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SUNY Series in Jewish Philosophy  
Kenneth Seeskin, Editor

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Norbert M. Samuelson

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*To all my students at Temple University (1975-1987), in appreciation  
of their enthusiasm, constructive criticism,  
and devotion in studying earlier drafts of this text.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This text is intended for readers with minimal or no background in Judaism. It introduces them to a mature study of different kinds of thought categories of the Jewish people from the time of their expulsion from Spain in 1492 C.E. (Common Era) up to the 1980's. The text consists of summaries followed by a selected bibliography of primary and secondary sources for the summaries.

In presenting a general summary of any period of thought, authors necessarily make several selections. First, they decide that certain conceptual topics and certain thinkers are more important than others. The general criteria for such selection are based on the inherent value, the originality, and the historical importance for the subsequent development of Jewish thought, as judged by these authors. While these judgements attempt to be objective, not all scholars would agree with any particular selection. Second, the authors decide that certain interpretations of the concepts chosen to be summarized are more correct than others. Again, not all scholars would agree with any particular set of interpretations.

The general method followed in this work is to present standard scholarly interpretations except in cases where this author is convinced that they were not correct. Where the standard interpretation is presented, no arguments are given in support of it. However, where a non-standard interpretation is used, the standard view is mentioned and a brief argument is given for why this author prefers his interpretation to the usual one. Readers should note that no statement of an interpretation of thought is a statement of fact. Ultimately readers should not rely on any secondary source for their understanding of any thinker. Rather, they should make up their own minds about what an author intended to say by reading of the primary sources, but they cannot and should not dictate any student's final judgment about

what those sources in fact say.

The selected bibliography contains books that support the interpretations given in this text as well as books that present alternative interpretations. The more of these books that readers read in addition to this text, the better will be their basis to pass judgement on any interpretations of modern Jewish thought. However readers also should note that this bibliography is not intended to be complete in any way. This author assumes that the readers are not likely to be able to handle anything but English texts on their own. Generally only English translations of primary sources in foreign languages are mentioned. Original texts in foreign languages are listed only if no reasonably reliable translation is available. Rarely is a secondary source mentioned in a language other than English.

The text is divided into thirteen chapters which in turn are classified under three section heads. In general, each chapter is intended to be a basic reading assignment for one class session in a standard semester undergraduate college course. Depending on the available time, a session could be spent on any subsection of a chapter. For example, three sessions could be given to chapter 8 (Mendelssohn and Modern Jewish Thought), or four to chapter 9 (Hermann Cohen). Chapter 11 (Franz Rosenzweig) is the longest and most difficult chapter. It is designed to require a minimum of three sessions.

The first main section provides a general historical overview for the Jewish thought that follows. The second section summarizes the variety of basic kinds of popular positive Jewish commitment existent in the twentieth century. The Jewish movements covered in this section are not technically the best Jewish thought, but they are the most widely believed and the most influential expressions of contemporary Judaism. The third section summarizes the basic thought of those modern Jewish philosophers whose thought is technically the best and/or the most influential in Jewish intellectual circles.

Past experience has shown me that students without any background in Judaism desire guidance to know what to emphasize. To meet this request I conclude each chapter with a list of key names, terms, and questions. Because this text merely summarizes at the most general level the history behind and the thought of only the most important modern Jewish philosophers, I am inclined to want the students to know everything. However since I expect them to prepare one chapter for every class session and I realize that there are limits on how much even the best students can absorb in a short period of

time, I have restricted each list to a maximum of twenty entries.

PART I  
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

# 1

## Migrations From Spain and the Popularization of Kabbalah

### Pre-Eventeenth Century Jewish Mysticism

1492 C.E. was a monumental year in Spanish and Jewish history. Christopher Columbus landed in the West Indies and claimed the "New World" for Spain. Christian forces had conquered the kingdom of Granada the last vestige of Muslim power in Spain, at the beginning of the year, and Ferdinand of Aragon together with Isabella of Castile expelled the Jews from now-united Roman Catholic kingdom. Five years later, Emanuel I also exiled the Jews from Portugal. From this major settlement of Jewish life and culture west of the Pyrenees, some Jews migrated westward to the New World, but most Jews reestablished their communities to the East.

In the sixteenth century, centers of Jewish life arose in Holland. In the seventeenth century, Dutch Jews prevailed upon Oliver Cromwell to readmit their people into England. However, the major migra-

tion of Spanish Jews in the sixteenth century in Christian Europe was back to the Germanic lands and further eastward into a territory that later would become known as the "Pale of Settlement," encompassing eastern territories in nineteenth-century Prussia, Austria Poland and western territories in Russia. Furthermore, in the sixteen century many Jews moved from Spain to Italy and from Italy into the Turkish Empire. Jewish communities were established there in the Turkish-Ottoman controlled Egypt and Palestine. The most notable settlement for the growth of Jewish religious thought was the city of Safed in Palestine.

Those Jews who settled communities in Italy, Greece, Turkey, Palestine, Egypt and other places bordering the Mediterranean Sea became known as Sephardic Jews, the Hebrew term *Sephardi* meaning Spanish. Those Jews who set fled throughout Central and Eastern Europe further to the North became known as Ashkenazic Jews, the Hebrew term *Ashkenazi* meaning German. Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewish communities became quite distinct and developed significantly different Jewish cultural-religious patterns. Still it should be noted that their common heritage through the fifteenth century and their continued commitment to rabbinic Judaism, at least until the middle of the nineteenth century, formed a bond far stronger than their differences. Furthermore, there was considerable travel between Sephardic and \ communities and cultural-religious ties between the two Jewish sub-civilizations remained dose. Similarly, while Ashkenazic communities in Central Europe differed from those in Eastern Europe, particularly during the past one hundred yearseconomic, cultural, and religious ties between these regions remained close.

The birth of the sixteenth century also marked the end of the six-hundred-year tradition of Muslim-influenced Jewish philosophy. However, while Jewish philosophy lay relatively dormant for the next thee hundred and fifty years, Jews did not cease to involve themselves in new forms of creative thought about religious questions. The forms by which Jews sought to understand God and God's relationship to the Jewish people ceased to be philosophic, but the seeking itself continued For the next thee hundred yearn the primary form through which this quest was pursued was the tradition of *Kabbalah* or Jewish mysticism. In fact, this tradition is contiguous with and almost as old as the tradition of rabbinic Judaism itself. Furthermore, many of the medieval Jewish philosophers taught an approach to life which, if not itself necessarily kabbalistic, at least provided a thought framework consistent with 'mystical'

communal and individual life styles.

The major influences that tended towards a mystical interpretation of Judaism were neo-Platonism\* and Sufism.\*\* However, according to one interpretation of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, the "secrets (SODOT) of the Torah" that he sought to communicate to those prepared to receive them were kabbalistic. Whether or not this is a correct interpretation of Maimonides' intentions, such an interpretation is consistent with much that Maimonides presented in the *Guide*. This interpretation testifies to the fact that medieval Jewish philosophy in general and Maimonides' religious thought in particular need not be inconsistent with a commitment to *Kabbalah*. In fact, Maimonides' son became a kabbalist, and the subsequent generations of Jewish mystics in Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire treated the *Guide* as an important theoretical text in Jewish mysticism.

What is meant in this context by 'mysticism' can be explained in the following way. Normative rabbinic Judaism claimed that by accepting and following rabbinic tradition, the individual Jew would come to know the true views of God; and he would be related to God by doing what God wanted. With respect to knowledge, the best of this or any other normative Western religious tradition could offer was that by accepting the theoretical teachings of the tradition, the 'believer' would have true views. But these true beliefs could not be called knowledge. In the Greek and medieval senses of the terms, the normative believer could claim 'true opinion' but he could not be said to 'know' what he correctly affirmed. Simply to affirm that something is the case is not knowledge. Knowledge consists of both affirming what is the case and knowing the reasons why (the *logos*) what is affirmed is the case.

For the normative believer, true opinion or belief about God and God's will through the mediation of his religious tradition was satisfactory. However, for some believers this was not enough. They were not satisfied merely with correct belief. They also wanted to know why what they believed to be true was in fact true. Such people became religious philosophers. The difference between normative Jews and Jewish philosophers can be illustrated as follows: Consider a book of math problems when the answers to the problems are given in the back of the book. Most students would be satisfied with accepting the answers in the book without working out the problems themselves. Better students would not be satisfied until they solved the problems on their own, even if they had no doubt that the answers given were correct. In this metaphor the answers in the book are rab-

\*. I.e., the tradition of Christian mysticism rooted in the writings of Plato.

\*\* . I.e., the tradition of Muslim mysticism.

binic tradition, and the students who must work out the problems themselves are religious philosophers.

Similarly, with respect to practice, the best that this or any other normative religious tradition could offer was that by accepting the practice or concrete discipline that the tradition dictated, the 'believer' would be doing what God command that he do; and by doing the divine will, the believer would be related to God. This relationship with God is indirect and remote. God has directly related himself to and communicated with the religious geniuses, i.e., prophets and teachers of the believers tradition, but the believers themselves have no such direct relationship. Instead they are related to God only secondarily through the community that embodies the tradition of direct relationship with the Lord.

For normative believers such indirect relationship through the mediation of the religious traction was satisfactory. However, for some believers it was not enough merely to receive divine directives without also having a personal, direct relationship with God. Such people became religious mystics. The difference between normative Jews and Jewish mystics can be distinguished in this way. Imagine a large office which contains at one end a separate office for the manager beyond which is another office in which the president resides. At regular intervals the manager enters the president's office where the manager receives instructions for the employees. The manager then withdraws from the president's office, passes through his own office to the large main room where the workers have their desks, and tells the staff what their president wants them to do. Most of the employees would be satisfied accepting the instructions from the manager without ever meeting the president of the company. The more ambitious employees would not be content until they personally met the president, even if they had no doubt that the instructions from the manager were correct. In this metaphor God is the president, the prophets and the rabbis are the manager, the people of Israel are the company, and the Jewish mystics are those employees who are seeking personally to meet the president.

While some Jewish philosophers were mystics and some Jewish mystics were philosophers, it is not the case that all Jewish philosophers are mystics and all Jewish mystics are philosophers. For example, Bahya ibn Pakuda was both a mystic and a philosopher; Gersonides was a philosopher but not a mystic; and Isaac Luria was a mystic but not a philosopher. However, what all these

in common was that although they did not question the veracity of the theoretical and practical teachings of rabbinic Judaism, in certain

respects these teachings were not personally satisfying. In the case of the philosophers, these believing Jews were not content to accept the tradition's gift of true belief. In the case of the mystics, these equally believing Jews were not content to accept the tradition's gift of true practice. Both categories of Jews wanted personal confirmation of the truths of the tradition—the former by seeing rational grounds or justifications of their beliefs, and the latter by seeing a direct, personal relationship with the God of Israel.

The ultimate concern of all Jewish mysticism was practical, enabling the individual Jew who had developed the proper character to achieve a direct, personal relationship with God. Still, Jewish mystical traditions can generally be distinguished as either theoretical or practical mysticism. What is called "theoretical mysticism" are those teachings in mystical communities which deal with topics generally associated with religious philosophy—the nature of man, the universe, God, and the relationship between the two. What is called "practical mysticism" are those teachings in mystical communities which deal with concrete means or training by which the initiate into the mystical community may go beyond the rabbinic community to a direct relationship with God. Most Jewish mystical associations tended to be pantheistic, so the direct relationship sought with God was described in terms of a union with or an absorption into the essence of God. 'Pantheism' refers to that view which claims that everything that exists ultimately exists as part of God. Hence, direct relationship with God consisted in achieving that mental or spiritual state in which the individual would overcome his consciousness of apparent difference or separation from God and sense the reality of his participation or unity in God. The desired consciousness had often been called "ecstasy". The term for this state used by the Jewish mystics was *DEVEKUT*, which literally means the abstract state of cleaving. By *DEVEKUT* the kabbalists intended a state of cleaving to or being one with God.

### *Merkabah Mysticism*

There are four major communities or traditions of Jewish mysticism, henceforth simply called Kabbalah, which can be noted prior to the seventeenth century. The first tradition, known as *merkabah* mysticism, arose in the first century B.C.E. under the influence of Gnosticism, and continued through the tenth century in the Muslim Empire. The term *MERKABAH* literally means 'chariot' and is associated with the purported ecstatic vision described in the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel. In the terminology of