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**Lawyers and Mystics in Judaism:  
A Prolegomenon for a Study of Prophecy in Jewish Mysticism**

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**LAWYERS AND MYSTICS IN JUDAISM:  
A PROLEGOMENON FOR A STUDY OF PROPHECY IN JEWISH MYSTICISM**

By Moshe Idel\*

**Abstract**

The Rabbinic claim that prophecy stopped after the biblical times, was part of a deep restructuring of biblical Judaism and the emergence of Rabbinism. Nevertheless, during the Middle Ages and premodern times there is ample evidence as to the existence of claims to prophecy, made by Jewish scholars belonging to what may be called secondary elite. The development of Jewish spirituality reveals many important moments of tensions, frictions and even sharp controversies between the legalistic (Halakhic) elite, which tried to keep the status quo in Jewish communities, and the individuals and larger movements, which aspired to prophetic experiences, some of which are dealt with here.

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## 1. Introduction

The emergence of rabbinic Judaism is the result of several important shifts underwent by the biblical religiosities. Sociological speaking, the ascent of a new elite, the Pharisean one, prior to the destruction of the second temple was quintessential. However, the destruction of the temple and the loss of the privileged status of the priests serving in it, the loss of the Jewish statehood in general that coincided to the destruction of the temple, on the one hand, and the ascent of Christianity, based on the claim of the possibility of a direct access to divinity, by Jesus Christ himself, and by those who believe in Paul's abrogation of the law on the basis of a person revelation, on the other hand, contributed greatly to the shaping of a new form of elite, the Rabbinic one. It dislocated the dominant priestly leadership on the one hand, by its much more democratic and interpretive concerns related to texts and less to traditions concerning templar rituals. Of major significance is the claim in Rabbinic text as to the cessation of biblical prophecy as a living experience possible and significant in the present. The Rabbinic statement: *pasqah ha-nevu'ah* is the theoretical formulation of the transition from an state of unmediated form of contact with the divine, represented by the experiences of both priests and prophets in the Hebrew Bible, to much more mediated religious experiences, based on study and interpretations of canonized texts, representative of Rabbinic elite.<sup>1</sup> However, though Rabbinism

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<sup>1</sup> E.E. Urbach, "When did Prophecy Cease?" *Me-'Olamam shel Hakhamim*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1988), pp. 9-20, idem, "Prophet and Sage in the Jewish Heritage," in Robert Brody & Moshe D. Herr, eds., *Collected Writings in Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1999), 393-403; Philip S. Alexander, "A Sixtieth Part of Prophecy: The Problem of Continuing Revelation in Judaism," *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F.A. Sawyer*, ed. Jon Davies, Graham Harvey and Wilfred G.E. Watson, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press) [=*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series*, 195], 1995, pp. 414-433, Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "'The Sage is Superior to the Prophet': The Conception of Torah through the Prism of the History of Jewish Exegesis," in Howard Kreisel, ed., *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought* (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2006), 2:37-77, Joseph Dan, "The End of Prophecy and its Significance to Jewish Thought," *Alpayyim*, vol. 30 (2007), pp. 257-288 (Hebrew); and especially Benjamin D. Sommer, "Did Prophecy Cease? Evaluating a reevaluation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115,1 (1996), pp. 31-47. As to the medieval material see the rich material collected and analyzed in Amos Goldreich, *Automatic Writings in Zoharic Literature and Modernism*, (The Cherub Press, Los Angeles, 201), pp. 9-12 (Hebrew), Boaz Huss, "A Sage is Preferable than a Prophet': Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai and Moses in the Zohar," *Kabbalah* 4 (1999): 103-139 (Hebrew); Elliot R. Wolfson, "'Sage is Preferable to Prophet': Revisioning Midrashic Imagination," in Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber, eds., *Scriptural Exegesis - The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination: Essays in Honour of Michael Fishbane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 186-210. It should be emphasized that the following discussions owe much to the approach of Abraham Y. Heschel, who insisted on the importance of prophetic experiences in the Middle Ages as part of the development of Jewish mysticism. See his collection of articles in

is a conscious alternative to the two modes of religious experiences in the glorious biblical past, the prophetic experience was conceived not just as a matter of the part, but much more as dangerous, based as it was on charismatic authority of an individual, and prone to explode the new and sometimes fragile frameworks that the early rabbis attempted to impose on the Jewish communities in their exilic situation. From many points of view the Rabbinic negative attitude to prophecy in the present is paralleled by the negative attitude adopted to this phenomenon by the early Christian authorities.<sup>2</sup> In both cases, the creation of institutions compelled the cooling down of the role of charismatic figures, or as Max Weber formulated it, there was a competition between charismatic and institutional forms of authority.

The discussions below will attempt to point out to some religious phenomena, which emerged long after the ascent of Rabbinism as the central or primary leading elite in medieval Judaism, and reflected in the writings of some representatives of the secondary Jewish elite which claimed some form of prophetic authority. While continuing some lines of research that strove to distinguish between different layers in medieval Jewish elites that I suggested in earlier studies<sup>3</sup>, here I shall concentrate on the prophetic factor as part of some second elite figures. My point is that when encountering the critique of the domineering Jewish lawyers, or Halakhists, the points of view of the secondary elites and to a great extent also their writings, survived the polemics in which they have been involved. Some of the members of the secondary elites may be designated

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English, Abraham J. Heschel, *Prophetic Inspiration after the Prophets, Maimonides and Other Medieval Authorities*, ed. M.M. Faierstein, (Ktav Publishing House, Hoboken, NJ, 1996). Nevertheless his too sharp distinction between prophecy and ecstasy is less attractive to me. See below note 4. For a survey of the various phenomena described as prophecy in twentieth century Judaism see Eliezer Schweid, *Prophets to Their People and Humanities, Prophecy and Prophets in 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1999) (Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., David Edward Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), or Niels Christian Hvuidt, *Christian Prophecy, The Post-biblical Tradition* (Oxford, New York, 2007). For later prophetic phenomena in Christianity see Richard Woods, *Mysticism and Prophecy: The Dominican Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998), Bernard McGinn, “‘Trumpets of the Mysteries of God’: Prophetesses in Late Medieval Christianity,” in *Propheten und Prophezeiungen/Prophets and Prophecies*, edited by Tilo Schabert and Matthias Riedl (Wurzburg: Konigshausen und Neumann, 2005), pp. 125-140, and the collection of articles eds. Bertrand Taithe & Tim Thornton, *Prophecy, The Power of Inspired Language in History 1300-2000*, (Sutton Publishing, 1997), and that of Schabert and Riedl mentioned above, and below note 85.

<sup>3</sup> See my "Kabbalah and Elites in Thirteenth-Century Spain," *Mediterranean Historical Review*, vol. 9 (1994), pp. 5-19, and "NAHMANIDES: Kabbalah, Halakhah and Spiritual Leadership," *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership*, eds. M. Idel -M. Ostow, (Jason Aronson, Northvale 1998), pp. 15-92.

in general terms as mystics, though in many cases they resorted to the term prophecy, in Hebrew *nevu'ah*, in order to define the nature of their experiences.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, historically speaking, the programmatic assumption as to a complete cessation of prophecy ceased is more a wishful mode of thinking than reality. That prophets were documented in the post-biblical period is known from Josephus Flavius, but also from some writings that the rabbis excluded from the canon, the so-called apocalyptic literature<sup>5</sup>, where figures like Moses, Isaiah, or Elijah continued to play an interesting role, in addition to other figures depicted as ascending on high and receiving extraordinary forms of knowledge like Abraham or Enoch. However, Rabbinic authorities were successful enough in erasing that literatures from the consensus of the Jewish authors that were canonized, and they survived mostly in translations, while the Hebrew original were almost in all cases, lost. My assumption is that between the prevailing Rabbinic mode of thinking, basically interpretive, and focused on Halakhic and Pentateuchic issues, and the prophetic mode, which took a variety of pneumatic forms, there was a tension, which remained obvious in the entire history of post-biblical Judaism, which may be described as a tension between the theophanic dimension of rabbinism, finding the divine revelation within the Scriptures, and the prophetic line, interested much more in experiences that culminates in apotheosis.<sup>6</sup>

More successful was however, another Jewish literature, composed in early medieval period, which is structurally similar to the apocalyptic literature, the so-called Heikhalot literature or Merkavah literature. Those literatures are predicated on the assumption that it is possible to

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<sup>4</sup> I would like not to enter here the complex question of the phenomenological relationship between biblical prophecy and ecstasy. See, e.g., H.W. Hines, "The Prophet as a Mystic," **American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature** 40-41 (1923-1924), pp. 37-71, Robert R. Wilson, "Prophecy and Ecstasy: A Reexamination," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 98,3 (1979), pp. 321-337, or Benjamin Uffenheimer, (Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, 2001), pp. 80-224 (Hebrew). Compare, however, the different approach of Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: JPS, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> See Stephen L. Cook, *Prophecy & Apocalypticism, The Postexilic Social Setting* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) and Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> For the assumption of the existence of these two trends in Judaism, including Jewish mysticism, see M. Idel, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism," in eds. P. Schaefer- J. Dan, *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 50 Years After* (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993) pp. 117-143, especially pp. 142-143 and *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*, (London: Continuum, New York, 2008), passim..

attain valid religious knowledge by two main techniques: on the one hand, the ascent on high and the contemplation of the divine places palaces and supernal retinue and the divine body, which is described as the highest form of religious knowledge, which is sometimes culminating in a transformation of the mystic into an angel, a move I call the apotheotic vector. On the other hand, the technique of bringing down the prince or the angel appointed upon the Torah, *Sar ha-Torah*,<sup>7</sup> (the theophanic one), in order to disclose forms of knowledge in an easier manner than the prolonged Halakhic studies found in rabbinic institutions. Here prophecies and prophets are mentioned only very rarely, and the more apocalyptic mood may be discerned in a rather conspicuous manner. However, from the point of view concerning the present study, the relatively modest role played by biblical texts and their interpretations is evident in these literatures. Though two chapters in the Hebrew Bible play, theoretically, an important role, first chapter of genesis – *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, and the first chapter of Ezekiel, *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, are invoked as major topics, the Heikhalot literature do not include detailed commentaries on these two chapters. Though considered esoteric issues also in rabbinic literature, it is obvious that the rabbis attempted to control as much as possible the discussion and even more the dissemination of the content of these topics, as it is evident from the discussions in the early Rabbinic collection designated as Tosefta on the Mishnah of Hagigah, and the later Talmudic elaborations of the four sages who entered the orchard, the famous *Pardes*. This means that an ideal of the ascent on high has been preserved also in classical Rabbinic texts, though with great reservations.

However, the Heikhalot treatises or concepts not only survived in different forms, which still wait for studies dealing with the details of their transmission from the Near East to Europe, but were semi-canonized, as the medieval attitudes to *Shi'ur Qomah* and other parts of this literature,

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<sup>7</sup> See, especially, Michael Swartz, *Scholastic Magic, Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) and Rebecca Lesses, *Ritual Practices to Gain Power: Adjunctions in the Hekhalot Literature, Jewish Amulets, and Greeks Revelatory Adjunctions*, (Ph. D Thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge, 1995). For the medieval repercussions of *Sar ha-Torah* see M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2002), pp. 140-142, 145-146, 173-178, 371 and Goldreich, *Automatic Writings*, pp. 59 n. 8, 91 n. 112, 138, etc.

show. In fact it penetrated in some few cases also Rabbinic literature, as we learn from the following passage found in a late Midrash:

Because you have studied Talmud, did you gaze [*Tzafita*] the chariot, did you gaze [*Tzafita*] [my] greatness<sup>8</sup>? There is no delight in my world but in that hour when the scholars sit and study the Torah, and peer and look at and see, and ponder upon this immense Talmud: how my seat of glory is standing; how the *Hashmal* does stand ...and more important than all the other [issues] how I am standing, from my nail until the top of my head, what is the size of the palm of my hand, and what is the size of the fingers of my feet...This is my greatness, this is the splendor of my beauty that my sons acknowledge my glory, by [the means of] this *Middah*.<sup>9</sup>

According to another passage found in a Midrash (whose precise date is a matter of dispute by scholars) the study of the Torah has another form of extraordinary effect:<sup>10</sup> "Because someone has read the Torah, the prophets and the hagiographia, and studied the Mishnah, Midrash of *halakhot* and 'aggadot, and studied the Gemara, and studied the [talmudistic] casuistry, for their own sake, [then] immediately the Holy Spirit dwells upon him."<sup>11</sup> Here we see the double situation found in the Heikhalot literature: in the quote from *Midrash Mishlei*, someone sees the divine greatness, in the last quote, the divine spirit descends. In both cases, direct contacts with the other sphere are induced by studies. However, in these two cases, it is the study of the text that became a mystical technique, some form of pneumatic study, different from the main gist of Rabbinic literature nonetheless.

My intention below is to offer a more general picture of the mechanism of the relations between some of the various form of Jewish mysticism and the Rabbinic elites, known as Halakhists, especially since the Middle Ages. Unlike the more problematic type of relations

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<sup>8</sup> *Gedulah*. The vision of the immense size of God is cardinal for manner in which experiences in Heikhalot literature have been depicted.

<sup>9</sup> *Midrash Mishlei* ch. x, ed. B. Wisotzky, (New York, JTS, 1990), pp. 84-85, Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (Schocken Books, New York, 1967), p. 71, and Moshe Idel, "The Concept of the Torah in Heikhalot Literature and Its Metamorphoses in Kabbalah," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* vol. 1 (1981), pp. 34-35 (Hebrew) and the accompanying footnotes. *Middah* means here a mode of activity

<sup>10</sup> See Jacob Elbaum, "The Midrash *Tana' De-vei Eliyahu* and Ancient Esoteric Literature" *Early Jewish Mysticism*, ed. J. Dan, (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 139-150 (Hebrew).

<sup>11</sup> *Seder 'Eliahu Zuta'*, ch. I. See also the passage from *Heikhalot*, in Peter Schaefer and alia, ed. *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1981), par. 297.



between various individual mystics and mystical movements in Christianity and Islam, when persecutions and even exceptions are well-documented, in Judaism the relationship to the various mystical phenomena is less fraught with tensions, and those tensions will be the focus of my discussions below. One of the obvious reasons for the milder type of relationship is the fact that in Judaism there was no central authority that could regulate the emergence and dissemination of radical forms of mysticism. Moreover, and this fact seems to be fundamental for the smoother form of relations, is the existence among the first elite, namely the rabbis since the Middle Ages, of a genuine interest in medieval forms of Jewish mysticism, especially Kabbalah, and it would not be an exaggeration to claim that since late 12<sup>th</sup> century, many of the major Halakhic figures, were exposed to and even embraced in a significant manner, some of the various forms of mysticism known in Jewish centers.

The list of Rabbinic figures whose writings shows in an indisputable manner a concern with Jewish mysticism is long and it includes, for example, figures like R. Abraham ben David of Posquieres (Rabad), Nahmanides, R. Yonah Gerondi, R. Shlomo ibn Adret (Rashba), R. Yom Tov Ashvili (Ritba'), R. Asher ben Yehiel (ha-Rosh), R. David ibn Avi Zimra (Ridbaz), R. Joseph Karo, R. Jonathan Eibeschutz, R. Elijah of Vilnius (ha-Gaon of Vilna), R. Abraham Yitzhaq ha-Kohen Kook (ha-Rayah) and in recent times R. 'Ovadia Joseph. Therefore, the moments of tensions between mysticism and Rabbinism, which indeed exist, are not a matter of competition between two totally different camps, that differ from one another ideologically, but much more an issue that I would like to describe as the fears of the first Rabbinic elite, concerned in one way or another with some forms of mysticism, to lose control of intellectual developments, represented by secondary elites, which – when disseminated in its extreme forms prophecy and messianism being the most important ones - may endanger the status of the leadership of the ruling elite.

## 2. *The Issue of Scant Documentation and the Rise of Secondary Elites*

Polemics between the first and the secondary elites dealing with mysticism are rare, and the documentation is quite scant. Given the prominence of the first elites figures mentioned above, whose writings constitute the bones of Jewish culture, the loss of some of the most important documents related to those polemics should be put in relief. This is quite a surprising finding, which did not sufficiently attract the attention of scholarship. Its implication is that the role played by the first elite figures as a dominant force in controlling the directions of Jewish culture, should be considered more modest than earlier in scholarship.

So, for example, R. Isaac ben Abraham (Rabad), designated as Sagi Nahor, an euphemism for the Blind, mentions the fact that he answers a letter, in fact more probably, some letters, written to him by no other than Nahmanides and Rabbi Yonah Gerondi, dealing with a scandal triggered by the dissemination of Kabbalah by the disciples of Sagi Nahor, but those letters, which we learn about the their existence from R. Isaac himself, are not extant.<sup>12</sup> Nahmanides and Gerondi were great Halakhists, and the most powerful figures in Jewish life in Catalonia and Castile in the second third of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. While R. Isaac the Blind's letter survived, those of his correspondees did not. R. Abraham ibn Adret, the most important follower of Nahmanides, mentions in one of his responsa that he wrote many letters – *rov ketavay* – to Sicily in order to counteract Abraham Abulafia's prophetic and messianic propaganda, but none of them survived, while Abulafia's own letter to Barcelona answering ibn Adret is found in many manuscripts and was one of the first of Abulafia's documents to be printed.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Sabbateanism, the situation is even more interesting. Given the amplitude of this movement, the length of time it operated in so many centers of Judaism, and the extreme forms it took, like conversion to Islam and Christianity, and the rumors and probably also the sexual deviations from Rabbinic code of

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<sup>12</sup> On the entire controversy see Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, tr. Allan Arkush, ed. R.J. Z. Werblowsky, (Princeton, Philadelphia: Princeton University Press, JPS, 1987), pp. 393-396, Idel, "NAHMANIDES: Kabbalah, Halakhah and Spiritual Leadership," and Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications* tr. Jackie Feldman, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007), pp. 70-74, 93.

<sup>13</sup> M. Idel, "The Rashba and Abraham Abulafia: The History of a Neglected Kabbalistic Polemic," in Daniel Boyarin, et al., eds., *Atara le-Haim: Studies in Talmudic and Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), pp. 235-251(Hebrew).

behavior in circles related to Sabbatai Tzevi and Jacob Frank, we could expect the emergence of a luxuriant polemic literature. However, this is not the case. What we have in the second part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is much more a proliferation of Sabbatean writings, which is quite voluminous, and extant in more manuscripts than the anti-Sabbatean literature. We may say that the most fascinating remnants of the anti-Sabbatean literature in this century has been preserved due to one single book, authored by a prominent rabbi, R. Jacob Sasportas. His collection of anti-Sabbatean documents saved many of them from total oblivion.<sup>14</sup>

Also in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the polemic literature is scant, and most of it is part of the famous controversy between R. Jacob Emden and Jonathan Eibeschutz. Without the commitment, perhaps obsession of the former, much of what we know about 18<sup>th</sup> century Sabbateanism would be much more fragmentary. Last but not least: the polemic against East European Hasidism, does not amount to more than one volume, much less than one single book of Hasidism, for example R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye's *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, which has been printed before the polemic literature. Thus, the first elite figures in the last third of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century produced no more than one to two percentages a polemic literature in comparison to the flood of Hasidic literature printed in the very same period, though in other domains the opponents of Hasidism were, at least quantitatively, creative.

What is the reason of this sharp disproportion? The answer is in my opinion obvious: all the opponents belonging to the first elite, who counteracted the dissemination of a certain type of knowledge or personal spiritual claims, won on short range, but lost the battles on the long range. The secondary elites, philosophical and mystical, with their claims of possessing a hidden knowledge that they decided to reveal, or the claims of special status of the secondary elite figures, as prophets and messiah, stroke a sensitive cord in wider audiences, which were interested in those issues, and decided to copy and disseminate material that was opposed, from time to time quite fiercely, by the first elites. In other words, what we see in the Middle Ages, is a process of continual loss of control of types of knowledge the first elite was interested to allow

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<sup>14</sup> See Jacob Sasportas, *Tzitzat Novel Tzevi*, eds., Z. Schwartz - I. Tishby, (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1954) (Hebrew).

its propagation, and the growing role played by secondary elite figures: occultists, Kabbalists, magicians, prophets and Messiahs, and copyists who were interested and read to disseminate messages that contradicted the *bone tone*, of powerful figures who opposed those messages and their authors. Though secondary elites produced also other forms of knowledge, philosophy, science, secular poetry, or grammar, the opposition to them was scant, since it was less concerned with claims related to the extraordinary status of a certain contemporary figure, or the nature of Jewish tradition.

However, when Maimonides claimed that his understanding of Judaism is predicated upon secret knowledge that is reminiscent of philosophical conceptualizations, the famous controversy exploded. Let me point out that the controversy is a repique to the strong polemic nature of Maimonides's own project, who attempted to dislocate the manner in which Jewish authorities understood main concepts in traditional forms of Judaism, as we learn from the earlier critiques of Maimonides, found for example in R. Abraham ben David of Posquieres [Rabad]. Let me point out that whether or not Maimonides conceived himself privately, to be a possessor of the Holy Spirit or a prophet, as argued by A. Y. Heschel, is a complex question<sup>15</sup> and recent scholarship does not go in this direction. What cannot however be denied is the fact that Maimonides contributed in a significant manner to the medieval discussions of the nature of prophecy by his chapters in the *Guide of the Perplexed*.

### 3. *Ashkenazi Prophets in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and Their Impact.*

That the rabbinic claim that prophecy ceased in the biblical period is more an ideological issue, related to the Rabbis' strive to maintain their unchallenged institutional authority, is obvious from some evidence found in the first part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Ashkenazi regions: the Rhinelands and France. The list includes, first R. Shmuel ha-Navi, the father of R. Yehudah he-

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<sup>15</sup> Heschel, *Prophetic Inspiration after the Prophets*. See also Lawrence Perlman, *Abraham Heschel's Idea of Revelation*, (Atlanta: Brown Judaic Studies, Scholars Press, 1989) and my *Old Worlds, New Mirrors, On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2010), pp. 217-233.

Hasid,<sup>16</sup> then less known figures in the first part of 13<sup>th</sup> century, R. Yitzhaq ha-Kohen, a prophet from France<sup>17</sup>, R. Jacob ha-Navi<sup>18</sup>, R. Ezra of Montcontour<sup>19</sup>, R. Samuel the prophet of Rouen<sup>20</sup>, and last but not least R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo also known as R. Troestlin the prophet, or ha-Navi, of Erfurt.<sup>21</sup> With the exception of the last author, R. Nehemiah, and his circle,<sup>22</sup> the literary evidence of the other prophets' literary or other activity is very scant, and from the little we know it is related to the preservation of Heikhalot literature in the centers of Jewish culture where they were active.<sup>23</sup>

In the second part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, two other Ashkenazi prophets are known: R. Abraham Axelrod of Cologne, who arrived to Spain, first in Barcelona and then probably also to Castile, and an anonymous prophet active in France, both mentioned by R. Abraham ibn Adret in his responsum no. 548.<sup>24</sup> Though the literary production of the Ashkenazi figures is not so impressive from the conceptual point of view, I assume that their impact on the development of

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<sup>16</sup>See the material collected by Alexander Marx, "Ma'amar 'al Shenat Ge'ulah," *ha-Tzofeh le-Hokhmat Israel*, vol. 5, (1921), pp. 194-202.

<sup>17</sup> M. Idel, "On R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo the Prophet's Commentaries on the Name of Forty-Two and *Sefer ha-Hokhmah* Attributed to R. Eleazar of Worms," *Kabbalah*, vol. 14 (2006), p. 157 (Hebrew).

<sup>18</sup> See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 239-240, and notes 87, 88.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 239 note 86 and p. 248.

<sup>20</sup> Nahum Golb, *The History of the Jews in Rouen in the Middle Ages*, (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1976), pp. 92, 98, 99, 104 (Hebrew).

<sup>21</sup> See Idel, "On R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo the Prophet's Commentaries on the Name of Forty-Two and *Sefer ha-Hokhmah* Attributed to R. Eleazar of Worms," pp. 157-158.

<sup>22</sup> See *idem*, as well as my "Some Forlorn Writings of a Forgotten Ashkenazi Prophet: R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo ha-Navi," *Jewish Quarterly Review* vol. 96 (2005), pp. 188-196, *idem*, "From Italy to Germany and Back, On the Circulation of Jewish Esoteric Traditions," *Kabbalah* vol. 14 (2006), pp. 47-94, "The Anonymous *Commentary on the Alphabet of Metatron* - An Additional Treatise of R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo the Prophet," *Tarbiz*, vol. 76 (2006), pp. 1-10 (Hebrew) or "R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo, the Prophet from Erfurt's Commentary on the Poem 'El Na' le-'Olam Tu'aratz," *Moreshet Israel*, vol. 2 (2005), pp. 1-36 (Hebrew). For an earlier study dealing with some of his texts see Yehuda Liebes, "The Angels of the Shofar and *Yeshua Sar ha-Panim*," in ed., J. Dan, *Early Jewish Mysticism*, (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 171-196 (Hebrew). On his name see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 239 note 86, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp. 88, 370 note 21, as well as his *Reshit ha-Qabbalah*, (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1948), p. 206 (Hebrew). See also below note 25.

<sup>23</sup> On the transmission of some elements belonging to lost themes from the Heikhalot literature, in writings of this Ashkenazi author see Idel, "From Italy to Germany and Back, On the Circulation of Jewish Esoteric Traditions," pp. 47-71, and Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 248. On the esoteric aspects of this school see Ephraim Kanarfogel, *'Peering through the Lattices': Mystical, Magical, and Pietistic Dimensions in the Tosafist Period* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> See J.L. Teicher, "The Medieval Mind," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. VI (1955), pp. 1-13, Idel, "Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin*, vol. 5 (2007), pp. 92-93, and Goldreich, *Automatic Writings*, pp. 174-175.

Jewish mysticism was quite considerable, since both Abraham Abulafia's prophetic Kabbalah and the Zoharic literatures owe much to the Ashkenazi material that was transmitted in Spain since the sixties of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, in both Catalonia and Castilia. Whether the presumably voluminous writings of R. Nissim ben Abraham, the young prophet of Avila, described again in some detail in Adret's famous responsum, are influenced by Ashkenazi material is uncertain, since they are lost.

We may, therefore, argue that far from ceasing, the search for unmediated knowledge, that is neither dependent on books and rabbis, nor necessarily related to topics of rituals and exegesis, but on direct experiences sometimes described as prophetic, survived in the Middle Ages, and were capable of inspiring significant literary activities, including at least a part of the book of the *Zohar*<sup>25</sup>, which has been subsequently canonized.

In a famous passage from R. Jacob ben Asher's legalistic classic *'Arba'ah Turim*, where the sequel of states *hitbodedut*, *hitpashetut* and prophecy occurs in the context of prayer, we read:

Let him think as if the *Shekhinah* stands before him, as it is said "I set always God before me"<sup>26</sup> and he should arise the *kavannah* and delete all the annoying thoughts so that his thought and intention will remain pure during his prayer...It is incumbent to direct one's thought because for Him thought is tantamount to speech...and the pious ones and the men of [good] deeds were concentrating their thought and directing their prayer to such an extent that they reached a [state of] divestment of their corporeality and the strengthening of their intellectual spirit so that they reach [a state] close to prophecy.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See M. Idel, "Incantations, Lists, and 'Gates of Sermons' in the Circle of Rabbi Nehemiah ben Shlomo the Prophet, and their Influences," *Tarbiz*, vol. 77 (2008), pp. 499-507 (Hebrew) and Amos Goldreich, "Inquiries in the Self-Image of the author of *Tiqqunei Zohar*," in eds. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich, *Massu'ot, Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb* (Mossad Bialik, Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 459-496 (Hebrew). In this context, the controversy between Charles Mopsik and Yehuda Liebes as to the prophetic mode found in R. Moshe de Leon is significant.

<sup>26</sup> Psalm 16:8.

<sup>27</sup> *Tur*, *'Orah Hayyim*, par. 98. For the huge impact of this passage see R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic* (Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 61-62; Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (York Beach, 1985), pp. 283-284, who pointed out some sources and influences of this passage. See especially a text printed in *Talmidei Rabbenu Yonah*, on *Berakhot* ch. 5 quoted by Abraham J. Heschel, *Prophetic Inspiration after the Prophets, Maimonides and Other Medieval Authorities*, ed. M.M. Faierstein, (Ktav Publishing House, Hoboken, NJ, 1996), pp. 26-27; M. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1989), pp. 163-164 note 136. On the nexus between prayer and ecstasy in early rabbinic literature see Shlomo Na'eh, "*Bore Niv*

This passage is of paramount importance for the later developments of Jewish mysticism. It represents the first explicit influence of Jewish mysticism on a major legalistic codex, which means a canonization of a certain mystical technique, which was explicitly described as leading toward an experience close to prophecy. According to this text, prophecy is not an extraordinary state of mind, infused by God, in order to reveal his intention, but the result of the human initiative, which is capable to reproduce this sublime experience at will, during the daily liturgy. Though the specific terminology used by R. Jacob is indubitably pointing in the direction of an influence of Spanish Kabbalah, and indeed R. Jacob wrote his codex in 14<sup>th</sup> century Toledo, the fact that it is an Ashkenazi figure who integrated it in a legal codex seems to me not accidental, but following the special interest in prophecy among Ashkenazi figures interested in esotericism. This codification of a moment envisioned as prophecy reverberated in an innumerable instances in Jewish mysticism, as it has also been adopted in Joseph Karo's more influential codex, based on R. Jacob's one. Therefore, we may speak about a turning point, when a major lawyer adopted an ideal formulated by Jewish mystics, in my opinion under the impact of ecstatic or prophetic Kabbalah, and incorporated it as part of the daily ritual activity. To a great extent, Hasidism went in this direction.

#### *4. On Abraham Abulafia's Prophecy and His Attitudes to Rabbis*

The influx of some Ashkenazi figures in Spain during the second part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, contributed in my opinion to the emergence of prophetic claims, experiences and writings. For a variety of reasons, the Ashkenazi masters were regarded as the custodians of an "authentic" type of Judaism, and their views were conceived of as preferable even to those of the earlier Kabbalists, even in circles close to Halakhic figures like ibn Adret.<sup>28</sup> The Ashkenazi figures

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*Sefatayyim*," *Tarbiz*, vol. 63 (1994), pp. 185–218 (Hebrew); A. Wolfish, "*Ha-Tefillah ha-Shogeret*," *ibidem*, vol. 65 (1996), pp. 301–314 (Hebrew).

<sup>28</sup> See M. Idel, "Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona," pp. 69-113 See also the many discussions on the affinities between the Spanish Kabbalists' discussions on divine names, especially in Castile, and the Ashkenazi sources in Asi Farber-Ginat, *The Concept of the Merkabah in the Thirteenth-Century Jewish Esotericism - 'Sod Ha'Egoz and its Development*, (Ph. D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1986), *passim* (Hebrew), and Daniel

influenced not only Spanish esotericism but also some descriptions of customs found in the book of the *Zohar*.<sup>29</sup> It is this new influence that reached Spain by different channels and different figures, that shaped, in my opinion, also Abraham Abulafia's prophetic Kabbalah.<sup>30</sup> More than any Kabbalist before or afterwards, Abulafia claimed to be a prophet, wrote prophetic writings, which he deemed worthy to be read in the synagogue as the *haftarah*,<sup>31</sup> and made public these claims, and was criticized, in fact banned, by ibn Adret.<sup>32</sup> Though resorting to Ashkenazi combinatory linguistic techniques in order to reach an experience he designates as prophecy, many of the components of his definitions of prophecy stem from Maimonides.<sup>33</sup>

We, and all those who follow our intellectual Kabbalah [attaining] prophecy by the means of the combinations of letters, he will teach us the essence of reality as it is, in an easier way in comparison to all the way in existence in the world, despite the fact that the knowledge of the essence of reality, which is apprehended by much thought. What brings about it [the knowledge] is the combination [of letters], and this combination induces it [the knowledge] as immediately as a youth studies the Bible, then the Mishnah and Gemara' he will indubitably achieve it quickly, with perseverance, being better than any thought.<sup>34</sup>

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Abrams, *"The Book of Illumination" of R. Jacob ben Jacob Hakohen*, (Ph. D. Thesis, New York University, New York, 1994), especially pp. 57, 61, 85, 111, 247,

<sup>29</sup> For matters of the appropriation of Ashkenazi customs in the book of the *Zohar* see the groundbreaking studies of Israel Ta-Shma, *"Be'erah shel Miriam," Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. IV (1985), pp. 267-270 (Hebrew); idem, "Pores Sukkat Shalom--Berakhah ve-Gilguleiah," *Assufot*, vol. II (1988), pp. 186-189 (Hebrew), idem, *Ha-Nigle She-Banistar, The Halakhic Residue in the Zohar*, second edition, (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz hameuhad, 2001) (Hebrew) and his "Rabbeinu Dan Ashkenazi," *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy and Ethical Literature Presented to Isaiah Tishby*, eds. J. Dan - J. Hacker, (Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 385-394 (Hebrew).

<sup>30</sup> On this Kabbalistic school see Gershom Scholem, *Ha-Qabbalah shel Sefer Ha-Temunah ve-shel Abraham Abulafia*, ed. J. ben-Shlomo (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1969), my "On the Meanings of the term 'Kabbalah': Between the Prophetic Kabbalah and the Kabbalah of Sefirot in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century," *Pe'amim*, vol. 93 (2002), pp. 39-76 (Hebrew) and Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Cherub Press, Los Angeles, 2000). As I shall show in a study in preparation, Abulafia was acquainted not only with Ashkenazi material that triggered his experiences, but also techniques stemming originally from Castile, though perhaps of Ashkenazi extraction.

<sup>31</sup> See M. Idel, *"Torah Hadashah, Messiah and the New Torah in Jewish Mysticism and Modern Scholarship," Kabbalah*, vol. 21 (2010), pp. 68-76.

<sup>32</sup> See above note 13.

<sup>33</sup> M. Idel, "Definitions of Prophecy – Maimonides and Abulafia," in *Maimonides and Mysticism, Presented to Moshe Hallamish* eds. A. Elqayam – D. Schwartz, (Bar-Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan, 2009), pp. 14-15, 19-25 (Hebrew).

<sup>34</sup> 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1580, fol. 90a.



It is evident that the initial stage of preoccupation, expressed by the phrase

When I arrived at [the knowledge of] the Names, by my loosening of the bonds of the seals, 'the Lord of All' appeared to me and revealed to me His secret and informed me of the end of the exile and of the time of the beginning of redemption. He compelled me to prophesy.<sup>35</sup>

Here, like in numerous other cases in Abulafia's writings, and in their reverberations, up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as we shall see below, prophecy is related to the resort to divine names, a practice that complicated even more the reception of his messages.

In a fragment stemming from a lost writing of a student of Abulafia, whom I propose to identify as R. Nathan ben Sa'adya Har'ar, we read:

The wise and illuminated R. Nathan, blessed be his memory, told me<sup>36</sup>: 'Know that the perfection of the secret of prophecy for the prophet is that he should suddenly<sup>37</sup> see the form of his self standing in front of him. He will then forget his own self and it will disappear from him. And he will see the form of his self in front of him, speaking with him and telling him the future.<sup>38</sup>

It is in this school that we hear for the first time the most blatant critiques of rabbinic figures. Those critiques are not only part of the dispute with ibn Adret, but are part of Abulafia's critique of magic, including the magic of divine names, which was *en vogue* among the Ashkenazi

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<sup>35</sup> See Abulafia's epistle *Ve-Zot Li-Yhudah*, ed. by A. Jellinek, *Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik*, Erstes Heft (Leipzig, 1853) pp. 18-19, corrected according to Ms. New York, JTS 1887. More on the issues dealt with in this passage see my "'The Time of the End': Apocalypticism and Its Spiritualization in Abraham Abulafia's Eschatology," *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert Baumgarten, (Brill, Leiden, 2000), pp. 155-186.

<sup>36</sup> Presumably to R. Isaac of Acre.

<sup>37</sup> The assumption that the prophetic experience starts suddenly recurs in R. Isaac of Acre, and if this text represents indeed R. Nathan's stand, R. Isaac was influenced by R. Nathan. See also below note 72.

<sup>38</sup> Preserved in R. Moshe of Kiev, *Shushan Sodot*, (Koretz, 1784), fol. 69b; Gershom G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, (Schocken Books, New York, 1991), p. 253, idem, "Sha'arey Zedeq, a Kabbalistic Text from the School of R. Abraham Abulafia, Attributed to R. Shem Tov (bn Gaon?)" *Qiryat Sefer* vol. 1 (1924-25), pp. 127-139 (Hebrew), idem, Gerhard G. Scholem, "Eine Kabbalistische Erklärung der Prophetie als Selbstbegenung," *MGWJ* vol. 74 (1930), pp. 289-290; idem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (The Schocken Books, New York, 1991), pp. 259-260, 314 note 22. On the impact of such a view, though adducing another source, on a modern Hasidic rabbi who perished in the Holocaust see Ron Wachs, *The Flame of the Holy Fire, Perspectives on the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalmish Shapiro of Piacenza* (Gush 'Etzion: Mikhlel Herzog, 2010), pp. 236 (Hebrew).

masters.<sup>39</sup> Abulafia was influenced by Maimonides' attitude to magic, and he ushered his critique in his first writing, written in 1271, long before the polemic with ibn Adret. As part of his strong interpretation of Rabbinic Judaism in term of a cult related eminently with the recitation of the divine names, Abulafia offers in the untitled treatise a detailed and original explanation to the term Jew. Let me mention first that while the term Jew, *Yehudi*, could point in the Bible to both a person belonging to a certain tribe, that of Yehudah, or later on, according to the book of Esther, to a community of people who share religious and other matters in common.<sup>40</sup> For Abulafia, Judaism was much less defined by the organic criterion as in the matrilinear Rabbinic approach, but by confession:

And the Jew who thinks that because he is Jewish and can trace his ancestry to the seed of Yehudah, he is of the seed of royalty, if he does not confess in the truth his similarity with the tribe of Yehudah is only [the matter of] a name. For Yehudah is etymologically related to *hoda'ah*.<sup>41</sup>

Abulafia bases his discussion here on the Biblical etymological allusion Genesis 49:8. Yet whereas there the "confession" is on the part of Yehudah's brothers, to Yehudah, the Kabbalist alters the meaning and has it refer to God. Elsewhere we read as follows: "You, oh nation of God, Supernal Holy Ones who look to the Name and to the source of your intelligence, and have seen the form of *YHVH* within the form of your hearts."<sup>42</sup> It seems to me that the expression *mabitei shemo*, namely those who look to His Name, is an explanation of the name *Yisra'el* that divides the word *Yisra'el* into *yishar* etymologically related to the word *yashur*, [He will look to], and the word *'El* [God].<sup>43</sup> This marginalization of the genetic factor, in favor of a spiritual one, is reminiscent of Christianity, despite Abulafia's critiques of this religion.

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<sup>39</sup> See Moshe Idel, "Between Magic of Names and Kabbalah of Names, The Critique of Abraham Abulafia," *Mahanayyim*, vol. 14 (2003), pp. 79-95 (Hebrew).

<sup>40</sup> See Moshe Bar Asher, "איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה" *REJ*, vol. 161 (2002), pp. 227-231.

<sup>41</sup> See Abulafia's epistle entitled *Matzref la-Kesef*, MS. Sassoon 56, fol. 30b. ,

<sup>42</sup> ed., A. Jellinek, "'*Sefer Ha-Ot*'. Apokalypse des Pseudo-Propheten und Pseudo-Messias Abraham Abulafia," in *Jubelschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstage des Prof. Dr. H. Graetz*, (Breslau 1887), p. 80.

<sup>43</sup> Regarding the meaning of the term *Yisrael* in Abulafia's writing, see Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1990), pp. 36, 38, 40, 110, 120, 166-167, 197.

Another strong interpretation that differs dramatically from the Rabbinic worldview concerns the meaning of the term Messiah:

the term *Mashiyah* is equivocal, [designating] three [different] matters; first and foremost the truly Agent Intellect is called the *Mashiyah*... and the man who will forcibly bring us out of the exile from under the rule of the nations due to his contact<sup>27</sup> with the Agent Intellect - he will [also] be called *Mashiyah*. And the material human hylic intellect is called *Mashiyah*, and is the redeemer and has influence over the soul and over all elevated spiritual powers. It can save the soul from the rule of the material kings and their people and their powers, the lowly bodily desires. It is a commandment and an obligation to reveal this matter to every wise man of the wise ones of Israel in order that he may be saved because there are many things that oppose the opinions of the multitude of the Rabbis, and even more differ from the views of the vulgus.<sup>44</sup>

Abuafia sees in the vulgar and rabbinic notions of the messiah only the plain and inferior sense of what the Messiah really is. The pejorative attitudes toward Rabbis, evident in the phrase *hamon ha-rabbanim*, the multitude of Rabbis appears therefore in an early treatise, a commentary on a prophetic book he himself wrote, composed around 1282. Once again this phrase occurs in the epistle he wrote to R. Yehudah Salmon, his student in the early seventies and in the late eighties the associate of ibn Adret in the Halakhic court in Barcelona, where he writes in response to the latter's assault against him:

This Kabbalah is concealed from the multitude of Rabbis who are preoccupied with the wisdom of the Talmud. It is divided in two parts in general, and they are the parts of the knowledge of God by the way of the ten sefirot called branches...and they reveal the secret of the union [of God], and the part [dealing with] the knowledge of God by means of the twenty-two letters, out of which, and of their vocalizations and their cantillations, the names and the seals are compounded, and they are speaking to the prophets in dreams, and by means of 'Urim and Tummim, and by means of the Holy Spirit, and in prophecy.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See his *Commentary on Sefer ha-Melitz*, Ms. Rome-Angelica 38, fol. 9a; Ms. Munchen 285, fol. 13a; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 66 and idem, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, tr. J. Chipman, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1987), pp. 127, 140.

<sup>45</sup> *Ve-Zot Li-Yhudah*, p. 15 והם המגלים סוד הייחוד וחלק ידיעות השם על דרך כ"ב אותיות אשר מהם חלקי דעות השם על דרך עשר ספירות הנקראות נטיעות... והם המדברים עם הנביאים בחלומות ובאורים ותומים וברוח הקודש ובנבואות. ומנקודותיהם ומטעמיהם הורכבו השמות והחותמת והם המדברים עם הנביאים בחלומות ובאורים ותומים וברוח הקודש ובנבואות. For the context of this quote see M. Idel, "Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names," *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, & Typology*, ed. R.A. Herrera (Peter Lang, New York, 1993), pp. 106-108. More on this topic

*Nota bene* the sarcastic overtone of the recurring phrase “multitude of Rabbis”, which is indubitably part of a competition between Abulafia and the representative of the primary elite. The sense that prophecy returned is therefore coupled by the feeling of a superiority over ordinary rabbis, who ignore Kabbalah in general, but also of those rabbis, like ibn Adret who, as a disciple of Nahmanides, adopted the first type of Kabbalah, while Abulafia himself considered himself superior, as he belongs to the higher forms of Kabbalah dealing with divine names, who revealed themselves to prophets. The sharp polemic initiated by ibn Adret against Abulafia's only exacerbated the latter's approach to Rabbis, and in the same epistle he describes those Kabbalists who believe in the ten *sefirot*, as being worse than the Christians, who believe in trinity.<sup>46</sup> I have no doubt that he refers to ibn Adret's type of Kabbalah. Here we have a clear example of a conflict between two form of elites, gravitating also around the question of prophecy in the present.

Despite the ban ibn Adret put on Abulafia, which was effective in Spain, in Italy, and in the Byzantine Empire his writings have been copied in many copies. Some passages from his writings have been copied by Kabbalists anonymously in influential Kabbalistic writings like the anonymous late 14<sup>th</sup> century *Sefer ha-Peli'yah*, including discussions about prophecy and the techniques to reach it.<sup>47</sup> His impact is obvious also in Italy, at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Florence and in Venice, on R. Asher Lemlein of Reutlingen, an Ashkenazi figure active in Northern Italy, who declared himself as the Messiah. Though we may assume that the fierce critiques of ibn Adret indeed diminished Abulafia's impact in Spain, it hardly affected the preservation of his writings and their influence in other centres of Jewish culture.

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see *Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar, Le Porte della Giustizia*, a Cura di Moshe Idel, tr. Maurizio Mottolese, (Adelphi, Milano, 2001), pp. 130-144.

<sup>46</sup> *Ve-Zot Li-Yhudah*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Michal Kushnir-Oron, *The Sefer Ha-Peli'ah and the Sefer Ha-Kanah: Their Kabbalistic Principles, Social and Religious Criticism and Literary Composition*, (Ph. D. Dissertation, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 75-80 (Hebrew).

### 5. Safedian Kabbalah: A New Politics toward Prophecy

Among the kabbalists who were acquainted with many of Abulafia's writings were the Safedian Kabbalists. R. Moshe Cordovero refers by names to several important books belonging to ecstatic Kabbalah, and even cites them in quite a positive manner. Also his brother-in-law, R. Shlomo ha-Levi Alqabetz, cites Abulafia's *Hayyei ha-Òlam ha-Ba'*. R. Elijah da Vidas possessed a book of Isaac of Acre, probably *Divrei ha-Yamim*, and quotes from it, but the original disappeared. From the quotes, the affinities to ecstatic Kabbalah are clear. Nevertheless, none of the Safedian Kabbalists claimed to be prophets. Though mystical experiences were not considered to be problematic at all, as we know from the writings of R. Joseph Karo, Moshe Cordovero and Isaac Luria, claims for prophecy cannot be discerned in their writings neither in those of their disciples.<sup>48</sup> It is obvious that the topic was conceived to be too dangerous even among the most spiritualists among the Safedian Kabbalists. The nocturnal revelations R. Joseph Karo received for several decades, are all emanating from feminine personifications, and deal mainly with personal issues. Even when the *Shekhinah* was described as speaking from Karo's mouth, Alqabetz who was present interpreted it as a form of maggidism, namely the revelation of an angelic mentor.<sup>49</sup>

Discussions about prophecy nevertheless were abundant in Safedian Kabbalah. So, for example R. Moses ben Jacob Cordovero, wrote:

The sons of the prophets, when they used to prepare themselves for prophecy, brought themselves [to a state of] happiness as in the verse, "Take me a musician, and when the musician plays..."<sup>50</sup> And they would concentrate in accordance with their ability to do so, in attaining the wondrous levels and divesting the material, and strengthening the mind within the body, until they abandoned matter and did not perceive it at all, but their mind was entirely in the supernal orders and subjects. And they concentrate, and divest [themselves] from the physical, and go away, and this matter is man's preparation on his own part.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Compare, however, the opposite claim of Mor Altshuler, "Prophecy and Maggidism in the Life and Writings of R. Joseph Karo," *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 33 (2006), pp. 81-110.

<sup>49</sup> See *ibidem*, and Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, *passim*.

<sup>50</sup> 2 Kings 3:15.

<sup>51</sup> *Shi'ur Qomah*, (Warsaw, 1885), fol. 30d; on this passage see Joseph Ben-Shlomo, *The Mystical Theology of Moses Cordovero* (Mossad Bialik, Jerusalem, 1965), p. 40 (Hebrew).

Though formulated as an interpretation of events in the distant past, toward the end of the quote Cordovero speaks in present tense, and implies that it is the human initiative that is important. Isaac Luria, dedicated an entire treatise to prophecy and the Holy Spirit.<sup>52</sup> Interestingly enough, he speaks only about the "sons of the prophets" namely minor prophetic figures.

However, it seems that something was going on under the surface. A student of both Cordovero and Luria, R. Hayyim Vital, wrote, after the death of his teachers and his departure from Safed to Damascus, a booklet, whose title is quite modest: *Sha'arei Qedushah*, the Portals of Holiness, which is in fact a handbook to reach prophecy. He never finished writing the small book, though he collected the material for the last part that culminated in techniques to reach prophecy. There the presence of two of Abulafia's main writings is obvious, and he resorts to Kabbalistic material that is probably no more extant. He explicitly considers the attainment of prophecy as possible in his times. It is plausible that he hesitated to finish his book. Let me adduce one passage from his book:

The ancient Hasidim come after them, and were called Perushim, and they sought to follow the path of the prophets and their practice and imitate them in caves of cliff and in deserts and they separated themselves from the ways of men. And some of them were separated in their houses as if they were walking in a desert, and day and night they were not silent, praising God by their study of the Torah and the psalms of King David, blessed be his memory, which are enjoying the heart, until their thought was cleaving forcefully and with a strong desire to the supernal lights. And they steadily continued this [practice] all their life until they reached the Divine spirit, and prophesied.<sup>53</sup>

It is clear that prophecy is described here as related to some of ascetic life, but it is not related to the classical prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Here, like in Abulafia and Cordovero, the initiative is that of the aspirant. It is a rather interesting pun that the *perushim*, the ancestors of the rabbis

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<sup>52</sup> *Sha'ar ha-Nevu'ah ve-Ruah ha-Qodesh*. See Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos, Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 281-285.

<sup>53</sup> *Sha'arei Qedushah*, (Benei Beraq, 1973), p. 7.

who decided that prophecy ceased, are described here as the ascetics who practice a way of life intended to reach prophecy.

Elsewhere, Vital distinguishes between ecstasy, or what he calls the divestment of the corporeality, when the soul leaves the body, and prophecy when the soul is aware and receives the message:

Behold, when someone prepares himself to cleave to the supernal root, he will be able to cleave to it. However, despite the fact that he is worthy to this [achievement] he should divest his soul in a complete manner, and separate it from all matters of matter, and then you should be able to cleave to her spiritual root. And behold, the issue of divestment that is found written in all the books dealing with issues of prophecy and divine spirit, a real divestment that the soul exits from his body really, as it happens in sleep, because if it is so this is not a prophecy but a dream like all the dreams. However, the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon man takes place while his soul is within him, in a state of awareness, and she will not exit from him.<sup>54</sup>

Vital's booklet had been printed many times, becoming a popular and had a huge impact, which still waits for a special inquiry. It became a conduit of the idea that prophecy is possible in the present. Below we shall see such an obvious example, but they can be easily multiplied, not all of them quoting explicitly the source.

Sixteenth century Safed, one of the most creative centers of Jewish culture ever, cultivated a very intense spiritual life, but refrained from indulging in perceptions of some of its illustrious members as prophets. It is indubitably one of the most nomian centers, and this normative approach ensured its tremendous impact for generations. Populated by some Halakhic figures, Karo and Jacob Beirav, Safedian Kabbalists were contained to bow to mystical masters of the past as the unparalleled paradigmatic figures, especially R. Shimeon bar Yohai, whose tomb they regularly visited. In short in Safed, the Kabbalists were much more interested in questions concerning the meaning of prophecy rather than in living prophets.

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<sup>54</sup> *Sha'arei Qedushah*, pp. 102-103. On this passage see Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 66-70. For an interesting reference to prophecy in the Lurianic corpus see a follower of Luria, R. Jacob Hayyim Tzemah, *Sefer Qehilat Ya'aqov*, Ms. New York, JTS 2146, fol. 90a, corresponding to Vital's *Sha'ar ha-Yihudim*, ch. 4.

## 6. Sabbateanism and Prophecy

In Sabbateanism, however, there is a shift in the politics of the dominant elite; Sabbatai Tzevi, Nathan of Gaza, Abraham Michael Cardozo, and Abraham ha-Yakhini, were considered as prophets and sometimes, they acted as such, especially in the case of Nathan. Their prophecy opens to gate, or at least allows a licit approach to popular prophecy.<sup>55</sup> Women are now not an instrument of demonstrating their power by crashing their allegedly demonic experiences, as in the exorcism séances conducted by Kabbalists since mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Safed, but serve as a manner of enhancing the messianic claims of the new elite.

Verily there is a spirit in Israel, and the breath of the Almighty awakens them, the sparks of prophecy are beginning [to appear] in the children who prophesied regarding the messianic king. The spirit is also in the mouth of the gentiles who say, "Your king has come."<sup>56</sup>

This means that prophecy was admitted to have inspired also gentiles, whose statements validate the messianic claims of Tzevi. Against this background, let me adduce an additional passage preserved by R. Jacob Sasportas, where Tzevi was described as transmitting the gift of prophecy to his close friend R. Abraham ha-Yakhini: "The Master [Tzevi] put upon him his spirit of prophecy. Thereupon something resembling a brilliant star grew on his forehead - and it seems to me that it was the planet Saturn - and it is said that he [namely ha-Yakhini] too then prophesied."

In general, the resurgence of popular prophecy among women was related by Sasportas as connected to witchcraft, as he refers to those women as *nashim makhshefot*.<sup>57</sup> In a similar manner he writes elsewhere that the prophetic claims:

several prophets and prophetesses prophesied to the same effect, and the prostitute women and ghosts or real women resorted to witchcraft, and spoke by the dint of demons and Lilits, boast about their wrong prophecy, without distinguishing between truth and false. This woman says that the queen that rescues is named *ShaTzaM*,<sup>58</sup> is

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<sup>55</sup> Matt Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2004), and M. Idel, "On Prophecy and Magic in Sabbateanism," *Kabbalah* 8 (2003), pp. 7-50.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi, the Mystical Messiah* tr. R. J. Z. Werblowsky, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 439.

<sup>57</sup> *ibidem*, p. 186.

<sup>58</sup> This is an acronym for the Hebrew names of the planets *Sabbatai*, *Tzedeq*, (namely Jupiter) and *Ma'adim*, (Mars).



found in the seventh firmament, while another says that all the kings put down their crowns, and [then] put them on his head<sup>59</sup>.<sup>60</sup>

None of the persons mentioned above were part of the first elite. Their Halakhic education was not outstanding, and their role in the Jewish society was precarious. Cardoso was a former Marrano. According to Scholem, prophecy was

In the place of these teachers of the Law, the new movements gave birth to a new type of leader, the illuminate, the man whose heart has been touched and changed by God, in a word, the prophet. Both movements have also counted scholars among their ranks, and paradoxically the Sabbatians numbered among their adherents a larger number of outstanding minds than the Hasidim...But for them it was not scholarship and learning that counted: it was rather the irrational quality, the charisma, the blessed gift of revival...Inspired preachers, men of the holy spirit, prophets—pneumatics in a word—...led the Sabbatean movement...is this ideal of pneumatic leadership which Hasidism, likewise a movement born from a deep and original religious impulse, adopted from the Sabbateans but as we shall have occasion to see, the conception of the ideal was now to undergo a grandiose change.<sup>61</sup>

I believe that Scholem was perfectly right insofar as Sabbateanism is concerned. However, in the case of Hasidism the situation is much more complex.

#### 7. *R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov as a Prophet*

To be sure, Scholem is not alone when describing Hasidic spirituality as Sabbatean prophecy that underwent a change. So, for example, Benzion Dinur, a major Israeli historian, entitled his most important study on Hasidism “The Messianic-Prophetic Role of the Baal Shem Tov,” who assumes that both messianism and prophecy should be related to the emerging Hasidism.<sup>62</sup> Also Joseph Weiss, an important scholar of early Hasidism, assumed that the founder of Hasidism was

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<sup>59</sup> This is a view found in Heikhalot literature.

<sup>60</sup> *Tzitzat Novel Tzevi*, p. 258.

<sup>61</sup> *Major Trends*, p. 334.

<sup>62</sup> Translated in M. Saperstein, ed. *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements and Personalities in Jewish History* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), pp. 377–388.

acquainted with a group of pneumatics, who decided not to resort to prophesy, though they were perhaps related to or consisting initially a Sabbatean prophetic group.<sup>63</sup>

The question as formulated at the end of Scholem's passage is that if something underwent “a grandiose change”, which means for this scholar that what happened in Hasidism was a neutralization of Sabbatean messianism. However, it is possible to understand the emergence of Hasidism not as a change of Sabbatean prophecy but another phenomenon, that is a more perennial interest in prophecy. Prophecy, as my claim goes, is a long *durée* issue in Jewish mysticism, not a sudden explosion in Sabbateanism, and the existence of Vital's *Sha'arei Qedushah*, is just one important example. Let return to my claim as to Safedian Kabbalah: intense religious life can be cultivated without attracting a critique, if dangerous statements are not made about specific individuals as claiming to be prophets in the present. Caution is the name of the game. The experiences may be extreme, the language used to express them may, however, much more prudent. Thus, not necessarily a neutralization of Sabbatean messianism took place in early Hasidism, but just a continuation of a Safedian cautious approach.

Let me adduce an example for this cautious language. In one outstanding case, as reported by his grandson R. Moshe Hayyim Efrayyim of Sudylkov, the Besht told him: "I swear to you that there is a person in the world that hears the Torah from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His *Shekhinah*, not from the mouth of an angel and not from the mouth [of a seraph] etc."<sup>64</sup> This passage has been printed without any problem. The Besht, or his followers, was not reluctant to compare himself to Moses more than once, but again in a veiled manner.<sup>65</sup> Or, to turn to a more complex example: In the hagiography, we are told about the revelation of a ghost to the Besht and for a while also to his acquaintance, R. Joseph Ashkenazi. The latter asks then the Besht:

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<sup>63</sup> See Joseph Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* ed. D. Goldstein (Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 27–42, idem, “Reshit Tzemihatah shel ha-Derekh ha-Hasidit,” *Zion*, vol. 16 (1961), pp. 60–62 (Hebrew); Immanuel Etkes, *Ba'al Hashem, The Besht, Magic, Mysticism, Leadership*, (Zalman Shazar Center, Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 171–172 (Hebrew).

<sup>64</sup> *Degel Mahaneh 'Efrayyim* (Jerusalem, 1995), p. 257: דא שווער איך אייך שיש איש בעולם ששומע תורה מפי קודשא בריך הוא ושכינתיה לא מפי מלאך ולא מפי וכו'

<sup>65</sup> See *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, [Sivhei ha-Besht]*, trs. and eds., Dan ben-Amos – Jerome R. Mintz, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1970), pp. 6, pp. 28, 129, 198, 204.

Rabbi Joseph asked him: “Why was I privileged to see him?” The Besht said to him: “because you recited [aloud] to me, and I recited before you, and my words purified you. We were united as one, and because of that, you were able to see him. If your mind had been stronger, you would have heard what he said to me, and you, too would have been able to ask him whatever your heart wished. Moreover, you would have been made known to him, you would be able to envision him at any time.” Rabbi Joseph grieved about this matter very much because seeing the soul of a righteous man is at the level of prophecy<sup>66</sup> as it is said in the book *Sha'arei Qedushah* of Rabbi Hayyim Vital<sup>67, 68</sup>.

The Besht is described, implicitly, as having a prophetic experience because of the strength of his intellect, and the more humble R. Joseph is sorry that he did not have it too. Interestingly enough, Vital's booklet is invoked as the source of the criterion for prophecy. The popularization of the ideal of prophecy is quite evident, not only because of the codification of this idea in R. Jacob and Karo's codexes. According to a text of R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, a follower of the charismatic Hasidic leader R. Dov Baer, known as the Maggid of Medziretz, who died sometime between 1795 to 1798, there are men

who perform ascetic deeds and baths and enhance the study of the Torah and pray, and their main intention and aim was to reach the divine spirit and the revelation of Elijah, and similar [attainments]. And I heard that in the days of Besht, blessed be his memory, there was someone like this that made ascetic deeds and went to [ritual] baths in order to attain the divine spirit. And the Besht... said as follows “In the world of the impure powers they are laughing at him and this is the truth. Why should someone pursue this while his heart is vacuous of the adherence to God, which is the purpose of worship? The purpose of worship is to adhere to His attributes in truth and in a wholesome manner. But after the perfect adherence he will be able to attain all the wishes of his

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<sup>66</sup> This is an interesting reference as to a view in the immediate ambiance of the Besht that envisioned him as a prophet. This passage should be added to the material I adduced in my "The Besht as Prophet and as Talismanic Magician," in: Avidov Lipsker - Rella Kushelevsky (eds.), *Studies in Jewish Narrative: Ma'aseh Sippur, Presented to Yoav Elstein*, (Bar Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan, 2006), pp. 122-133 (Hebrew), and “On Prophecy and Early Hasidism,” in ed. Moshe Sharon, *Studies in Modern Religions, Religious Movements, and the Babi-Baha'i Faiths*, (Brill, Leiden, 2004), pp. 65-70. See also the similarities between the Besht and Moses mentioned in *Shivehei ha-Besht*, referred in the prior footnote.

<sup>67</sup> See 3:7, pp. 112-114.

<sup>68</sup> See *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, [Sivhei ha-Besht]*, pp. 124-125.

heart, and the attainment of the divine spirit, and similar sublime degrees...are borne [organically] from this. But he should not pay attention to this [attainment] while he is worshipping".<sup>69</sup>

The Besht was not antagonistic of reaching the divine spirit. However, he considered the efforts to do so as ridiculous, since what is important is the worship of God, which ensures the attainment also of the divine spirit. Last but not least: the Besht has been described by his opponents as "the Prophet of the Ba'al", *Nevi' ha-Ba'al*, a pun on his name, Ba'al Shem Tov, and on the phrase the prophets of the Ba'al.<sup>70</sup> Thus, an opponent belonging to a much more Rabbinic-oriented form of Judaism, reacted promptly to prophetic claims of the founder of Hasidism.

This does not mean that descriptions of prophetic phenomena disappeared in early Hasidism. Let me adduce a passage written not later than the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by R. Aharon Kohen Perlov of Apta [Opatow], in his rather neglected commentary on the Pentateuch:

The issue of prophecy is [as follows]: it is impossible, by and large, to prophesy suddenly<sup>71</sup>, without a certain preparation and holiness. But if the person who wants to prepare himself to prophecy sanctifies and purifies himself and he concentrates mentally and utterly separates himself from the delights of this world, and he serves the sages, [including] his Rabbi, the prophet,—and the disciples that follow the path of prophecy<sup>72</sup> are called the sons of the prophets<sup>73</sup>—and when his Rabbi, [who is] the prophet, understands that this disciple is already prepared to [the state of] prophecy then his Rabbi gives him the topic of the recitations of the holy names, which are keys for the supernal gate...the account of the chariot is by the recitation of the names of purity...prophecy is like the lightning that is seen when the heavens have been opened

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<sup>69</sup> *'Or ha-Me'ir*, (Parichi 1815), fol. 43d; Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, tr. J. Chipman, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993), p. 200, note 38.

<sup>70</sup> See R. David of Makov, *Zemir 'Aritzim*, ed. Mordecai Wilensky, *Hasidism and Mitnagedim*, (Mossad Bialik, Jerusalem, 1970), II p. 211 (Hebrew).

<sup>71</sup> *Pit'om*. This term occurs also in Abulafia's *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*. See Ms. Paris BN 777, fol. 111a. See also above, note 37. In fact there is a contradiction between the two stands: that of Abulafia assumed a preliminary preparation, while the revelation may occur suddenly, and this is also the case here. However, this is less evident in the text referred in note 37, where the issue of spontaneity is more conspicuous.

<sup>72</sup> This is a Maimonidean stand, found also in Abraham Abulafia's writings.

<sup>73</sup> Compare the passage quoted from Cordovero

...and when Moses came before God he removed the mask, i.e., he had [the experience of] the divestment of corporeality.<sup>74</sup>

This is a rare and a very important document, fostering in quite an explicit manner my thesis about the resonance of the ideal of prophecy with nascent Hasidism. It contains many elements consonant with both Abulafia's prophetic Kabbalah and Vital's *Sha'arei Qedushah*. To my best knowledge, no negative reaction to the printing of such a passage is known.

Last but not least: the search for prophecy did not cease in the twenty century, as some interesting religious phenomena testify quite amply,<sup>75</sup> especially the emergence of a "prophetic Halakhah" in the writings of R. Abraham Yitzhaq ha-Kohen Kook.<sup>76</sup> This synthesis is an exceptional moment in the history of both Halakhah and prophecy. No wonder that the latter came under the attacks of ultra-orthodox circles in Jerusalem.

#### 8. *Some Conclusions*

Let me point out three major observations at the end: as a religious ideal, prophecy did not disappear but, just as in the case of messianism, it was contained, sometimes due to the influence of the "lawyers", but not renounced in most of the forms of Jewish mysticism. When revealed and disseminated, it understandably created a lot of frictions, and the critiques against this dissemination was part of the attempt of the first elite to keep Jewish society in a *status quo* situation. The sharpest critiques were lawyers, who were interested in implementing the law, not in recognizing the possibility of the promulgation of a new law.<sup>77</sup> Though I assume that the ecstatic experiences as cultivated by some of the Kabbalists who did not proclaim themselves as

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<sup>74</sup> 'Or ha-Ganuz la-Tzaddiqim, (Lemberg, 1850), col. X fol. 4b. More on this passage see M. Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 59-60.

<sup>75</sup> See, e.g., the interesting discussions of prophecy in a modern Hasidic figures as analyzed in Wachs, *The Flame of the Holy Fire*, pp. 209-240, and my discussion of R. David ha-Kohen in "Abraham Abulafia, Gershom Scholem, and R. David ha-Kohen [ha-Nazir]," in *Derekh ha-Ruah: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Eliezer Schweid*, ed. Y. Amir, (Jerusalem: Hebrew University and Van Leer Institute, 2005), II, pp. 787-802 (Hebrew).

<sup>76</sup> See Yuval Cherlow, "The Image of the Prophetic Halakhah," *Akdamot*, vol. 12 (2002), pp. 7-48 (Hebrew) and Avinoam Rosenak, *The Prophetic Halakhah: Rabbi A.I.H. Kook's Philosophy of Halakhah*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 2007) (Hebrew). See also Schweid, *Prophets to Their People and Humanities*, pp. 190- 214.

<sup>77</sup> See M. Idel, "Torah *Hadashah*: Messiah and the New Torah in Jewish Mysticism and Modern Scholarship," *Kabbalah*, vol. 21 (2010), pp. 55-107.

prophets, were not necessarily distinct from those who did so, the very resort to the term prophecy, and not only the content of the messages, was oftentimes inflammatory. In a way, one of the key problems of Jewish mysticism was how to cultivate experiences, which are extreme, without recognizing this extreme nature in terms that may shake the social structure of their communities. Thus, mystical union with God was considered less socially dangerous than the claim of prophecy, since it was a purely personal experience. In any case, the ideal of prophecy recurs in several turning moments in the history of Jewish mysticism, and inspired ideals of perfection of the individuals, who at the same time, contributed to new conceptualizations of Judaism.

It should be mentioned briefly that the oscillation of the content of “prophecy” between the unitive experiences on the one hand, and the messianic-apocalyptic dimensions on the other, is an issue that requires much more detailed studies. The two poles are not exclusive in my opinion, but part of an important spectrum, in which the individual experience finds its expression on the public arena.<sup>78</sup> In the few remnants of documents related to the Ashkenazi figures mentioned above, in Safed and in Hasidism, the Messianic elements as related to prophecy were quite marginal. In Abulafia’s writings and in Sabbateanism, however, they were much more manifest, and the two phenomena were indeed ostracized by Rabbinic authorities, as they imperiled the control of the first elite over the second one because of the eschatological overtones.

My second assumption is that the prophetic drive, and its continuation – to be sure with many changes, since the apocalyptic literatures – but especially the Hekhalot literature, reached Europe via Italy, and had an impact on the Hasidei Ashkenaz and other circles in Germany and France, which resorted explicitly to the term prophet in many cases, statistically speaking more than it has been done in any other Jewish center beforehand. The impact of those discussions, techniques, personalities, on Abraham Abulafia, was formative for the emergence of the prophetic Kabbalah in the early seventies of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. By its turn, this Kabbalah influenced Safedian Kabbalists, and to a certain extent also Sabbatanism, and ultimately, Hasidism. This line differs from the main schools of Kabbalah, the theosophical-theurgical ones,

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<sup>78</sup>See my *Messianic Mystics* (Yale University Press, (New Haven, 1998), passim.

represented by a significant series of main legalistic figures, which are concerned much more with the explanations related to commandments and their rationales. In a way, it is a confrontation between the more dynamic elements in Judaism, and the more static ones, or to put it in a more simplistic manner, between the prophet and the priest, or between the prophetic part of the Hebrew Bible, and the gist of the Pentateuch.

Last but not least: I have succinctly presented the development of the prophetic ideal type in some forms of Jewish literature, the tensions it triggered in their contemporary lawyers, and the impact it had by eliciting reactions found in rabbinic literature, as constituting a basically inner Jewish development. I did so since it seems to me that it is possible to discern the concatenations between the contents of various Jewish documents dealing with these issues throughout centuries, the recurrent impact of ibn Adret's responsum no. 548, where he criticizes the prophets in his lifetime, being one such example. This does not mean that there were no significant impacts of non-Jewish discussions about prophecy, and that we should regard the entire story as a matter of a pure Jewish affair. As I attempted to show in a series of studies, Jewish mystics, when dealing with psychological terminology, owed a lot to conceptualizations found in Greek philosophy and mediated by Muslim thinkers and adopted by Maimonides.<sup>79</sup> This is indubitably the case of Abraham Abulafia, whose many definitions of prophecy are indebted to the Jewish philosopher, as it is to Hasidei Ashkenaz and some other sources, especially for the many details of the techniques to reach it.<sup>80</sup> In the medieval Near East, the impact of Sufi type of thought and practices on some Jewish thinkers, including many of the descendants of Maimonides, has been

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<sup>79</sup> See Falzur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, (London, 1958), Amira Eran, "Intellectual Modifications in Maimonides' Model of Prophecy," *Trumah*, 12 (2002), pp. 149–161, idem, eadem, "The Diffusion of the *Hads* Theory of Avicenna from Maimonides to Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav," in *Maimonides and Mysticism, Presented to Moshe Hallamish* eds. A. Elqayam – D. Schwartz, (Bar-Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan, 2009), pp. 71-76 (Hebrew) and, for Jewish medieval prophetologies, the comprehensive study of Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy, the History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, (Kluwer, Dordrecht, 2001). In general the numerous discussions of prophetology in Muslim mysticism, found in the numerous writings of Henry Corbin, (perhaps also under the impact of Abraham Y. Heschel, whom he translated in French early in his career), should be taken in consideration more in the study of Jewish mysticism.

<sup>80</sup> Idel, "Definitions of Prophecy – Maimonides and Abulafia and Beyond," pp. 14-15, 19-25.

demonstrated by Paul Fenton.<sup>81</sup> More recently, suggestions have been made to show that such influences could, perhaps, be discerned also in Kabbalah in Europe.<sup>82</sup>

On the other hand, I am confident that Sabbatai Tzevi's self-perception as both a prophet and Messiah, depends also upon astrological concepts found in Hellenistic astrology, mediated by Arabic authors, adopted by late 13<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalah, and incorporated in a treatise read by Tzevi.<sup>83</sup> The intrusion of the astronomical/astrological order, marginal in rabbinic worldviews, created a tension with the medieval Rabbinic understanding of the commandments. It is possible that the existence of parallel prophetic phenomena in Christianity among figures that were contemporary of the Tzevi, could help the reception of the Messiah as such in some Jewish circles.<sup>84</sup> In my opinion, the emphasis on the centrality of inner developments in Jewish culture does not preclude external influences, and none of the two directions should be neglected by scholars. The ongoing opening toward new intellectual horizons in medieval Judaism, in Europe and elsewhere, is part of the gradual loss of control of the primary elite and the growth in

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<sup>81</sup> See Paul Fenton, "A Mystical Treatise on Perfection, Providence and Prophecy from the Jewish Sufi Circle," in Daniel Frank (ed.), *The Jews in Medieval Islam*, (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 301-334.

<sup>82</sup> See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 73—89, 106-107, Haviva Pedaya, "'Ahuzim be-Dibbur: For the Clarification of a Prophetic-Ecstatic Type in Early Kabbalah," *Tarbiz*, vol. 65 (1996), pp. 565–636 (Hebrew), and Harvey Hames, "A Seal within a Seal: The Imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia's Teachings," *Medieval Encounters* vol. 2 (2006), pp. 153-172.

<sup>83</sup> M. Idel, "Saturn and Sabbatai Tzevi: A New Approach to Sabbateanism," in eds. Peter Schaefer & Mark Cohen, *Toward the Millennium, Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco* (Brill, Leiden, 1998), pp. 173-202. Some vestiges of this theme, that connects Saturn and Messianism are found also in a description of the Besht, as I show in my forthcoming "Mystical Redemption and Messianism in the Teachings of R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov," *Kabbalah*, vol. 24 (2011). In general, the deep impact of astrology and astro-magic on Jewish mysticism, including discussions on prophecy, requires additional studies. On the need to allow also other explanations, related to general background, for the emergence of Sabbateanism see in more general terms Silvia Berti, "A World Apart? Gershom Scholem and Contemporary Readings of 17th century Christian Relations," *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, vol. 3 (1996), pp. 212–214.

<sup>84</sup> See Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets*, Olivier Pot, "Prophetie et Melancolie: La querelle entre Ronsard et les Protestants (1562–1565)," in *Prophetes et propheties au XVI e siecle*, Cahiers V. ed. L. Saulnier, vol. 15 (Paris, 1998), pp. 189–229; Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis, Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford University Press, Stanford 1988); *Il profetismo gioachimita tra Quattrocento e cinquecento*, a cura di Gian Luca Potesta, (Genova: Marietti, 1991); Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets, The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth-Century England*, (Los Angeles, London, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) and Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Late Middle Ages, A Study in Joachimism*, (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993. See also above note 2.



quantity and quality of figures from the secondary elites.<sup>85</sup> A religious society generated and maintained by the activities of figures who may be described as lawyers, Rabbinic Judaism was, has enjoyed – or suffered - some important cases of centrifugal developments, which became more and more evident in the last two centuries, when additional new elites emerged, like Jewish academicians, whose attitude towards Rabbinic authority was quite negative.

The balance between the centripetal vectors that sustained Jewish communities for centuries, consisting in the role played by the Rabbinic lawyers and their Halakhic edifices on the one hand, and the impact of new forms of culture imported by second elite on the other, became more precarious with the time, and allowed the developments of forms of Judaism less indebted or dependent on the classical forms of Jewish lawyers. Those centrifugal developments introduced a variety of new contents to some of the conceptual structures of Rabbinic Judaism, the more mystical dimensions constituting one major example, which has been gradually absorbed also by the Rabbinic elite. The “lawyers”, though sometimes Kabbalists themselves, conceived themselves as appointed on shaping of the social and religious scenes by determining the precise manner of Jewish behavior, were reluctant to allow to subjective experiences any authority of changing the spiritual physiognomy of Jewish society. Those subjective experiences, framed in many cases by broader systems of thought imported from non-Jewish speculative sources that contributed the more general worldview and psychology, were conceived of as unnecessary for the articulation of Halakhah, deemed to be free of comprehensive and systematic ideologies or theologies. Is the non-constellated universe of Halakhah<sup>86</sup>, which conceived itself as part of an ancient revelation and conceptually autonomous and self-sufficient, and was persistently reluctant to the intervention of other forms of thought, capable to teach a lesson to a secular type of law, based on the assumption of a human convention?

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<sup>85</sup> This is also evident in the two famous controversies on Maimonides and the study of philosophy in early 13<sup>th</sup> century and late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>86</sup> On the question of Rabbinic non-constellated way of thought, versus the medieval Jewish adoption of constellated and ordered universes see M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), passim, and “On Some Forms of Order in Kabbalah,” *Daat*, vol. 50-52 (2003), pp. XXXI-LVIII.