

SHALOM SHAR'ABI AND THE KABBALISTS OF BEIT EL



PINCHAS GILLER

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For Elliot Wolfson

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Preface

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The Beit El mystics are underrepresented in contemporary scholarship, even as they are the most influential living school of

Kabbalah in the world. Living schools have generally been problematic for scholars of Kabbalah. With some exceptions, the scholarly community has neglected the contemporary kabbalists of the Middle East, particularly in comparison to such movements as Ḥasidism or the Jewish enlightenment. This study will, I hope, mark a small beginning in correcting this inequity in the contemporary academy. Nevertheless, it remains a beginning, and I would not be surprised if, in the future, many of its conclusions are successfully queried. I expect that this book should raise more questions than it resolves. Nonetheless, I hope that this little book is useful for limning the contours of rich possibilities for further study.

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Transliterations

a, e	alef	l	lamed
b	bet	m	mem
v	vet	n	nun
g	gimmel	s	samekh
h	he	‘	ayin
v	vav	p	pe
z	zayin	f	fe
ḥ	het	z	zadi
t	tet	q, k	qof
y, i	yod	r	resh
k	kaf	sh	shin
kh	khaf	s	sin
		t	tav

Quotations from Ḥayyim Vital’s rendition of the Lurianic canon, the *Shemoneh Sha’arim* (Eight Gates), and the *Ez Ḥayyim* (Tree of Life), are from the comprehensive edition by Yehudah Ashlag (Tel Aviv 1962), with the exception of various individual texts not included therein, which will be identified by separate bibliographical data.

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Introduction: Kabbalistic Metaphysics

The *sefirot* are the building blocks of classical Jewish mysticism. The term is first evident in the *Sefer Yeẓirah*, or *Book of Formation*, a brief text written in the Mishnaic style and steeped in Pythagorean mysticism. The idea resurfaced among the mystics of Provence and Gerona in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They, as well as the mysterious composition *Sefer ha-Bahir*, contributed the idea of reference to the *sefirot* in terms of their *kinnuyim*, or symbolic euphemisms. Eventually, the *sefirot* were portrayed in anthropomorphic form and were utilized in kabbalistic meditation much as the *chakras* were employed in Tantrism.

The *sefirot* may be described as aspects, or stages, in the descent of the Divine into present reality. In the classical works of theosophical Kabbalah, such as the *Zohar* and the works of Joseph Gikatilla, Joseph of Hamadan, and Todros Abulafia, the *sefirot* are clearly hypostases of the Divine, emanations from the apex of the Godhead. They were portrayed in many ways, and the various attempts to organize and structure them were collected in systematic works such as Moshe Cordovero's *Sefer Pardes Rimmonim*. They are most commonly organized in the form of a hierarchy of emanation, beginning with *Keter* or *Da'at*, the highest aspect, which is the abstracted inner nature of God. *Keter* is followed by the *sefirot* *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, which represent the attributes of Divine wisdom and understanding, respectively. The emotive features of the Divine are summed up in the *sefirah* *Hesed*, the quality of loving kindness, and its apposite,

Din or *Gevurah*, the faculty of Divine Judgment. These are combined in the central *sefirah*, *Raḥamim* or *Tiferet*, which also interconnects with all of the seven lower *sefirot*. The lowest four *sefirot* represent the four aspects of sentient existence. *Neṣaḥ* is the aspect of linear time, while *Hod* is the aspect of scope or grandeur. The *sefirah* *Yesod* governs sexuality, and the final *sefirah*, *Malkhut* or *Shekhinah*, govern the simple fact of existence in the physical world.

Lurianic Kabbalah differed from the interpretations that preceded it in that it emphasized a different structure of the Divine. Instead of the *sefirot* that formed the basis for the Kabbalah of the *Zohar* and the mainstream Safed Kabbalah, Isaac Luria emphasized a different system, which was first presented in the last sections of the main part of the *Zohar*. This universe is visualized in anthropomorphic terms and structured according to a hierarchical family, including a patriarch (*Attika Kadisha*), a set of parents (*Abba* and *Imma*), a son (*Zeir*), and his consort (*Nukvah*). The family, moreover, has been traumatized by its history, following the well-known mythos of the “breaking of the vessels” of Divinity and the need to restore the world through the act of Divine repair. In the midst of this general catastrophe, *Abba* and *Imma* must conceive and nurture their offspring, *Zeir*, and betroth him to *Nukvah*. The various members of the cosmic Divine family, the parents (*Abba* and *Imma*), the youth (*Zeir Anpin*), and his consort (*Nukvah*), have turned away from one another to confront the chaos in the world following the breaking of the vessels. With their backs turned toward one another, they face outward to confront the chaos of the world outside. This turning out is called the back-to-back embrace.

The goal of the adept, in the Lurianic rite, was to bring about the harmonious and untroubled union of the various countenances, thereby causing the conception and nurturing of *Zeir Anpin*, the central countenance. This union is described as the goal of the kabbalistic practice in the later strata of the *Zohar*, where unification with the Divine is a positive act that takes place through the contemplative practice of certain commandments. The central act of all Lurianic theurgy is to turn these dysfunctional figures toward each other, thus effecting “face-to-face” union and thereby fixing the broken and sundered universe.

I

Shar'abi and Beit El

A living form of Kabbalah is enjoying a renaissance, in spite of its exotic and obscure nature. In Jerusalem, Safed, New York, and Los Angeles, kabbalists regularly pray in elevated states of high concentration and silence. As they complete the Jewish prayer rite, these adepts contemplate complex and abstruse linguistic formulae. These formulae, known as the *kavvanot*, or “intentions,” are based on a complex set of associations, employing Divine Names, esoteric symbols, and complex vocalized mantras. Across the development of the tradition, it has been defined in various ways. It is a rite, performed by the adepts with the power of their minds. The adepts may also experience an ascent of the soul and even, according to some systems, an experience of union with God. The most widespread understanding is that, in the practice of the *kavvanot*, the contemplative mind is sacrificed to the cathartic processes of the Divine in order to expedite the uniting of Divine and earthly forces according to the teachings of mainstream Kabbalah.

There has been a renewed enthusiasm for this form of contemplative prayer, and it is being propagated with a new urgency. Prayer with *kavvanot* has been the provenance of the wonder-working rabbis who have come to social prominence in the past three decades, a line of recently departed sages that includes R. Mordechai Shar'abi, R. Yisrael Abuḥazeira, the “Baba Sali,” the *Ḥakham* (Sage) Yizḥak Kaduri of the Bukharian community, and his student

R. Shmuel Darsi. Posthumous sainthood has been conferred upon such mendicant figures as Yosef Dayyan, an impoverished Jerusalem pietist who made gravesite pilgrimage his special area of concern and who was a natural subject of hagiography. With the passing of this immigrant generation of religious saints, there are new figures waiting in the wings to assume leadership at the nexus of religious and political power.

There are a number of institutions devoted to the practice of *kavvanot*, and they host a shifting number of practitioners. In Jerusalem, prayer with *kavvanot* takes place formally in the institutions Nahar Shalom, Beit El, Ahavat Shalom, Ha-Ḥayyim ve-ha-Shalom, and Nayot be-Ramah, as well as in a circle that meets every morning at the Western Wall. Among Jews of Middle Eastern extraction, congregations that meet before dawn are likely to include practitioners of the *kavvanot*. I have observed individuals practicing the *kavvanot* among the pious worshippers at the Aboab synagogue in Safed and at the Natan Eli congregation in Los Angeles. Manuscripts of influential prayer books with *kavvanot* are being published in photo offset. At the same time, new editions of *kavvanot* are being prepared in conjunction with the recent political and economic empowerment of the Jews from Middle Eastern communities in locales ranging from Jerusalem to Los Angeles. As the practice of *kavvanot* grows, it is clear that the wider public has accepted the primacy of the most esoteric of practices and ceded the practice to a small elite of venerated adepts.¹

This tradition is grounded in the lineage and eros of classical Kabbalah. The kabbalistic tradition sees its origins in the disciples of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai in second-century Galilee. The exploits of this circle were documented in the vast classic of Kabbalah, the *Zohar*. The *Zohar* began to circulate in the thirteenth century. Following the Spanish expulsion, the Galilee hill town of Safed saw a renaissance of kabbalistic activity, in which various refugee scholars attempted to recover and reinstitute the practices laid out in the *Zohar*, as well as the eros of a circle of adepts and the charisma of ecstatic rabbinic leadership. The foremost kabbalist of Safed was Isaac Luria, whose teachings were purveyed mostly by his foremost student, Ḥayyim Vital. Acolytes of the Beit El tradition, like their European contemporaries in Polish Ḥasidism, see themselves as the lineal descendants of the main systems of Kabbalah. From Shimon Bar Yoḥai the tradition passed to Isaac Luria, known as the AR" I (an acronym for "our master R. Isaac"). Luria's revelations, according to the acolytes, then passed to the founder of Ḥasidism, the Ba'al Shem Tov and Shalom Shar'abi of Jerusalem.

Shar'abi

Shalom Shar'abi (1720–1780; also known as *RaSHaSH*) developed the most popular and normative system of *kavvanot*. Shar'abi was a Yemenite kabbalist who arrived in Jerusalem via Syria in the mid-eighteenth century. His personal history is obscured by the sort of hagiographies that attend the biographies of holy men in other traditions: picaresque escapes, the temptations of the flesh, and the protagonist's obscuring his spiritual identity as an act of piety. The circumstances of Shar'abi's journey to the land of Israel, his progression from obscurity to the head of the Beit El yeshivah, and his acts of saintliness and intercession are legendary.

Shar'abi was raised in Sana, Yemen, although his family originated in Shar'ab, whence his name. He came to the land of Israel from Yemen by way of Aden, Baṣra, Baghdad, and Damascus. In Baghdad, he studied the *Zohar* with a circle of mystics under the leadership of Sheikh Yiṣḥak Gaon, and his ecstatic manner earned him his first recognition. Controversy seemed to follow him: his flight from Yemen was attended by an incident “like that of the wife of Potiphar.”² The account bears repeating:

In the holy city of Sana I knew the family of the Rav RaSha”Sh, wise and steadfast people, and they told me of the circumstances of his coming to [Jerusalem]. He was a comely and God fearing youth and his livelihood was to peddle spices and small notions in the city and the villages, as did all the Jewish youths in that district. Once he passed though the gentile city Sana with his peddler’s sack on his shoulder and a wealthy Ishmaelite noble woman saw him through the lattice. She called him up to make a purchase. She let him in to her chambers and locked the door behind him and attempted to induce him to sin with her, threatening otherwise to kill him. When he saw that there was no escape he asked to relieve himself. She showed him to the privy and waited outside. He forced himself through a small window in the privy; fell unharmed three stories to the ground and fled. She waited for him in vain, and when she saw that he had fled she flung his pack outside. He fled, and wandered from city to city until he came to Aden, thence to Basra, Babylonia and from there to Jerusalem.

It is not unusual for revered religious innovators to have a somewhat checkered early history, and, for such a unifying figure, Shar'abi had a career that, as he moved through the great Jewish centers of the Middle East, was

littered with misunderstandings and controversies; trouble seemed to follow him. In Damascus, he was employed as the servant of Samuel Parḥi, the economic adviser of the Pasha of Damascus. R Parḥi did not recognize the young man's real nature and was unkind to him. This led to an emotional denouement some years later in Jerusalem. Parḥi was himself an avid supporter of the Beit El yeshivah and found his former servant sitting at the head of the academy, leading the Damascus householder to beg forgiveness for his mistreatment of Shar'abi.³ It was also in Damascus that Shar'abi became embroiled in a halakhic controversy over the minimum acceptable weight of the Passover *mazah*, which hastened his departure for Jerusalem.⁴

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Shar'abi behaved in a self-effacing manner. He was assigned to be the sexton (*mesharet*) at the Beit El yeshivah and kept to himself, although he visited the sacred graves on the Mount of Olives and listened to lessons in Lurianic Kabbalah from a corner in an adjoining room in the academy. Only after the clandestine circulation of some of his writings did his star begin to rise among the scholars of Beit El. In accordance with the romantic tone of his biography, it was the daughter of Gedaliah Ḥayyun, the academy's founder, who determined that Shar'abi was circulating the responsa, recognizing the true nature of the quiet, handsome, self-effacing young sexton. Ḥayyun elevated Shar'abi's status and gave him his daughter's hand in marriage, at which point Shar'abi entered into the historical record.⁵

Beit El

At the time of Shar'abi's arrival, the Beit El yeshivah was still a young institution, part of the general flowering of Kabbalah in eighteenth century Jerusalem.⁶ The kabbalists of Beit El initially organized to study and follow the kabbalistic system of Isaac Luria, which had been developed nearly two centuries before in the Galilee hill town of Safed. The kabbalists were already renowned among the population for their intercessions in times of drought.

Shar'abi's leadership galvanized the Beit El community, in part because he organized and chartered the majority of the Jerusalem kabbalists. The group at Beit El left a number of documents, particularly four charters. The charters are significant because they were based on the type that had been instituted by the Safed kabbalist Ḥayyim Vital with the object of uniting the circles around Luria under his (Vital's) leadership.⁷ Hence, the instituting of the charters is evidence that the Beit El kabbalists self-consciously patterned themselves after the circles that attended Isaac Luria, which in turn were patterned on the kabbalistic fellowships described in the *Zohar*. The first charter reflects concerns

about the continuation of the fellowship and the preservation of its social structure and spiritual intensity. As in the case of the charter signed by Vital's companions, the signers committed themselves to attitudes of love and humility toward their fellows in the circle.⁸ The second charter deals with responses to catastrophes that occur to members of their community. The signers committed themselves to take responsibility for the education of the comrades' children and to take special measures in the event of a comrade's illness or death. The comrades also committed themselves to reciting all of the books of the Psalms, which is also a common response to catastrophe. In the fourth charter, the comrades designated themselves as the Ahavat Shalom group, an appellation that survives to this day.⁹

The pietistic life of the Beit El kabbalists was distinguished by the structure of the comradeship. In Beit El, there were three main areas of study: exoteric, philosophical (*maḥshevet Yisrael*), and Kabbalah. The group divided into three "watches" (*mishmarot*) that effectively kept the study room populated twenty-four hours a day. The first watch began at the midnight vigil (*tiqqun ḥazot*) and concentrated on the study of Lurianic Kabbalah, particularly Vital's *Ez Ḥayyim*. The second group commenced after the morning prayers and continued until the afternoon. The third watch ran from the afternoon to the evening services and concentrated on the study of Mishnah.¹⁰ After the evening prayers, this group committed itself to the study of the Talmud. Hence, the social structure of the *mishmarot* was such that merchants and people who worked for a living could be preoccupied with exoteric studies during the day while the full-time practitioners of Kabbalah were busy during the night and morning hours.

Owing, in part, to tensions in the Beit El community, a group broke away and formed another institution, the Reḥovot ha-Nahar yeshivah, in 1896.¹¹ Reḥovot ha-Nahar was founded in the Yissacharoff synagogue of the Bukharian quarter of Jerusalem's "New City." The founder was Nissim Nahum, of Tripoli, with the assistance of Ḥayyim Shaul Dweck, of Aleppo. Dweck had left Beit El in the midst of a controversy over the proper *kavvanot* to be recited for the Sabbatical year.¹² Reḥovot ha-Nahar was devoted to *kavvanot* practice, to the apparent exclusion of Talmud study. Like Beit El, the new institution operated around the clock. The daily schedule began with nightly immersion in the ritual bath (*mikvah*), the performance of the midnight vigil (*Tiqqun Ḥazot*), and the full recitation of prayers with Shar'abi's version of the *kavvanot*.¹³ Reḥovot ha-Nahar served as a center for the Aleppo scholars and came to include other newcomers to Jerusalem from Yemen and the west, as well as a significant contingent of Ashkenazim. The leaders of the early Ashkenazic pietistic circles of Jerusalem, Moshe Naḥum Wallenstein, Aryeh Leib Beharad, and Zevi Pesah Frank, as well as the Ḥasidic rabbinical court, gave their