise was primarily a reaction against Christian triumphalism and polemics. Notwithstanding these strictures, the central chapters of the book offer any reader interested in the Kabbalah a rich and varied array of primary sources to ponder and enjoy.

Notes


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