

Kabbalah—Escape from Reality or Affirmation of Life?

A Response to Lippman Bodoff, “Jewish Mysticism: Medieval Roots, Contemporary Dangers and Prospective Challenges”¹

By: BEZALEL NAOR

Lippman Bodoff's bold new credo is packed into the following explosive statement:

I believe, therefore, that the new ascetic-mystical spirituality of Ashkenazi Jewry arose not as an inevitable organic development from within rabbinic culture, but as a result of on-going Christian persecution and pressure, and a resulting sense of vulnerability and hopelessness of any redemption through history. If so, the progeny of that historical trauma, represented in Jewish mystical movements and their many forms of escapist, separatist, anti-rationalist, esoteric, and ascent religiosity, which have engulfed Judaism in the last one thousand years, culminating in Hasidism for the past two hundred and fifty years, is subject to reexamination and question in the radically new situation of Jews and Judaism in the twenty-first century... Today's scholars have a right and even a duty to consider whether at least some of these ascetic and mystical ideas and practices, having arisen as responses to historical trauma, may no longer be relevant,

¹ <http://www.edah.org/backend/coldfusion/search/document.cfm?title=Jewish+Mysticism:+Medieval+Roots,+Contemporary+Dangers+and+Prospective+Challenges&hyperlink=Bodoff3_1.htm&type=JournalArticle&category=Orthodoxy+and+Modernity&authoritle&firstname=Lippman&lastname=Bodoff&pubsource=not+available&authorid=531&pdfattachment=Bodoff3_1.pdf>

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and may perhaps even be dangerous to Judaism today.

Without doubt, Bodoff's article is one of the most original essays to enter public Jewish discourse in the past several years. Whether one subscribes to its historic thesis and contemporary ramifications or not (and the present writer has serious reservations in both regards), Bodoff's article is a must-read for any committed student of Kabbalah. Having said that, let me proceed to my response to Bodoff's analysis of Jewish Mysticism.

What is most refreshing to a student of Jewish Mysticism or Kabbalah who reads Lippman Bodoff's article is the shifting of focus from Provence to *Ashkenaz*. Since the meteoric appearance of Gershom Scholem's *Das Buch Bahir* in Leipzig in 1923, academic students of Kabbalah have been primed that the esoteric wisdom originated in Provence. Bodoff has moved the cradle of Kabbalah from the sunny Mediterranean clime of Provence to the dark, dour surroundings of the German Rhineland. In so doing, the essayist has effected not only a geographic shift but a major shift in terms of worldview.

What, the reader may ask, is refreshing about this perspective? Well, for one, if pursued properly, it would acknowledge the influence of the *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz*, those Rhenish pietists, on the development of the *Zohar*. True, the *Zohar* (not undeservedly referred to on occasion as "the Bible of Jewish Mysticism"), which surfaces in Castile at the end of the thirteenth century, is deeply indebted to the earlier *Bahir*, but it might appear that traces of Rabbi El'azar of Worm's angelology are to be found in the *Zohar*.² (I throw out the *Roke'ah*'s angelology as merely one of the many

² I make this bold assertion fully cognizant of the earlier layer of *Hekhalot* literature that undergirds most of the works of Rabbi El'azar of Worms. See Isaiah Tishby, *Commentary on Talmudic Aggadah by Rabbi Azriel of Gerona*. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982, p. 38. The correlation of the angelology of the *Zohar* to that of Rabbi El'azar of Worms might be made easier if in Rabbi Reuben Margalio's encyclopedia *Mal'akhei 'Elyon* the obsolete references to *Sefer Raziel ha-Mal'akh* (Amsterdam, 1701) were updated to *Sodei Razayya* by Rabbi El'azar of Worms. For a survey of *Sodei Razayya*, see Joseph Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism, The Middle Ages*, Vol. VI. Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2011, pp. 493–558.

Moshe Idel writes (perhaps tentatively) that the angelology of Ashkenaz that made its way southward to Sefarad was not that of *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz*, but that of a rather obscure figure, Rabbi Nehemiah ben Solomon of Erfurt (Rabbi Tröstlin the Prophet), a younger contemporary of Rabbi El'azar of Worms. See M. Idel, *The Angelic World: Apotheosis and Theophany* (Hebrew). Tel-Aviv: Yedioth Aḥronoth, 2008. Idel identified material of Rabbi Nehemiah in *Sefer Raziel*; see

influences of *Ashkenaz* upon the *Zohar*'s mysticism.)³

The Angelic World, p. 147. (Thanks to Prof. Yosef Yitzhak Lifshitz who brought Prof. Idel's work on angelology to my attention.)

Elsewhere, I noted a striking similarity between *Hilkehot ha-Kisse* of Rabbi El'azar of Worms and Rabbi Ezra of Gerona's Commentary to Song of Songs 3:10. Cf. *Sodei Razayya* II, ed. Aaron Eisenbach, Jerusalem, 2004, pp. 33, 37 to *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. C.B. Chavel, Vol. II. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1968, p. 494, s.v. *merkavo argaman*. See *Hassagot ha-Rabad le-Mishneh Torah*, ed. Bezalel Naor. Jerusalem: Zur-Ot, 1985. Intro., pp. 23-24, n. 5.

³ The late Israel Ta-Shma was convinced that there are residues of Ashkenazic halakha in the *Zohar*; see I. Ta-Shma, *Ha-Nigleh she-ba-Nistar* (Tel-Aviv, 1995). More recently, Moshe Idel has briefly sketched the profound influence the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* or Rhineland Pietists (specifically Rabbi El'azar of Worms) exerted upon the development of Spanish Kabbalah. See Idel's Introduction to *The Hebrew Writings of the Author of Tiqqunei Zohar and Ra'aya Mehemna* (Hebrew), ed. Efraim Gottlieb. Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2003, pp. 12–15.

One cannot be but impressed—as was Idel—by the deferential tone assumed by the leader of Catalonian Jewry in the second half of the thirteenth century, Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham Ibn Adret (Rashba), when referring to the spiritual prowess of the German Jewish mystics. How ironic that in the very responsum to the Jewish community of Avila (*She'elot u-Teshuvot Rashba*, Part 1, no. 548) that impugns the so-called “Prophet of Avila,” Rashba lauds the extrasensory accomplishments of Abraham of Cologne (who reportedly acted as a medium for Elijah the Prophet). That the acknowledged leader of Spanish Jewry, in the very process of debunking his own countrymen's forays into the *terra incognita* of preterrational consciousness, would so romanticize the prophetic ability of Ashkenazic Jewry, is indeed remarkable. By the same token, while speaking *ad hominem*, the fact that Rashba sponsored Rabbenu Asher ben Yehiel (Rosh), a German refugee rabbi (disciple of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg), to assume the rabbinate of Toledo, also bespeaks enormous respect for the *Hakhmei Ashkenaz*. See A.H. Freimann, *Ha-Rosh, Rabbenu Asher ben Rabbi Yehiel ve-Tse'etsa'avn*. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986, pp. 28, 158.

Inter alia, in a recent newspaper interview, Haym Soloveitchik observed that generally, halakhic texts moved from North to South, from Ashkenaz to Sefarad, and not vice versa. The one notable exception was Maimonides' code meriting *Hagabot Maimoniyot*, the glosses penned by a disciple of Rabbi Meir (Maharam) of Rothenburg.

In the volume that already appeared [=Collected Essays, Vol. 1], I address the “one way street” that you mention. For example, the Rosh moved from Germany to Spain in the beginning of the fourteenth century. His Pesakim and the Tur, the work of his son, made their way swiftly to Ashkenaz, but the Hiddushei HaRamban or those of the Rashba never did. The same caravans or boats which brought the

And by the way, there are now scholars who contend that Scholem got the *Bahir* wrong when he conceived it as a Provençal creation. Of late, we are told that the *Bahir* too has its roots in Ashkenaz.⁴ So, Bodoff has hit the mark in repositioning the origins of the Kabbalah.

What comes next is highly tendentious, to say the least. Bodoff would have us believe that Jewish Mysticism as it developed in the Rhineland was a direct response to the Crusades and the concomitant martyrdom that befell entire Jewish communities. Their plight is narrated in the *kinot* or elegies that Ashkenazic Jewry recite to this day on the fast of the Ninth of Av. Who has not been touched to the core by the account of the decimation of the once proud communities of Speyers, Worms and Mayence? And in the spiritual laboratory of Ashkenazic Jewry's limitless suffering was spawned the bacillus of—Kabbalah. (I use the term “bacillus” borrowed from the field of Biology to convey the tenor of Bodoff's perception of Jewish Mysticism, which is remarkably similar to that of the Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz. Had Bodoff written in German rather than English, I am convinced that we would have been treated to Graetz's vintage term of “*Schwärmerei*” as a depiction of Kabbalah.)

The problem with this original thesis is the same problem that critics point out in Scholem's much-vaunted thesis that Lurianic Kabbalah was a response to the Spanish Expulsion of 1492. While at first blush there might be something attractive about imagining Luria's “shattering of the vessels” and the cosmic exile of the sparks that ensued, as a trope for the catastrophe that befell Iberian Jewry—the facts do not support this notion. For starters, Isaac Luria was an Ashkenazic Jew born and bred in Egypt.⁵ Though Safed, where he spent the last two years of his short life,

Piskei HaRosh to Cologne, could have brought the Hiddushei Ha-Rashba, had people in Germany been interested in them. Apparently, they weren't.

(“Interview with Professor Haym Soloveitchik by Rabbi Yair Hoffman,” *Five Towns Jewish Times*, Wednesday, January 8th, 2014

<<http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/209453/interview-with-professor-haym-soloveitchik-by-rabbi-yair-hoffman.html>>)

Summing up, we see emerging a pattern whereby in both the exoteric and esoteric realms, for some yet unexplained reason, the *Hakhmei Sefarad* adopted what one might term a reverential attitude toward the *Hakhmei Ashkenaz*.

⁴ Daniel Abrams “argued for the Ashkenazi composition of the *Bahir* (outside of the German Pietist circles)” (Daniel Abrams, *The Book Bahir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts*. Los Angeles: Cherub, 1994, p. *13).

⁵ Though it seems that Rabbi Moshe Schreiber erred when he wrote that Luria was a Sephardi, his point concerning the Lurianic *kavvanot* or mystical intentions

was populated by Sephardic Jews whose spoken language was Castilian, it does not strike one as convincing that Luria himself would be so moved by the traumatization of Spanish-Portuguese Jewry as to apotheosize their collective experience. He might be duly sympathetic to their ordeal, but that he would develop a cosmogony based on that historic event, beggars the imagination.⁶

Now Bodoff tells us that the mysticism of the Pietists of Ashkenaz (*Ḥasidei Ashkenaz*) was a response to the pillaging and rapine of the Rhenish Jewish communities during the Crusades. Though this thesis does not suffer from the same weakness as that of Scholem, whereby an Ashkenazic Jew takes up the litany of Sephardic Jewry, it does suffer from another major weakness (which in all fairness, Bodoff is sensitive to), namely that of dating. The major catastrophe of the Crusades is centered on the year 1096, while Ashkenazic mysticism reaches its crescendo in Rabbi El'azar of Worms (circa 1176–1238), a full century later. (Scholem's dates tend to be a tad tighter, with Luria [1534–1572] dying but eighty years after the Expulsion of 1492.)

Bodoff's rejoinder might have been that the historic consciousness of those tragic events of 1096 was a palpable reality for the likes of the author of the *Roke'ab*. On the night of 22 Kislev, 1196, Rabbi El'azar was busy composing his commentary on the Book of Genesis, when two men (possibly Crusaders) entered his home and killed his wife Dulce and daughters Belette and Hannah, and wounded his son Jacob. (The elegy "*Tsiyon, halo tish'ali li-she'lo 'aluvayikh*" is attributed to Rabbi El'azar of Worms.)

Instead, Bodoff parries by positing something like the collective unconscious of Ashkenazic Jewry:

I believe the evidence supports the powerful impact of external causes. From the facts developed by Chazan, Soloveitchik and

is well taken. The reason that Luria loaded his *kavvanot* onto the Sephardi rite (*Nusah Sepharad*) was because that was the prayer book in use in Safed in his day. Had Luria transmitted his teachings in an Ashkenazic milieu, he undoubtedly would have adapted the *kavvanot* to the Ashkenazic rite (*Nusah Ashkenaz*). See *She'elot u-Teshuvot Hatam Sofer, Oraḥ Ḥayyim*, No. 15(2).

According to Rabbi Ḥayyim Yosef David Azulai, the Ari would pray the entire year in the Sephardi rite with the exception of the Days of Awe, when he would pray in the Ashkenazi rite. See H.Y.D. Azulai, *Yosef Omets* (Livorno, 1798), 20:2; cited in Rabbi Israel of Shklov, *Pe'at ha-Shulban* (Tsefat, 1836), *Hil. Eretz Yisrael* 3:14 (31). This explains Ari's positive recommendation of the *piyyutim* of Kalir, found in the Ashkenazic *mabzor*.

⁶ See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 265.

Kanarfogel, it appears that a milder form of asceticism and esotericism developed before the First Crusade in response to a milder Christian hostility at that earlier time, and a more radical Jewish response developed after it—and continued to do so in various forms in the face of new developments and an ever more pervasive, insistent and continuing Christian hostility to Jewry in its Diaspora environment. Therefore, any attempt to discount outside influences as a cause of Jewish mysticism simultaneously ignores not only the psychological mechanism of mystical responses, but that sense of continuing threat and vulnerability created by a triumphant, powerful, zealous, and hostile Christianity during virtually all of the last thousand years. Moreover, looking for *immediate* cause-and-effect manifestations reflects a too rigid and fragmented understanding and expectation regarding the nature of mystical responses, and—in particular—the pervasive and continuing nature of Christian threats and pressures on Jewry, and the Jewish responses to it. Sometimes the impetus to a mystical or messianic response may even be an event that provides hope that an apocalyptic end to history is imminent. But, that, too, is in no way inconsistent with the paradigm I have described. Psychoanalytic studies have shown that mysticism is a psychologically based response to a perceived threat to one's identity, presented by the abyss between the real and the ideal in the world, and can lie dormant for a prolonged period.

In endnote 31 we are told:

A traumatic external cause may also induce a mystical effect that is not immediate, but survives, “underground” as it were, for a long period, emerging when circumstances are propitious.

All of this is but preparation for Bodoff's central argument and that is that mysticism in general, and Jewish mysticism in particular, poses an escape from reality. Rather than being life-affirming, it is life-negating. This is not the first time that we hear this complaint from a Jewish thinker. Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik in his study “*Ish ha-Halakha*” (first published in *Talpiyot* in 1944) contrasted the mystic (specifically the adherent to Ḥabad Hasidism, to which Rabbi Soloveitchik was exposed in youth), with his otherworldly pining and his perception of the *Shekhinah* as being in exile in this world, to the halakhist, blessed with a robust, healthy this-worldly outlook. (So goes Rabbi Soloveitchik's typology.)

The complaint is certainly a valid one. Even a kabbalist such as Rav Kook observed that there are those who engage in Jewish mysticism as an escape from reality. But Kabbalah needn't be a rejection of everyday life and a retreat to the cave.

Bodoff is familiar with the writings of Martin Buber. (There is very little in the way of Judaic literature that Bodoff is not aware of.) He knows that Buber proposed a “Neo-Hasidism,” which would be very much a celebration of life. In Buber’s book *Ich und Du* (mistranslated into English as *I and Thou*, when *I and You* would have been the correct translation), the *Shekhinah* is precisely the Presence in every aspect of living. Rather than being a “*Shekhinta be-galuta*,” an exiled *Shekhinah*, it is the very here-and-now. Bodoff ends up (as do so many others before him, whether they be Hasidim of the old school, or academicians such as Scholem) trashing Buber’s reading of Hasidism as wide of the mark, if not downright unlawful.⁷

The truth be told, Buber was a master at starting the conversation between the sacred and the secular. By effecting the interpenetration of the two, Jewish mysticism becomes pronouncedly this-worldly. I am not convinced that Buber got the immanentalism of the Ba’al Shem Tov so very wrong.

Another master at setting up the meeting of *kodesh ve-hol*, the holy and the profane, was Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook. (While not a disciple, Buber was certainly a great admirer of Rav Kook.)⁸ Rav Kook’s Kabbalah is a celebration of life, of the incarnate, of flesh and blood. There is nothing spectral or spooky about it. In Rav Kook’s vision, not only would a deeper understanding of Kabbalah not undermine the Jews’

⁷ See Bodoff, note 65:

While Buber sought to portray Hasidism as changing Lurianic kabbalah’s anti-worldly approach, the better view of scholars is that he was incorrect; see Jerome Gellman, “Buber’s Blunder,” pp. 20–40 [= Jerome Gellman, “Buber’s Blunder: Buber’s Replies to Scholem and Schatz-Uffenheimer,” *Modern Judaism*. Oxford: February 2000, pp. 20–40]. Buber’s romanticized view, which has proved attractive to many, is discussed in Joseph Dan, “A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism,” *Modern Judaism*. Oxford: May 1991, pp. 175–194.

⁸ In Buber’s book *Bein ‘Am le-Artso*. Jerusalem: Schocken, 1944, which grew out of a series of lectures on the history of Zionism, a chapter is devoted to Rav Kook. The chapter is entitled aptly enough: “Hiddush ha-Kedushah” (“The Renewal of Holiness”). In the introduction, the author writes that the volume was inspired by meetings with two men: A.D. Gordon and Rav Kook. Buber met the latter in Jerusalem in 1927. For an analysis of the aforementioned chapter, see Paulina Sarah Sklarevski, “*Hiddush ha-Kedushah: Ha-Rayah Kook bi-re’i tefisat ha-tsiyonut shel Buber be-sefer ‘Bein ‘Am le-Artso*,” Term Paper, Jerusalem: Hebrew University, July 31, 2013). Available at <www.academia.edu>. Buber’s book has been brought out in English translation under the title *On Zion: The History of an Idea*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997.

return to a landed existence and to normalcy, but (drawing on the prediction of the *Ra'aya Mehemna*), “With this composition of yours, which is the *Book of Splendor (Sefer ha-Zohar)*...they shall emerge from exile with mercy.”⁹

A mass whose hearts have been touched by the Lord, of this divine camp, will be the power that establishes the foundation of the salvation, the power that gives grace, the light of life and the pride of greatness to the entire *elan vital* of the national renaissance in the Land of Israel. The *Book of Splendor (Zohar)* that breaks new ways, making a way in the desert, a road in the wilderness, it and all its crop are ready to open doors of redemption. “Since Israel are destined to taste of the Tree of Life which is the *Book of Splendor (Zohar)*, they shall emerge from exile with mercy” [*Zohar* III, 124b].¹⁰

While deploring delving into mysticism before one has paid one’s dues to the revealed Torah, Rav Kook maintains that the exoteric and the esoteric are best conceived as two sides of the coin of reality. They complement and enhance one another.

The schism between the esoteric and exoteric comes about always due to the lack of wholeness of both elements. The exoteric that is restricted to its borders, which does not long for its source and root, will feel a certain antipathy to the esoteric, which cares to know no restriction or limitation. Lack of preparation for the hidden, jumping into it only because of a weakness of inner appetite, coupled with sloppiness and impracticality, causes the form of the esoteric to be distorted. Only unrealism, weak vitality, and lack of ability to grasp the living world, its deeds, movements, events, and charming currents, full of majesty and strength, cause immersion in the depth of the esoteric despite lack of preparation. But neither can exist exclusive of the other; life cannot be established on only one side of the global and Torah coin.¹¹

Drawing on Maimonides’ prescription that one first fill one’s belly with bread and meat before venturing into the speculative orchard (*Pardeis*),¹² Rav Kook explains that “filling the belly” extends to all healthy aspects of life. These are the grounding necessary prior to ascent to the more rarefied levels of human existence:

⁹ *Zohar* III, 124b.

¹⁰ *Orot ha-Tehiyah* (Lights of Renaissance), end chap. 57, in *Orot*, trans. Bezalel Naor. Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015, p. 395. Based on Kook, Rabbi Abraham Isaac. *Orot*. Jerusalem: Degel Yerushalayim, 1920.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, beginning chap. 60 (p. 401).

¹² Maimonides, *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:13.

The germ of the esoteric is ready, but it will be successfully actualized only after the full preparation of the exoteric. Filling the belly with “bread, meat and wine” must precede the “stroll in paradise.” “Filling the belly” in its full sense includes within it also knowledge of the world and life, ethical and character development, strength of will and recognition of human value, and all the good, aesthetic, and orderly in existence that comes from an education good and proper in all its facets, which joins together with all that is aroused to life and freshness, in all areas: man and nation, literature and life, secular and holy and holy-of-holies. The demand of the esoteric, which is filled when its time comes, is a firm demand, which brings the liberating word, which frees the great Israelite saying from the prison of its muteness. It renews firm life, it arouses the spirit of strength in the absolute holiness, which is much simpler and more natural than anything secular and mundane, and yet retains its loftiness and glory.¹³

Authentic Jewish mysticism comes not to escape but rather to enhance reality. Rav Kook is very clear about this, and indeed he revisits this theme on innumerable occasions in his vast literary *oeuvre*. I think that this point might best be illustrated by juxtaposing momentarily to the field of music.

Who of us has not felt at one significant moment or another the reality at hand enhanced by the accompaniment of music? Whether it was a life-cycle event such as a wedding or funeral, a picturesque scene, or a passage in a book, one felt a quickening, an enlargement, a maximizing, on account of the music playing in the background. Now for some, music might be attractive as an escape from reality, as a way of “tuning out” everyday life with its many challenges. And there is no denying that from an innocent attraction music might turn into a deadly addiction. (Youth in particular are susceptible to this siren call.) But would the thought arise in the mind of any sane human to therefore declare a “jihad” against music? Music, the invention of the Biblical figure Yuval, is one of the features that ennoble our being. How impoverished would our civilization be without fine music!

By the same token, I think it fair to say that Jewish mysticism in the hands of an ethical genius such as a Rav Kook or an Abraham Joshua Heschel, enriches rather than impoverishes, invigorates rather than vitiates our existence.

¹³ *Orot ha-Tehiyah*, end chap. 60 (pp. 401–403).

Bodoff's response to my summoning the spirit of Rav Kook (to whom he is sympathetic)¹⁴ would be that the man was not a *homo mysticus*, but rather a poet!¹⁵ 

¹⁴ Bodoff's final sentence (Appendix 13) reads:

Rav Kook offers the strongest and simplest argument for secular activities, dispensing with kabbalistic ideas of mystical exegesis, sefirotic emanations, and the intricate structure of mystical ritual activity. For him, spirituality is the *result* of using the tools of modern culture to guide the historical, earthly process of redemption; it is not achieved by casting off corporeality or by the negation of the self; see Eliezer Schweid, "Prophetic Mysticism in Twentieth-Century Jewish Thought," *Modern Judaism*. Oxford: 1994, pp. 166–169.

¹⁵ Bodoff writes in note 52:

Marvin Fox applied a kind of hybrid analysis, similar to my own in some respects, in concluding that Rav Kook was—a poet! See his "Rav Kook: Neither Philosopher nor Kabbalist," *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*. Ed. David Shatz and Lawrence Kaplan. New York: NYU Press, 1995, pp. 78–87.