
Kabbalah as Literature

Theology, Narrative, and Lyric

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In the study of Kabbalah, like other fields of Judaica before it, we stand at a remarkable turning point in our appreciation of the deeply integrated nature of mystical creativity and literary art. For while Kabbalah and philosophy have long been viewed as sister fields, balancing both commonalities and antinomies, we may now suggest that Kabbalah and Jewish literature are also intimately related, reflecting affinities in form and imagination – the one frequently revealing the depths and concerns of the other. What is more, as part of the broader project of these volumes, I shall suggest here that Kabbalah as a literary phenomenon (or family of literary forms) is both a vibrant and under-appreciated component of world literature. As with other global mystical discourses, kabbalistic creativity may be valuably approached as a mode of spiritual artistry, a textual evocation of the human yearning for the Divine. So considered, Jewish mystical literature is an aesthetics of theological reflection, the vibration of the numinous in the lyric imagination of humanity. Like Jalal al-Din Rumi (Rūmī; see Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Poetic Presence and Past*) in Muslim literature and San Juan de la Cruz in Christian letters, the Jewish mystic (perhaps most vividly in the *Zohar*) embodies the striking ways in which mystical and poetic creativity are so intertwined in the global humanistic experience.

Viewed synchronically, we may distill the following literary morphology from the vast corpora of Jewish mysticism: (1) lyricism, poetry, and the devotional hymn – including mythopoesis and theological poetics; (2) narrative – including fictional storytelling, hagiography, and autobiography; and (3) the literary art of the homily – an aesthetics of hermeneutical and symbolic rhetoric. The third of these shall be discussed tangentially in

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the context of my reflections on theological poetics, and will await discussion elsewhere. In this brief survey, I will give primary attention to poetry and narrative in the *Zohar* and in sixteenth-century Kabbalah.

Lyricism, Poetry, and the Devotional Hymn

Poetic renditions of Jewish mystical experience and thought are first manifest in what would become the foundation documents of Judaic culture. Texts such as Isaiah 6 (later incorporated into the *qedushah* liturgy) and Ezekiel 1, to take but two paradigmatic examples, represented prophetic states of revelation that would function as the grounding visions for ancient Jewish mysticism. If the history of Jewish mystical poetry begins with the canonical biblical prophecies of ascent and visionary experience, key examples of the genre pervade the corpora known as *Heikhalot* (Palaces) or *Merkavah* (Chariot) mysticism, in which the mystic's ascent through the angelic domains in quest of the heavenly palaces and divine throne-room is expressed through an often incantatory and hymnic exclamation. These *Heikhalot* hymns reflect a magical practice in which the mystic seeks to bypass the celestial guardians and ascend to the divine Chariot (see Swartz 2007). In this sense, mystical poetry reflects the passionate yearning of the human being for the numinous, for a direct encounter with Divinity. Similar characteristics shine through the poetry of classic *piyyut* – sacred poetry that would become integrated into canonical Jewish liturgy, such as the work of Yannai in the sixth century, with his rich evocations of celestial fire and wonder (see Lieber 2010; Cole 2014), as well as in such master-poems as *Shir ha-Kavod*, attributed to the German pietist Yehudah he-Hasid, in which God is depicted as the anthropomorphized object of human love and passion (Green 1997, 117–120). As again with the poetry of religious experience in such philosopher-spiritualists as Shlomoh Ibn Gabirol and Yehudah ha-Levi, mystical poetry carves out a space of longing for the Divine, a fierce and soulful yearning for the unmediated and loving embrace of God. *Abavikha*, sings Gabirol – “I love you, as a man loves his only child” (see Liebes 1987) – and it is a full-hearted love in quest of the great All of Being that is Divinity. “Where shall I find You,” cries Ha-Levi – “Your Glory fills the earth,” and “I cry out to you with my whole heart!” (see Scheindlin 2008)

Theology and Myth as Prose Poetry in the *Zohar*: A Case Study

It is within this poetic tradition that we may locate the lyricism of the *Zohar* – the pinnacle of kabbalistic creativity in thirteenth-century Castile. The eruption of mythopoesis and theological lyricism in that work of many hands and decades may be understood as a key moment in the history of Jewish poetics; the exegetical and the symbolic are interwoven with a rhythmic prose poetry in the representation of the divine cosmos. Indeed, at the heart of the zoharic mystical imagination is a fundamentally poetic impulse – a resistance to the ability of ordinary prose to capture the transcendent dimension of theology and human spiritual experience. In this respect, mystical expression in the *Zohar* is starkly distinct from the systematic metaphysics of medieval Jewish philosophy and many Hebrew kabbalistic sources as well. The authors of the *Zohar* reflect a yearning for the ineffable

limits of language – a state of transcendence that paradoxically flows from the richness of imaginative and musical speech (see Fishbane 2018).

It is the musicality of such language that first elevates the poetic from ordinary expression – so suggested Hannah Arendt and now Robert Von Hallberg. Poetry, Von Hallberg argues, strives for that place of mystery and ambiguity in human experience, thinking, and creativity (2008, 12). This is certainly the texture of some of the *Zohar's* most transcendent passages, where the mystery of divine existence is evoked through the rhythm and sonority of the language, the use of paradox and the rhetoric of unsaying, the rich evocation of ethereal imagery. In this way, zoharic prose poetry casts a wondrous spell over its readers, utilizing cadence and sound to produce a mystified consciousness of Divinity, endeavoring to arouse the depths of human spiritual feeling. The beauty discovered in *poesis* is often equally due to the pleasure of sublime imagery and music, just as it is due to the conceptual content that might be paraphrased and interpreted (see Langer 1953, 208, 258–259, 280).

To observe the *Zohar* at the peak of its sonoric and rhythmic powers, let us first consider the well-known passage at the beginning of the *Zohar's* commentary on Genesis (see The TaNaKH and the Canons of Alexandria) (1:15a). There we are told of the primordial engraving of the supernal ether – a mystifying and seemingly paradoxical image (for how is an ether to be engraved?). Indeed, paradox is a repeating refrain in zoharic poetics: it is as though the mystic-poet simultaneously opens his hand and swiftly draws it away – stunning our perception into the depths of unknowing. From the image of engraving, the author shifts to a second visual paradox: the flashing of a darkened or hardened spark. The spark is called “darkened,” the *Zohar* implies, because it is supremely hidden and *unimaginable* – it is the purity of concealment and formlessness. But in the poetic hands of the *Zohar*, where paradox and the “speaking away” of apophasis are ready techniques, this lack of revealed particularity is named in all its specificity – *not* white, not black, not red, and not green. It is as though the authors want to evoke the experience of flashing colors; for when we are told not to think of red and green, the first thing that comes to mind is the presence of those colors – and then their afterglow in the dark of absence. From that sense of flashing – that absence that is actually a presence in the imagination – the full spectrum of colors bursts forth as a fountain of manifest hues – “within that spark flowed forth a fountain, from which colors were splayed below.” Here, true to its guiding verse from the book of Daniel, the *Zohar* awakens a mystical poetics of light awash with that fountain of the sublime – the reader is drawn in to an enchanted realm of primordial color and divinely emanated beauty.¹ In this mythopoesis, the zoharic authors fashion a metaphysical ideal of beauty, one that combines an incantatory Aramaic – its open vowel tones marking the cadence of a new music – with a textured portrait colored and engraved – *qutra be-gulma* (ringed in formlessness), *buzina de-qardinuta* (spark of darkness) – as well as the closed rhythm of staccato repetition: *setim go setimin* (concealed within concealments), *galif gelifu* (engraved its engraving).

The poetics of light continue on the ensuing pages of the *Zohar*. The text evokes the mysteries of the hidden light, the spark from which all manifest being emerges:

And there was light, light that already was. This light is a concealed mystery (*or da raza setima*) – a spreading forth that spreads (*itpasbtuta de-itpasbat*) and bursts from the mystery of the secret (*raza setima*) of the supernal hidden air (*avir*). First it burst, then sending out one

hidden point from its mystery. For *Ein Sof* burst forth from its air and revealed this hidden point: *yod*. Once this *yod* expanded, what remained spread forth; the light from the mystery of the concealed air was present. (*Zohar* 1:16b)

Again we may note the rhythmic use of open vowel sounds – *vaza*, *setima*, and so on. The signature zoharic use of the word *vaza* itself cloaks the discourse in a veil of mystery and punctuates the cadence with a tonal openness; the rhythmic repetition and rhyming of the *kamaz* vowel sounds create an incantatory and lyric atmosphere in the reading experience. But it is also the exegetical and orthographic play of the text that leads the reader into a sensation of aesthetic discovery and pleasure. The אֵייר (air) of *Ein Sof* is separated into אור (light) and י; when the *yod* that is first contained within the word אֵייר is drawn out and revealed, the word אור is what remains – and thus it is the light that was already present in the primordial air, albeit in hidden form. Indeed, this is a paradigmatic example of the *Zohar*'s mystical-midrashic technique; through an interpretive twist, a hermeneutical moment of play, a metaphysical idea is portrayed. And such exegetical play is artful in a way that a straightforward assertion might not be. In the gleam of interpretive ingenuity we encounter a key dimension of the zoharic aesthetic experience, the experience of spiritual beauty. The exegesis itself stimulates a breakthrough in mystical consciousness; the shape of something new arises through the dance of hermeneutics. The cosmic emergence of the *yod* marks the focus of the theological drama; it is both present and absent, advancing and withdrawing in paradox at the same time.

After the primordial point, *yod*, emerged from it – it manifested upon it, touching yet not touching. Expanding, it emerged; this is אור, light, remaining from אֵייר, the light that already was. This endured, emerged, ascended, was hidden away, and a single point remained, so that by a hidden path it constantly touches that point, touching yet not touching (*matei ve-lo-matei*), illuminating it through the path of the primordial point that emerges from it. So all is linked, one to the other – illuminating this one and that one. When it ascends, all ascend, uniting in it. It touches and is hidden within the realm of *Ein Sof*, and all becomes one. (*Zohar* 1:16b)

The relation to midrashic technique here is notably different from the dominant forms of that genre in the *Zohar*. Here the authors let the rhythms of their metaphysical speech run free without the customary markings of frequent scriptural proof-texts, exegetical question-and-answer, or even the alternation in the speaking voice. Instead, there is a lyric shape to the unit that seeks to capture the mystery and elusiveness of this moment of transition within the unfolding divine pleroma. *Matei ve-lo-matei* – the emergent reality is and is not at the same time; a light both hidden and revealed. The signature zoharic use of the reflexive (*itpa'el*) carries the stream of rhetoric and evokes the flow of movement through exhalation of the *sh*-sound – *ishtakakb*, *ishta'ar*, and so on. It is the rhetoric of illumination and unification – of hiddenness and ascent; the cadence of the language itself seems to draw the reader toward the mystifying veil of *Ein Sof*, slowly unveiling the glimmer of the hidden infinite light. The passage reaches toward this crescendo of unity and interconnectedness; the reader is wrapped in the spell of the metaphysical mystery.

The musicality of the *Zohar*'s poetics of light appears throughout the corpus, but in particularly incantatory fashion at the beginnings of both *parashat Bereishit* and *parashat Shemot* in the printed edition. These passages function as introductory lyrics of spiritual awakening, songs to the muse of mystical contemplation, to the light of wisdom's discovery:

The enlightened will shine like the radiance of the firmament (ke-zohar ba-raqia), and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever (Daniel 12:3). The enlightened (maskilim) are those who contemplate the secret of wisdom (raza de-hokhmeta). They shine and sparkle (neharin u-nezazim) in the light of supernal wisdom.

“Like the radiance, the light and spark of the shining river that flows from Eden (*de-nabara de-nafiq me-eden*), and this is the concealed mystery that is called *raqia*; within it exist the stars, constellations, sun and moon, and all the lamps of light.” (*Zohar* 2:2b)

This passage and its parallel in *parashat Bereishit* reflect the *Zohar*'s arousal to creativity, the attempt to produce a contemplative experience in its reader (see Liebes 1994). I suggest that we may see these passages also as instances of the *Zohar*'s poetic plane; the casting of its spellbinding lyric shadow over the text, the calling of its readers to the music of mystical speech – an ethereal state of consciousness and being. The authors of the text seem to be carried on the tide of a rhythmic speech, a cadence that moves in and out of variations on the theme of light, the contemplative experience of gazing upon the secrets of divine emanation. The sound of the *nun* punctuates the flow of speech here – *nehiru u-nezizu de-nabara de-nafiq* – and as elsewhere in the *Zohar*, the linguistic play on the similar sounding words for light and water evokes a flowing river of light, an overflow of Divinity through the cosmos and into the consciousness of the mystic. Thus do the *maskilim* “shine and sparkle in the light of supernal wisdom” – in contemplating the mystery of the divine secrets they too become illumined and awash with the river of heavenly transformation. The poetry of the text weaves an image of upper and lower radiance; we are taken into the inner eye of mystical meditation, we follow the cadence of zoharic music in which all of reality brims with hidden divine truth, and the discovery is dramatized and unveiled through the melody of the prose lyric.

Mystical Poetry in Sixteenth-Century Tzfat

In the history of Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar* is the cornerstone upon which the great majority of later Kabbalah was built and to which it frequently relates. As I have argued elsewhere, the status of the *Zohar* as such a classic is due in great measure to its literary power, both as a work of mythic prose poetry and as frame-tale narrative (Fishbane 2018, 4–9). While kabbalistic creativity certainly continued in the centuries following the completion of the *Zohar*, the next major stage in kabbalistic poetics took place in the Galilean town of Tzfat, where – in the decades following the traumatic displacement of Iberian Jewry – a stunningly creative group of mystics flourished. In this context emerged the figures and writings of such luminaries as Yosef Karo, Shlomoh Alqabetz (Alqabez), Moshe Cordovero, and Elazar Azikri, on the one hand, and Yitzhaq (Yizḥaq) Luria (the “ARI”), Hayyim (Ḥayyim) Vital, and Yisrael Sarug, on the other. The scope of this creativity ranged widely from elaborate mystical metaphysics to ethical treatises, legal tomes, and

life-writing. But it was the composition of various master-works of mystical poetry that most concerns us in this section – pieces of creativity that, in several cases, were to find canonical placement in later liturgical practice. Here I refer to the poems “Lekha Dodi” (by Shlomo Alqabetz), “Yedid Nefesh” (by Elazar Azikri), and the Sabbath table songs of Yizhaq Luria. Each of these hymns evokes the mystic aura and ambience of the incoming Sabbath, the luminous indwelling of the extra heavenly soul in each Jew, the renewed presence of *Shekhinah*.

“Yedid Nefesh,” a poem of mystical yearning that first appeared in Azikri’s kabbalistic-ethical treatise, *Sefer Hareidim*, and widely recited today at the opening of the Friday evening *Kabbalat Shabbat* service, expresses the mystic’s state of soul-love for *Shekhinah* – the feminine dimension of Divinity believed by kabbalists to be present at the commencement of the Sabbath (a theme vividly and influentially developed by the *Zohar*, preserved in many prayer books as the “Raza de-Shabbat,” a poetic evocation of the *Shekhinah*’s descent into the world on Friday eve, whereupon each Jew receives a new, extra soul). Indeed, Azikri expresses his love-sickness for *Shekhinah* in the hymn (*nafshi holat ahavatakh*) – the mystic experiences devotion as an event of passionate eros (*mahmad libbi*), the deep yearning (*nikhsaf nikhsaf*) for communion (and even union) of the kabbalist’s soul with the fount of Divinity.

Sixteenth-century mystical poetry reached its apogee, however, in Shlomo Alqabetz’s “Lekha Dodi,” a poem that contains multiple layers of meaning – from the simple celebration of Shabbat and longing for redemption from exile to the use of coded kabbalistic theological symbolism (see Kimelman 2002). At the structural level, the nine stanzas of the poem plus the refrain correlate to the ten *sefirot* of Divine Being – the supplicant’s progression through the sections of the hymn thus mirroring the unfolding emanation of divine reality from its hiddenmost dimension down to its greatest revelation in *Shekhinah*, the feminine component of Divinity. Indeed, this ultimate state of revelation is reflected in the dramatic concluding lines of the poem (“Come, O Bride!” / *bo’i kalah*), a final declaration of welcoming that parallels the custom, practiced by some sixteenth-century kabbalists, of going out to the fields to greet and contemplate the arrival of *Shekhinah* (Faierstein 2013, 35–36). Among the various mystical valences and symbols that scholars have noted in “Lekha Dodi,” we may observe the mythic drama of *hieros gamos* between the *sefirot* *Tif’eret* and *Shekhinah*, expressed through a variety of image-clusters. Phrases like “*Shamor ve-zakhor be-dibbur ehad*” (“Observe and remember [were spoken] as one utterance”), which certainly have non-kabbalistic, rabbinic provenance, also carry kabbalistic resonance in the hands of Alqabetz. Based on comparison with his other kabbalistic prose writings, it is clear that Alqabetz understands the word *shamor* as a reference to the feminine *Shekhinah*, and *zakhor* to the male (*zakhar*) *Tif’eret* – their perfect unity being the ultimate aim of all kabbalistic practice (see Kimelman 2002). Likewise, the drama of raising the bride from the dust of exile, the arousing of the feminine to meet the arrival of the light of her divine beloved (*bit’oreni, hit’oreni, ki va oreikh*), alludes to the culmination of union between heavenly bride and groom. In his three hymns for the Sabbath meals, Isaac Luria (these poems were among the few writings that were actually penned by Luria himself) channels the lyric Aramaic of the *Zohar*, vividly evoking the theological drama that was believed by kabbalists to unfold throughout the sacred time of Shabbat. In some of the most remarkable verse from kabbalistic literature – also canonized in the prayer books of Oriental Jewry – Luria portrays

the luminous process of *Shekhinah's* indwelling in the world, the sublime state of cosmic unity in which divine lover and beloved are in harmony with one another, channeling the overflow of energy from the highest reaches of Infinity. The sonorous cadence of zoharic language – the open-mouthed sounds of its recurrent *ab*-endings – utter the sigh of spiritual exhalation as the music of mystical devotion washes over Sabbath ritual (see Liebes 1972).

Narrative Literature in Medieval and Early Modern Kabbalah

Forms of Fiction in the *Zohar*

By far, the most significant instance of narrative in kabbalistic creativity is that of the *Zohar*, its fictional frame-tale about the second-century sage, Shimon bar Yohai (Yoḥai), and his disciples wandering the Galilee in quest of mystical wisdom. Attributed pseudepigraphically to Bar Yohai, but actually composed by a group of kabbalists in late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Castile, the *Zohar* presents its series of mystical homilies on the Torah as the discourses of Bar Yohai's circle, spoken as they wander from place to place, sharing words of kabbalistic Torah in their distinctively out-of-doors setting – walking on the road or seated under tree-shade overlooking the Sea of Galilee (among many other pastoral locations). Thus, although the authors of the *Zohar* succeeded in passing off their work as the product of an ancient sage, the text is in fact a fictional reimagination of antiquity through the lens of medieval creativity. Indeed, I suggest that the fictional and romantic re-creation of the land of Israel in a time of paradigmatic rabbinic greatness may be viewed as a kind of diasporic literature from the vantage point of medieval Castile. The idealized vision of the holy terrain may further be characterized as a resurrection of the yearned-for homeland amidst the travails and disempowerment of Spanish exile. The tales of zoharic narrative revolve around the perceived greatness of its protagonist hero, Shimon bar Yohai, his unequalled ability to reveal mystical secrets in his generation, and the passionate friendship that exists among his circle of disciples – their love for each other and for their teacher (Fishbane 2018, 9–17).

The following is a distillation of the other main narrative features in the *Zohar* as I see them (see Fishbane 2018):

1. *The Zohar is a work of dramatic literature, evoking the power and process of mystical secrecy and disclosure*, the perennial quest for esoteric wisdom, and the tumultuous event of its articulation. The zoharic authors utilize an array of narrative techniques to represent this ordeal of revelation as a performative, even theatrical, occurrence; monologue and dialogue function as narrative devices – perhaps most notably in the deployment of soliloquy as a performative prose poem that allows the removed narrator to reveal the emotional condition and transformations of the characters. The varieties of voice combine with the representation of gesture in the cultivation of dramatic momentum and communication of affect (including weeping, prostration, the raising and laying on of hands, and the interplay of sitting and standing). These forms of dramatization often integrate modalities of lament, gratitude, and celebration.

2. *This quest for mystical wisdom, narrated as a journey along fictionalized Galilean roads of oldentime, revolves around the construction of character, the thematics of serendipitous encounter.* The *Zohar* makes extensive use of the narrative device of anagnorisis, the drama of character unveiling and recognition that holds a venerable place in the broader history of world literature, and in medieval Iberian fiction in particular. The zoharic tale turns on the process by which the wandering kabbalists arrive at new discoveries of hidden meaning, extrapolated from encounters with the natural world (ruminating upon the vision of trees, stars, and flowers) and through unexpected conversations with mystical sages disguised as simpletons.
3. *Narrative and exegesis in the Zohar are woven together in a tapestry of literary art, often setting the stage or responding to one another.* Not only do mystical midrashim emerge from a fictional context in which the companions are found, the zoharic authors (at least at the redactional level) play with the boundaries of genre, allowing story to concretize a homiletical principle, and presenting exegesis as a rhetorical response to the “lived experience” of the fictional plane. The narrative motifs that are especially developed in this manner include: the setting of ominous mountain terrain that elicits fear in the wandering characters; the interplay of light and darkness; the correlation of *Shekhinah* to the journey of the human mystics and the implication that *Shekhinah* can be invoked by the kabbalist through mystical conversation on the road; entrance into a cave along the road, and the subsequent discovery of mystical secrets developed at length in the exegetical homily; the motif of fire associated with deep esoteric study; the sudden flight and disappearance of the book of secrets.
4. *While representing the paradigmatic mystical past through the eye of the medieval present, the zoharic authors take us deep into an enchanted realm of the imagination – one in which miracles erupt in the ordinary stream of human events, where mundane experience opens into an alternate reality of the fantastic.* In many zoharic cases, these narrative scenes may be characterized as instances of magical realism, a depiction of terrestrial life that inserts an otherworldly texture blended with ordinary experience. These include the following core elements of structure and theme: sensory ambiguity and temporal confusion; entrance into a fantastical and otherworldly domain through a portal in the mundane realm; encounter with and receipt of secret documents from an apparently celestial figure; traversal of reality from earthly experience to the metaphysical Garden of Eden; representation of a dynamic heavenly mythology that involves shape-shifting celestial beings and a larger portrait of cosmic Being as imbued with enchantment, fantasy, and mystery.
5. *Zoharic narrative includes a strong ethical current in which stories are presented as exempla of the virtuous and pious life.* The *Zohar* contains a good many tales that are not overtly mystical in nature, but instead function as a story-based moral discourse concerning a cluster of ethical ideals as they were conceived by the zoharic authors. These include the virtues of forgiveness, concern for the poor, hospitality, and the control of anger. In some cases this discourse of narrative ethics is also combined with the metaphysical thought of the *Zohar*.
6. *Finally, zoharic narrative needs to be situated in its historical and comparative contexts, both Jewish and non-Jewish.* From the motif of anagnorisis and the wandering quest for wisdom to the extensive use of the language of secrets and revelation in the context of

frame-tale narration; from the construction of the passionate master–disciple relationship to the dramatic yearning for Holy Mary and *Shekbinah* respectively when spiritual seekers find themselves lost in the mountains and afraid for their safety, we may observe the vivid ways in which zoharic storytelling ought to be understood as part of a broader cultural phenomenon. These observations in comparative poetics also have significant implications for the compositional conundrum that continues to plague scholars of the *Zohar*: the particulars of the frame-tale morphology derive from the specific time-space of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iberia, thereby indicating that this stratum of zoharic creativity belongs squarely in what may be called the golden age of zoharic composition in Castile.

Narratives of Life-Writing: Autobiography and Hagiography

Narrative storytelling in kabbalistic literature took two other forms that I shall discuss in this overview, both of which may be characterized as techniques of life-writing. The first is confessional and introspective, a genre in which select kabbalists articulated testimonies of their own revelatory and contemplative experiences, occasionally also in the context of a broader life story. A few such instances of this creative phenomenon are found among high medieval works – most notably in *Sefer Ozar Hayyim* of Isaac (Yizḥaq) of Akko (see Fishbane 2009, 101–122) and *Sefer Sha'arei Tzedeq* by Natan ben Sa'adia Har'ar (see Idel 2001). As I have studied in detail elsewhere, Isaac of Akko offers an array of autobiographical anecdotes in which he recounts his mystical-contemplative insights achieved upon waking from sleep (or in a semi-conscious state he refers to as “asleep but not asleep”), theological associations achieved while wandering in and gazing upon the phenomena of the natural world, or in moments of reverie while reciting or practicing liturgical rituals. With some frequency, Isaac testifies to mystical visions of light as well. Natan ben Sa'adia Har'ar goes into even more detail in his construction of an autobiographical narrative, one in which he recounts the stages of his spiritual quest to attain deeper wisdom and attachment to Divinity. This introspective story culminates in the protagonist's apprenticeship with a master kabbalist (likely Abraham Abulafia) from whom he learns the immense meditative power of writing letter combinations of the divine name, a practice that reaches its apex in his ecstatic experience of supernatural light taking possession of his physical self. Though not yet the more elaborate examples of mystical autobiography that we encounter among the sixteenth-century kabbalists of Tzfat, these two examples do reflect the attempts of Jewish mystics to discern spiritual meaning from their life experiences, to overtly see their own identities and journeys as worthy of scrutiny and storytelling. One other notable element of this genre in the high medieval period was the use of the first-person testimonial voice as a device of literary opening. Various prominent thirteenth-century kabbalists partook of this micro-genre, especially in the construction of authorial purpose. Here I am thinking of the opening lines of Moshe de Leon's *Mishqan ha-Eidut* and *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, Yosef Gikatilla's *Sha'arei Orab*, and Bahya ben Asher's *Peirush al ha-Torab*, to name but a few. This abbreviated writing of the self, while seemingly ancillary to the larger purpose of the author's composition, is nevertheless an integral and revealing piece of literary self-consciousness among kabbalists.

As I intimated above, the genre of autobiographical storytelling developed dramatically among the extraordinary kabbalists of sixteenth-century Tzfat. Notable examples include Yosef Karo's *Magid Meisharim*, Moshe Cordovero's *Sefer Geirusbin*, Elazar Azikri's *Milei de-Shemaya*, and Hayyim Vital's *Sefer ha-Hezyonot* (*Sefer ha-Hezyonot*). Among the many literary features that may be identified in these sources, we may highlight several dominant themes, motifs, and rhetorical structures: (1) representations of self-worth – both in terms of grandiosity and insecurity; (2) anxieties toward physicality; (3) otherworldly, paranormal, visionary mystical experience; (4) the play of time – memory, narration of the present, hope; (5) the construction of discipleship, reverence for the teacher, relationship to the paradigmatic past; (6) drama, performativity, and symbolic action; (7) self-conscious writing and authorial purpose. With regard to these works, I am using the term *autobiography* somewhat inclusively – a usage that absorbs a more fragmented and episodic mode of life-writing, not necessarily governed by a strict notion of a complete and integrated narrative arc to the life in question. Of these four texts, *Magid Meisharim* and *Sefer ha-Hezyonot* are certainly the most expansive in their narrative construction of the mystic's life, fashioning often vivid portraits of the psychological evolution of the subject, representations of his self-perception and the interior of his emotional states. As literature, these kabbalistic documents participate in the broader genre of autobiographical storytelling studied by historians and critics of the literary arts, in these cases distinguished by the particular concerns of kabbalists with the meaning of revelatory experience, messianic purpose, and relation to previous paradigmatic holy men.

The last literary genre that I shall address in this chapter is that of hagiography, the narrative construction of the holy man's hyperbolically idealized life. Built upon the models of narrativized reverence in rabbinic literature and then in the *Zohar*, one of the most significant and influential instances of this genre was the early modern work, *Shivbei ha-Ari* (*Shivbei ha-Ari*, "In Praise of R. Yizḥaq Luria") (Fishbane 2012). In telling the story of the saint's life, the disciples formulated a portrait of the ideal man, expressing reverence for qualities they believed to represent the perfect life. In the case of *Shivbei ha-Ari*, the authors constructed a narrative in which the holy man's maturation from newborn to adulthood displays marks of the extraordinary, even the supernatural. Luria was imagined as a baby whose otherworldly greatness was indicated by the radiance that filled the room upon his birth, by the supernatural miracle of an instantaneous healing of his body from the surgery of circumcision. The jarring supernaturalism of these depictions, along with several characterizations of young Luria as a child who had achieved an erudition that exceeded the greatest of adult scholars, construct an image of radical saintly otherness – one which, from a literary perspective, also functions as a kind of narrative anticipation and foreshadowing of the adult holy man figure.

The narrative of *Shivbei ha-Ari* fashions a literary portrait of greatness through the lens of disciplic reverence, and as such constitutes not historical biography, but a narrative *imaginaire* of the saint as it dwells in the heart of the religious adherent, the receiver of sacred myth and tradition. In the case of Isaac Luria's reception, this involved perceptions of the holy man's ability to diagnose the soul, foresee the future, read minds, and master vast swaths of texts with astonishing fluency. As a microform of kabbalistic literature, the hagiographical genre constitutes a story-form portrait of paradigmatic personhood; certainly shaped by narratives of greatness from rabbinic and medieval times, *Shivbei ha-Ari*

in particular proceeded to exercise a literary influence on later instances of Jewish hagiography, perhaps most notably so in the widely read legends about the putative founder of eighteenth-century Eastern European Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov, published as *Shivvei ha-Besht* (*Shivvei ha-Besht*).

In conclusion, this chapter argues for a recovery of Jewish mysticism as an integral piece of world literature. Long studied primarily within the frameworks of the history of ideas and the phenomenology of religion, the corpora of Jewish mysticism ought to be now understood, I suggest, as key components of the vibrant nexus between theology and literature. The nuanced development of lyric, mythic, symbolic, fictional, autobiographical, and hagiographical forms in the history of Kabbalah locate this textual landscape in the broader panorama of literary artistry across cultural, geographical, and temporal divides – within the global human effort to render experience, imagination, and meaning through the many-sided prism of literature.

SEE ALSO: Contextualizing the Babylonian Talmud; Introduction to World Literature 601 to 1450; Wisdom and Mysticism

NOTE

- 1 On light mysticism in Kabbalah and the *Zohar* in particular, see Wolfson (2004, 105–118). Cf. Fishbane and Necker (2018, vol. 16).

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