

Kabbalah and Elites in Thirteenth-Century Spain

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In this article my aim is to consider some of the processes involved in the emergence of the Kabbalah in Spain, paying special attention to the dynamics behind the relationships between the different types of élites and their respective mentalities, forms of expression, and creativity. A very elitistic type of lore in general, the medieval Kabbalah as it flourished in Spain, is analysed not only by examining the evolution of its ideas, the nature of its ideals, the mystical experiences which nurtured them, and its literary genres or its reception in wider circles, but also the affinity between its emergence and its subsequent dissemination, and the nature of the élites that contributed to these processes. In the following, the term élite assumes the idea of the superiority of some authors, either organized or not, when compared to the larger audience for which those authors, described as part of an élite, were writing.

TWO TYPES OF INTELLECTUAL ELITES IN SPAIN

Kabbalah, like some forms of Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages, especially the Maimonidean stream, was an esoteric lore. The reasons for this inclination towards esotericism among Jewish intellectuals were numerous: the adoption of the Rabbinic interdiction against discussing some issues in public; in the case of Maimonides, the Platonic view of esotericism which was motivated politically, as the studies of Leo Strauss have shown; in the case of some Kabbalists, the reticence to disclose some forms of mystical discipline was connected

to the need of a more mature personality, which could stand the pressure of strong mystical experiences.¹ Those different forms of esotericism existed in corresponding forms of élites which inherited, or at least claimed to have inherited, secrets or which were able to extrapolate them from canonic texts. In many cases, there was a synthesis between the philosophical élite and the Rabbinic one, the most well-known case being Maimonides, while in many instances in Kabbalah, Kabbalists were also Rabbinic authorities, as the cases of Rabbi Abraham ben David (known as Rabad), Nahmanides, Rabbi Shelomo ben Adret (known as Rashba), Rabbi Isaac Campanton, Rabbi David ibn Avi Zimra, Rabbi Joseph Karo, or Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilnius. However, while these examples include most important Halachic figures, the great majority of both Jewish philosophers and mystics, most of them active in Spain, was not part of the Rabbinic élite but what can be called a 'secondary élite'.² By this term I refer to those authors who did not contribute in a significant manner to the communal Jewish life as leading figures, nor did they play a major role in the Halachic literature, which shaped the religious life of the ordinary Jew. Nevertheless, those figures were influential in smaller segments of Jewish society, either as teachers, or as writers whose works circulated and influenced a number of other writers.

By choosing the contribution to Halachic literature as the criterion for establishing the type of élite, primary or secondary, I am guided by

1. The variety of Kabbalistic types of esotericism and the different reasons offered by Kabbalists for this feature of Jewish mysticism still await a detailed investigation. See, for the time being, M. Idel, 'Secrecy, Binah and Derishah', in H. Kippenberg and G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Secrecy and Concealment* (Leiden, 1995).
2. The emphasis I place on the secondary élite for the development of Kabbalah differs from Gershom Scholem's attribution of a certain importance to what he called the 'stratum' of Nazirites or of pious men, *hasidim*, of *perushim*, and prophets; see his *Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. A. Arkush, ed. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton, 1987), pp. 229-35, 238-41. He claims that a certain very small segment of the Jewish mature persons in France dedicated itself to the study of the Torah, and could serve as the appropriate milieu for contemplative activity that could advance the emergence of the Kabbalah. However, the evidence adduced in order to substantiate the claim for the existence of such a stratum seems to me to be inconclusive. Indeed, Rabbi Ya'aqov's title, the Nazirite, constitutes the only *pièce de résistance* for Scholem's thesis. The occurrence of the *epitheton* 'Nazirite' in the other case, that of Abraham ha-Nazir, is, as Scholem himself later correctly acknowledged, a matter of conflation between the shorter form of the name Ya'aqov ha-Nazir, namely ha-Nazir, and Abraham ben David: see *ibid.*, p. 230, n. 65. The other

the assumption that the importance of this literature has been less in dispute than either the philosophical or the Kabbalistic writings were. As we shall see below, the primary élites, who shared a profound interest in Halachic literature, were less involved in mutual criticism despite their ideological divergence, while in the case of the secondary élites the common denominators were less important and thus the ideological differences constituted more acute points of confrontation.

In many cases, both the philosophical and the mystical esotericism had used precisely the same type of nomenclature, which stems from ancient Jewish sources: *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* or the nature and meaning of the divine name. However, this shared nomenclature notwithstanding, the contents or the concepts underlining the various uses of these terms differed substantially in the two main strands of intellectual literature. The divergence between the philosophical theological concepts and those which dominated the main theosophical theurgical trend of Kabbalah are well known: they consist of a more static and intellectual theology, emphasizing a transcendental stand, inspired mainly by medieval Aristotelianism in the case of Maimonides; and on the other hand, of a much more dynamic theosophy, sometimes informed by earlier Jewish theosophies and sometimes by neoplatonic concepts, in the case of the main theosophical-theurgical stream of Kabbalah. In other words, Maimonides is better understood as a philosopher or theologian who imported a world view which emphasizes the ideal of intellectual

name mentioned by Scholem in this context, a certain Yehudah Nazir, does not belong to a mystic circle, as he indicates in his book and as E.E. Urbach has also shown. Thus, at least insofar as the term 'Nazir' is concerned, it is very difficult to assume the existence of a certain social stratum which was interested in matters of mysticism on the basis of one name alone! Whether we should add the other *epitheta*, 'Hasid', 'Parush', and 'Navi' to that of 'Nazir', and thereby create a stratum, is a rather complex question. Moreover, one of the texts which figures in a prominent manner in Scholem's thesis, *Sefer Huqei ha-Torah*, as representative of an ascetic Provencal spirituality, seems to be closer to another geographical area and form of spirituality, that of the Ashkenazi. See, more recently, E. Kanarfogel, *Jewish Education and Society in the High Middle Ages* (Detroit, 1992), pp. 101-5. To sum up: most of the names Scholem adduced in this context as belonging to a special, ascetic, social stratum are not connected directly to the emerging Kabbalah. In any case, in the following I shall address only those persons who have been explicitly connected to Kabbalistic activities.

perfection, which implies antagonism to more material aspects, matter in the case of the body, and imagination in the case of the human soul. In fact, a polarity between spirit and matter, between the divine, tantamount to the intellectual, and the material, haunt this form of thought, while the struggle between these elements constitutes the real religious and philosophical drama. It is the attempt at separating the higher human faculty from the lower, the spiritual from the corporeal, the intellectual from the imaginative, the secret sense of the text from the obvious, that are conceived to be the supreme achievement of the élite. This is a form of elitistic speculation that involves a sharply dualistic approach, which is paralleled by an anthropology that is dualistic as well. The plain sense of the religious texts is intended for the many, the esoteric one only for the few, provided that only the latter are able to master the intellectual disciplines which alone enable the cultivation of the perfect religiosity. It is a disjunctive elitism that characterizes Maimonideanism. Despite the fact that Maimonides himself took care to offer various forms of religious leadership in his writings, there is good reason to assume that the intended audience for the different writings could, to a considerable extent, influence his formulations. In any case, his philosophical secrets, of Aristotelian extraction and expressed in Rabbinic terms, were intended for the few, while the vulgus was given a very simplified and minimalistic type of philosophical and theological credo, the 13 articles of faith. This disjunctive attitude has also been adopted by a certain type of Kabbalah, the ecstatic one, as represented by the writings of its founder, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia.³

However, the main trend of Kabbalah, as formulated by many Spanish Kabbalists, adopted a much more conjunctive type of participating thought. Between the Infinity, the *'Ein Sof*, a certain emanative process bridged the gap between the totally spiritual and the most material aspects of reality. In the various forms of theosophical Kabbalah, the infinite divine is conceived not only as emanating its revealed and more limited manifestations, the *sefirot*, but in many cases

3. On the elitistic view of Abulafia and its relation to his hermeneutics that sharply distinguishes between the plain and the hidden dimensions of the canonic texts, see M. Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, 1989), pp. xii-xiii, xvi.

also the whole range of reality, including language.⁴ Thus, immanentist views were accepted by some important forms of Kabbalistic theosophy. In its latter formulation, in the Lurianic theosophy, the divine sparks were conceived as immersed in this world, including the demonic one. By and large, this is a conjunctive theology, which is paralleled by a similar situation in its sociology: most of the Kabbalistic élites constitute not only the spiritual segment of the society but also an active force that is shaping the lives of the lower levels by being directly involved with them. The existence of a certain ontological continuum on the cosmic level is often, though not always, paralleled by a continuum between the Kabbalistic esotericism and the contents of the Jewish exoteric life, as understood by those Kabbalists. In other words, though there is a great difference between the Kabbalistic understanding of their own performance of the ritual and that of the simple Jews, the Kabbalists, at least those Spanish ones whose views are referred to below, envisioned the performance of the commandments by the simple Jews as fraught with a mystical value, different from the more powerful effects of the theurgical performance of the Kabbalists themselves, despite the more simple-minded Jews' ignorance of Kabbalah. In the following discussion the attitude of some Spanish Kabbalists to the efficacy of the Jewish ritual will be examined, keeping in mind the effort of those thinkers to offer at least a double mystical significance to the ritual: one for the élite, the other for the non-Kabbalist.

It should be emphasized that Spain is the only country where the two forms of esotericism have flourished and have been elaborated. Indeed, unlike the more Halachic propensity of the Ashkenazi élite, which indeed also produced a certain type of mystical literature, the Spanish élite produced a much more variegated type of literature, which is far more elitistic than the Ashkenazi one. The latter masters were less interested in the difference between élite and vulgus, than in the gap between those belonging to a sect, or group, and those who did not.⁵ Also, a comparison between the general attitude towards

4. On language and emanation see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 277-89; id., 'The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala', *Diogenes*, 79 (1972), 59-80; 80 (1972), 164-94; M. Idel, 'Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism', in S.T. Katz, *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford - New York, 1992), pp. 59-66.
5. See I. Marcus, *Piety and Society* (Leiden, 1981).

esotericism among Italian Jewry and that of Spanish Jewry may be relevant. In Italy it seems that the two models of esotericism developed by Spanish thinkers were imported, but the preoccupation with the questions of the esoteric mode was less visible.

TWO TYPES OF KABBALISTIC ELITES

The first élite, or the governing one, did not produce a vast mystical literature for the masses; this seems to have been the exclusive contribution of the secondary élite. Though there was no co-operation between the two kinds – I would even say despite the tensions between them – the complementary activities of these types of élite contributed to the establishment of Kabbalah as a significant phenomenon in Judaism. While the first élite, represented in Spain by thinkers like Nahmanides, Rabbi Yonah Gerondi, and Rabbi Shlomo ibn Adret cultivated a type of lore to be transmitted only orally to their select students, the secondary élite produced the written Kabbalistic literature, which capitalized on the esoteric elements produced by, or only circulated in, the first élite in order to organize them as literature.

Roughly speaking, the transition from one élite to another involved not only a social move but, to a great extent, a shift in the media of the representation of this lore, namely from orality to literacy. While the first élite used both the direct and the remote modes of communication, the secondary élite acted, by and large, by means of the remote, written medium. This is obvious in the transition of Kabbalah from Provence to Catalonia. In my opinion Rabbi Isaac the Blind is a classical representative of the secondary Jewish Kabbalistic élite: he was mainly a Kabbalist, who stemmed, however, from a first élite family. While his father was both a Halachist and a Kabbalist, who produced almost only Halachic writings, Rabbi Isaac produced almost only short Kabbalistic treatises. It seems that it was more eminently his activity, both oral and written, that propagated Kabbalah in Catalonia, and was instrumental in helping, or at least inspiring, the literary activity of his Catalan followers in Gerone: Rabbi Ezra, Rabbi Abraham ben Isaac (the cantor of Gerone), Rabbi Azriel, and Rabbi Ya'aqov ben Sheshet, who represent, both individually and as a group, the secondary élite, who dealt only with Kabbalistic issues and propagated Kabbalah to somewhat larger audiences in a written form. It should be mentioned that Rabbi Isaac, by disclosing Kabbalistic traditions to his followers,

at the same time divulged them to persons who did not belong to his family. His two predecessors, his father Rabbi Abraham ben David and his grand-father Rabbi Abraham ben Isaac, apparently, combined esotericism with family transmission of the lore. Though Rabbi Asher ben David, the nephew of Rabbi Isaac, was also an accomplished Kabbalist, representing therefore another, and apparently the last representative of the Kabbalistic line in Languedoc, what is new in Rabbi Isaac's activity is that he was ready to introduce persons outside his family into the Kabbalistic tradition. This move is evident also in the writings of Rabbi Asher, who produced Kabbalistic writings which were much more exoteric, and intended to clarify some misunderstood Kabbalistic issues for a much larger audience.

On the other hand, the first élite in Catalonian Jewry as represented, in my opinion, by well-known Rabbis Yehudah ben Yaqar, Nahmanides, Yonah Gerondi, and Shlomo ibn Adret, opposed the extensive committing to writing of esoteric topics. Symptomatic of this approach is a famous passage in Nahmanides' introduction to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*:

I bring into a faithful covenant and give proper counsel to all who look into this book not to reason or entertain any thought concerning any of the mystic hints which I write regarding the secrets of the Torah, for I do hereby firmly make known to him [the reader] that my words will not be comprehended nor known at all by any reasoning or contemplation, excepting from the mouth of a wise Kabbalist [speaking] into the ear of an understanding recipient; reasoning about them is foolishness; any unrelated thought brings much damage and withholds the benefit. Let him not believe in an erroneous vanity, because it is only a bad thing which will result from his reasoning.⁶

6. Ch. D. Chavel, *Commentary on the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem, 1961), Vol. I, pp. 7-8. See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 380. See also B.D. Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), pp. 113-14; E.R. Wolfson, 'By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic', *AJS Review*, 14, 2 (1989), 176-7. See M. Idel, 'Maimonides and Kabbalah', in I. Twersky (ed.), *Studies in Maimonides* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 41. It should be mentioned that Scholem, *ibid.*, p. 385, presents a picture of Nahmanides as the inheritor of a wide range of Kabbalistic traditions, and emphasizes the propagandistic role of this figure; the two characterizations seem to me unfounded.

An important aspect of the same concept is the view that there is no way, independent of the tradition of secrets, to discover the hidden dimension of the Torah by relying on someone's intellectual capacities:

The Account of Creation [*Ma'aseh Bereshit*] is a profound secret, which cannot be understood from the [biblical] verses, and cannot be understood in toto⁷ but by the way of the [esoteric] transmission,⁸ up to Moses [who received it] from the mouth of the [divine] Dynamis. Those who know it are obliged to hide it.⁹

It should be mentioned that, according to this quote, it is impossible to exhaust the secret dimension of the Bible by means of reasoning; I interpret this view as assuming a trans-intellectual and hidden essence of the Torah. It seems that it is not an infinity of mystical aspects of the Torah which are mentioned here, as understood by the Castilian Kab-

7. 'Al burio.

8. *Mippi hakkabbalah*. Compare, however, the opposite approach expressed by Rabbi Asher ben David, the nephew of Rabbi Isaac Sagi Nahor, who repeatedly uses the phrase *ha-maskkil yavin*, namely the *illuminati* will understand, without mentioning the necessity of a certain tradition. He also assumes that a legitimate understanding of a certain topic related to the divine name can be received in a dream. This more open attitude of Rabbi Asher ben David to the concept of Kabbalah does not corroborate a somewhat opposing view expressed by J. Dan, who believes that it was this Kabbalist's instructions that were instrumental in imposing a more esoteric policy of writing on Nahmanides! See his *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics* (Seattle-London, 1986), pp. 31-5, as well as his 'The Cultural and Social Background of the Emergence of Traditional Ethical Literature', in M. Idel, W.Z. Harvey, and E. Schweid, *The Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday* (Jerusalem, 1988), Vol. 1, pp. 244-52 (Hebrew). It should be mentioned, on the contrary, that Rabbi Asher was one of the most esoteric among the first Kabbalists, trying as he was to clarify topics that have been misunderstood. On the view that there were two distinct Kabbalistic schools in Gerona, see M. Idel, 'Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah and Spiritual Leadership (forthcoming); id., 'On R. Isaac Sagi Nahor's Mystical Intention of the Eighteen Benedictions', in M. Oron and A. Goldreich (eds.), *Massu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb* (Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 42-7 (Hebrew); M. Idel, 'In the Light of Life: An Inquiry in Kabbalistic Eschatology', in I.M. Gafni and A. Ravitzky (eds.), *Sanctity of Life and Martyrdom: Studies in Memory of Amir Yekutiel* (Jerusalem, 1992), pp. 203-5 (Hebrew).

9. Chavel, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, p. 9.

balists in the generation following Nahmanides,¹⁰ but the insufficiency and even the vanity of human reasoning, which not only cannot find, by itself alone, a mystical dimension of the Jewish tradition, but even when such a secret tradition is revealed by an oral tradition, some other esoteric dimensions of the same text still defy human understanding. This feeling seems still to be evident in a passage of one of Nahmanides' much later followers, Rabbi Meir ibn Avi Sahulah; in the first part of the fourteenth century, he wrote as follows:

Despite the fact that our knowledge is limited and we cannot comprehend the issues according to their precise depth, it is incumbent upon us to inquire into the issues in accordance with our comprehension, and follow the way trodden by those called, in our generation and in the former generations, for two hundred years [by the name] *Mequbbalim*. And they call to the wisdom of the ten *sefirot* and some few rationales of the commandments by the name *Qabbalah*.¹¹

While the secondary élite would opt for more room for new mystical interpretation in order to create for itself a space for its literary activity, such a space was already ensured in the case of the primary élite in the form of its Halachic literary production.

Unlike the emphasis on the importance of transmission in the first élite, which involves, by definition, extensive regulation and power over the forms of mystical thought to be validated, the idea of innovation recurs several times in the writings of Kabbalists who

10. On this topic, see M. Idel, 'Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah', in G. Hartmann and S. Budick (eds.), *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven, 1986), pp. 141-57.

11. *Perush Sefer Yetzirah*, ms. Roma-Angelica 45, fol. 2b. In my opinion, this view on the impossibility of exhausting the mystical dimension of the Torah, explained by the inability to reach 'the precise depth', differs substantially from that which assumes the infinity of its senses; the latter allows, implicitly, that the infinite number of senses can be deduced by the human hermeneutical activity, therefore allowing a greater transparency of each of the mystical senses; Nahmanides' view, on the other hand, assumes a much more opaque picture of the contents of the Kabbalah. On the double mode of accepting an esoteric tradition and, at the same time, following an intellectual inquiry, see also M. Idel, 'Some Remarks on Ritual and Mysticism in Geronese Kabbalah', in *Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 3 (1993), 125-6, insofar as ben Sheshet is concerned. See also Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Ktoneth Passim*, ed. G. Nigal (Jerusalem, 1985), p. 3 (Hebrew).

belonged to the secondary élite. So, for example Rabbi Ya'aqov ben Sheshet emphasizes that were he not sure that a certain topic was his own innovation, he would consider it to be 'Halachah given to Moses at Sinai'.¹² His contemporary, Rabbi Azriel, who was close to the views of ben Sheshet in some respects, writes that 'from every [detail in the Torah] it is possible to [homiletically] extract [secrets]'.¹³

Describing the Kabbalah of Rabbi Azriel of Gerona, a later Kabbalist, namely Rabbi Isaac ben Shmuel of Acre, writing in early fourteenth-century Spain, concluded:

Because I have seen the great benefit and the innovation [*vehiddush*] in his words, I wrote them down, despite the fact that from his words it is understandable that his Kabbalah and the Kabbalah of Nahmanides are not identical and, in any case, every enlightened person will be able to discern the difference between them.¹⁴

It is not only the conceptual difference between the two types of Kabbalah that is alluded to here, but also the feeling that Rabbi Azriel's form of Kabbalah is an innovation. Thus, several generations after the disappearance of the Geronese Kabbalah as a social group, a knowledgeable Kabbalist was still able to detect the innovative nature of a certain ideas exposed by a follower of Rabbi Isaac the Blind.

12. On this issue see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 380-81; M. Idel, 'We Have no Kabbalistic Tradition on This', in I. Twersky (ed.), *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in his Religious and Literary Virtuosity* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), p. 68, n. 58; Wolfson, 'By Way of Truth', 154-5; D. Matt, 'The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar', in P. Schaefer and J. Dan (eds.), *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: Fifty Years After* (Tübingen, 1993), pp. 194-5.
13. See his *Perush ha-'Aggadot*, ed. I. Tishby (Jerusalem, 1945), p. 38, also discussed by Matt, 'The Aura', p. 200. See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 381, who already pointed out the affinity between Azriel and ben Sheshet, insofar as the issue of creativity is concerned. See also M. Idel, 'Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance', in L.E. Goodman (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany, 1993), pp. 325-9.
14. A. Goldreich (ed.), *Sefer Me'irat Einayim* (Jerusalem, 1984), p. 146. On the context of this quote see Idel, 'On R. Isaac Sagi Nahor's Mystical Intention', p. 47.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN KABBALISTIC ELITES IN SPAIN

My view as to the emergence of the Kabbalah, especially its Spanish phase, assumes the importance of a silent, and in some cases also an overt, confrontation between the Maimonidean philosophical esotericism and some other earlier Jewish forms of esotericism. Maimonides, when offering his interpretation of the significance of the ancient Jewish esoteric terms, explicitly asserted that their meaning had been lost during the period of the exile;¹⁵ His philosophical project was, therefore, according to his rhetorics, a restorative one. This claim ran, in my opinion, against the presence of different, more mystical and mythical interpretations of precisely the same terms, extant in some elitistic circles in Provence, Ashkenaz, and apparently also elsewhere, and provoked a reaction which gradually took on the form of the construction of various metaphysical systems, and explanations of the significance of the commandments. The open and famous controversies – analysed in detail by several historians¹⁶ – aimed at banning Maimonides as a thinker by attacking his views, and sometimes even analytically criticizing them, without however, proposing a detailed intellectual alternative. The early theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists, however, though critical of the Maimonidean project, were less engaged in the open and often sharp controversies, and embarked on the long-range project of building and offering a different religious outlook, which implicitly, and sometimes also explicitly, contradicted that of the great eagle.¹⁷ Alternative visions of the ancient topics of Jewish esotericism were offered by the early Kabbalists, sometimes explicitly mentioning the divergence between their view and that of Maimonides. However, the first fully-fledged criticism of philosophy produced by a Kabbalist was addressed not to Maimonides's view, but to that of his most important follower in the West: Rabbi Shmuel ibn Tibbon, one of the translators of the *Guide of the Perplexed* into Hebrew. Rabbi Ya'aqov ben Sheshet devoted one of his writings to a

15. See the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Pt. I., Ch. 71.

16. On the open controversy at the beginning of the thirteenth century, see D.J. Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy* (Leiden, 1965).

17. See Idel, 'Maimonides and Kabbalah', pp. 34-5.

rather detailed criticism of a book of this philosopher.¹⁸ This fact seems to be very emblematic: Ben Sheshet, belonging to what I propose to call the secondary Kabbalistic élite, criticized the work of another member of the secondary élite, an adherent of the philosophical brand. As A. Ravitsky has remarked, Ibn Tibbon and many others among Maimonides' followers in the realm of philosophy, unlike Maimonides himself, devoted their intellectual activity only to philosophical topics.¹⁹ In other words, though Maimonides' thought has sometimes been criticized, also by the members of the first Kabbalistic élite, as is the case with the disparaging remarks regarding his views in the writings of Nahmanides and Yonah Gerondi, the criticism is more evident in some statements of the secondary Kabbalistic élite, while the most critical assault against the address of philosophy was directed at the writings of the secondary philosophical élite by a member of another secondary élite. We may conclude that there was a common denominator between the first élites, Kabbalistic and philosophical: the role they attributed to the Halachic discourse and literature. This shared concern attenuated the criticism, despite the intellectual antagonism between their religious world views. However, insofar as the secondary élites were concerned, no important common denominator could mitigate the divergence between their views and this lack of communication was responsible for the stronger antagonism evident in their writings. In other words, the mutual respect between the first types of élites was eventually greater than that between the secondary élites.

However, in addition to the criticism of and tension between the different types of Kabbalistic élites and the philosophical one, I assume that there were some tensions even between the first and the secondary Kabbalistic élites as represented respectively by Nahmanides and Rabbi Yonah Gerondi on the one hand, and the Geronese Kabbalists, the students of Rabbi Isaac Sagi Nahor, on the other hand. As I have attempted to show elsewhere, the disappearance of the Geronese type of Kabbalah influenced by Rabbi Isaac the Blind's views, as a distinct school of Kabbalah, and at the same time the continuation of the Kabbalah from the school of Nahmanides for many decades after his

18. See *Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhohim*, ed. G. Vajda (Jerusalem, 1969), esp. pp. 82-3; G. Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la Kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1962), pp. 33-113.

19. This view was presented by A. Ravitsky in a lecture, so far not published.

death, reflect a confrontation which ended with the victory of the latter's school.²⁰

THE GOLDEN AGE OF SPANISH KABBALAH, 1275-1295

The divergence between the importance of transmission and the prevalence of the feeling that innovation is also a mode of Kabbalistic creativity, is a very great one. It divided the conservatist mood from the more inventive one, and it gave the impetus to the development of Kabbalah beyond the first fragmented traditions that are extant from at least the late twelfth century. However, it should be emphasized that the most important achievements of Kabbalah as an influential force in the intellectual life of the Jews in Spain are due to the impact of the secondary élite. In the second part of the thirteenth century, the vast majority of the Kabbalistic writings, and I would say also the most influential ones, were composed by the secondary élite. This is especially obvious insofar as the Castilian Kabbalah is concerned, as almost all of its major representatives belong to the secondary élite.²¹ The disappearance of two most influential figures in matters of Halachah in Spain, Nahmanides and his cousin Rabbi Yonah Gerondi, in the sixties of that century, had opened a unique and very short period that can be designated as a 'window of opportunities' onto a much more creative phase in Spanish Kabbalah. I would call this span of time the golden decades of Spanish, more precisely of the Castilian Kabbalah, between the beginning of the 1270s and the middle of the 1290s. In the span of one generation there were no great Halachic figures in Spain who were able to inhibit, explicitly or tacitly, the freer creativity which produced huge and very imaginative forms of Kabbalistic literature and

20. Cf. Idel, 'Nahmanides'

21. On other additional factors that contributed to the intellectual effervescence that served as the background for the *floruit* of the innovative Kabbalah in Castile in this period, see M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven – London, 1988), pp. 211-12. For the circle of Kabbalists who produced the Zohar, all of them belonging to the secondary élite, see Y. Liebes, *Studies in Zohar* (Albany, 1993), pp. 85-138. On the emergence of a systematic hermeneutics among many of the secondary élite figures, an issue absent in the first élite of the thirteenth-century Kabbalists, see M. Idel, 'Pardes: Between Authority and Indeterminacy: Some Reflections on Kabbalistic Hermeneutics', in *Ioan Culianu Memorial Volume* (Albany, 1995, forthcoming).

their dissemination. It was only the ascent of two important Halachists as dominant factors in the religious life in Spain that substantially mitigated the production of Kabbalistic literature. The rising influence of the Rashba in Catalonia and the arrival of Rabbi Asher ben Ya'aqov, known also as the *Rosh*, in Toledo – authors who belong to what I conceive as the primary élite – coincided with the beginning of the decline of the Kabbalistic creativity in Spain.²² This synchrony seems to me highly significant: It shows that there is a certain inverse correlation between a strong Halachic authority and the weakening of Kabbalistic innovative creativity. This feeling is corroborated by a comparison to what happened in the same period in Italy.

Abraham ben Shmuel Abulafia (1240–c.1291), the founder of the ecstatic brand of Kabbalah, was a Spaniard by extraction, who had studied some forms of Kabbalah in Barcelona and attempted, without lasting success, to disseminate his special synthesis between Kabbalah and Maimonidean philosophy in Castile, subsequently left Spain for good, and wrote most of his works in Italy, especially in Sicily. It is towards the end of his life, at the end of the 1280s, that a conflict erupted between him and the religious leading figure of Aragonese Jewry, the Rashba, an inhabitant of Barcelona, and in that capacity in some way also responsible for the Jews of Sicily, an Aragonese province. This sharp confrontation still awaits detailed analysis.²³ Such an analysis will, in my opinion, convincingly illustrate the problems involved in the imaginative creativity of an innovative Kabbalist in the lifetime and presence, although geographically remote, of a great Halachic authority, even if this authority was himself a Kabbalist. In this case, a sharp and open conflict between a member of the first and a representative of the secondary élite is evident.²⁴

22. From the mid-1290s, the decline of Kabbalistic creativity in Spain becomes increasingly visible. From the beginning of the fourteenth century very few classical books on the subject of Kabbalah were composed in Spain.
23. I hope to offer a detailed analysis of this controversy in a separate study, now in preparation. See, for the time being, M. Idel, 'The Ecstatic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia in Sicily and its Transmission during the Renaissance', *Italia Judaica*, 4 (1995).
24. The question of different types of élites may be an important criterion for a better understanding of the clash between the opponents to Hasidism and the Hasidic masters at the end of the eighteenth century. See, for the time being, E. Reiner, 'The Wealth, Social Position and the Study of Torah: The Status of the Kloyz in Eastern European Jewish Society in the Early Modern Period', *Zion*, 58 (1993), 323-8 (Hebrew).

While the first élite's adherence to Kabbalah was crucial for the aura of respectability and credibility this lore enjoyed for generations in many Jewish circles, its creativity as a spiritual factor is much more strongly connected to the secondary élite's contribution. Without the latter, Kabbalistic lore would have remained a very fragmented and esoteric type of lore, transmitted in small circles, and sometimes diminishing because of the vicissitudes of transmission. Without the former, Kabbalah would have remained in the margins of Jewish life, unable to shape the *modus vivendi* of the masses.

A final observation regarding the correlation between the types of élite and the Kabbalistic ideas exposed by them is called for; a sociological reading of the first steps of Kabbalah as proposed above should not be understood as an attempt to reduce the emergence of the Kabbalistic ideas to social factors.²⁵ In my opinion, Kabbalistic ideas were in existence long before they surfaced in the Spanish provinces. However, the fact that the existence of a policy of dissemination versus one of discrecy can be established, and that expressions invoking innovative creativity versus a rhetoric and practice of traditionalism can be adduced, also demands an approach that is not solely dependent upon the history of ideas. The nature of most of the Kabbalistic ideas should be studied by recourse to numerous ways, the history of ideas being only one of them. The dissemination of those ideas, their reception and, sometimes, also their emergence, should also be approached from sociological angles.

25. On reduction in relation to the use of social explanations in matters of religion, see D. Merkur, 'Reductions of a Working Historian', in Th. A. Idinopulos and E.A. Yonan (eds.), *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion* (Leiden, 1994), pp. 227-9.