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Asceticism, Mysticism, and Messianism: A Reappraisal of Schechter's Portrait of Sixteenth-Century Safed

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ON "SAFED IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: A CITY OF LEGISTS AND MYSTICS" (1908)

It goes without saying that the fields of Jewish mysticism and intellectual history have greatly evolved since the time that Solomon Schechter wrote "Safed in the Sixteenth Century: A City of Legists and Mystics," first published in 1908.[1] We now have a more nuanced understanding of the relationship of law and mysticism as it was expressed by kabbalists and pietists through the centuries and especially in the sixteenth century. We have a better grasp of the complexity of the Lurianic Kabbalah and the difficulty of establishing with certainty the contours of both the oral and the written dimensions of this phenomenon. Our understanding of the historical connection between the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century and the proliferation of kabbalistic activity in the Jewish diaspora of the sixteenth century, especially in the city of Safed, is far more sophisticated today than it was when Schechter wrote his essay. These qualifications notwithstanding, the pathos and intellectual vigor of Schechter's masterful portrayal of sixteenth-century Safed have stood the test of time. In this brief essay, I would like to draw attention to some of the themes that run through his study, themes that still have the capacity to illumine essential features of the mystical piety that crystalized in the upper Galilee at that time.

1. Solomon Schechter, from *Studies in Judaism*, 2nd ser. (1908; Philadelphia, 1924), 202–85. Future references to this essay will appear in the body of the essay.

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ASCETICISM, HYPERNOMIANISM, AND THE SAINTLY LIFE OF THE MYSTIC

"The history of the world, some maintain, is but the record of its great men. This is especially true of the history of Safed in the sixteenth century, which is essentially spiritual in its character, made and developed by men living lives purified by suffering, and hallowed by constant struggle after purification and holiness" (pp. 209–10). Schechter is to be given credit for his attentiveness to the primacy accorded the spiritual comportment of the Safedian kabbalists, moralists, and preachers, and particularly to the ascetic sensibility they cultivated in an effort to achieve the coveted state of virtue and veneration. In a separate but thematically related study, "Saints and Saintliness,"[2] he articulated in more general terms the corrective to a familiar misrepresentation of Judaism: "The statement is often made that Judaism is not an ascetic religion, and, indeed, there are passages in Jewish literature which might be cited in corroboration of this view. But the saint, by reason of his aspirations to superior holiness, will never insist on privileges and concessions . . . And thus we find any number of saints in Jewish history, as notorious for their asceticism with all its extravagances as those of any other religion" (pp. 161–62). The implementation of this ideal is exemplified by the sixteenth-century kabbalists. Schechter offers the following thumbnail account of their milieu:

> A religious atmosphere seems to have pervaded all classes of the Jewish population, so that the impression the Safed of the sixteenth century leaves on us is that of a revival camp in permanence, constituted of penitents gathered from all parts of the world. Life practically meant for them an opportunity for worship, to be only occasionally interrupted by such minor considerations as the providing of a livelihood for their families and the procuring of the necessary taxes for the government. (p. 242)[3]

To buttress the general claim with specific examples, Schechter notes that from his angelic mentor, the magid—the externalization of the internal light of the soul personified as the Shekhinah materialized in the form of

2. In the preface to ibid., x, Schechter informs the reader that these two essays "are closely connected" and that they "are intended to complement each other in various ways."

3. On the ascetic and penitential rituals practiced by sixteenth-century kabbalistic fraternities, see Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, Calif., 2003), 65–74, 167–80.

the Mishnah—Joseph Caro received "chastisement" that "consisted partly in imposing . . . a number of regulations of an ascetic nature" (p. 215). These restrictions extended not only to Caro's physical activities, including food, drink, and sleep, but also to his psychological ability to experience joy in the world. To be single-mindedly dedicated to the divine, to become the seat upon which the Shekhinah is enthroned, one must be exceedingly contrite and chaste, indeed transcending, albeit without abrogating, the obligations required by the law. Schechter illumines the nature of the Safedian ascetic praxis by referring to Solomon Molkho, the Portuguese Marrano and self-proclaimed Messiah, who

> entered upon a course of ascetic practices, fasting for many days without interruption, depriving himself of sleep, and spending his time in prayer and meditation, which was naturally followed by more visions of an apocalyptic nature. The visions were manifested to him, as in the case of Caro, by a Maggid, who communed with him from heaven in dreams. (pp. 223–24)

Ascetic rituals, related especially to fasting, are attested as well in the circle of fellows (*ḥaverim*), apparently presided over by Solomon Alkabets and featuring such prominent kabbalists as Moses Cordovero (pp. 238, 245–46) and R. Abraham Halevi Berukhim (pp. 243–44). In conjunction with the latter, Schechter also noted the activity of a group of "saints and men of action," who may have been members of the association known as the "Tent of Peace" (*sukat shalom*) mentioned by Eleazar Azikri and for whom he composed his moralistic treatise *Sefer ḥaredim* (p. 244). Along these lines, Schechter mentions the "Society of Penitents," which was distinguished for abstemious behavior of a "severe nature," including abstention from food and drink, devotional weeping, and the wearing of sackcloth and ashes. Ḥayim Vital, too, is identified as someone who displayed ascetic tendencies even though he opposed the more fanatical practice of public confession of one's transgressions (p. 245). But perhaps most importantly, Schechter recounts the legend concerning the retreat of Isaac Luria into a life of abstinence and solitude when he was in Egypt. The purpose of the withdrawal—a leitmotif well known in the folklore of charismatic religious personalities—was to provide the compliance necessary to receive the spontaneous overflow of the Holy Spirit and to achieve communion with Elijah in order to penetrate the mysteries of the Zohar (p. 255). We can surely appreciate the historian's objective to separate the fictitious from the factual, but in appraising the significance of this phenomenon, such a distinction is beside the point. If I were to translate

Schechter's methodological assumptions into more contemporary hermeneutical terms, I would say that he astutely understood that when it comes to studying Kabbalah, the chasm between the real and the virtual is bridged by the presumption that the virtual is imagined to be real to the extent that the real is imagined to be virtual. Applied to the contemplative envisioning of the kabbalists—the specularizing of what defies specularization, the ascribing of an image to the imageless—it is impossible to paint a historical portrait entirely stripped of imaginal embellishment.[4]

Here it is apposite to recall Schechter's observation, "Thus the Safed of the sixteenth century, at least, is free from all antinomian tendencies, which are the supposed inevitable consequences of mysticism." The point is epitomized by Caro and Luria: the former is deemed the "leading legist of the time" and the latter the "generally recognized head of the mystical school of Safed" (p. 210), but just as the latter "was amenable to the discipline of the Law," so the former was "not unresponsive to the finer impulses of love and admiration" (p. 279). It is noteworthy that Schechter underscores the link between mysticism and antinomianism, a theme enunciated by various historians of religion of his time and later expanded greatly by Scholem.[5] I concur with Schechter's contention that in the case of the Safedian kabbalists—and this extends to much of the history of Kabbalah, with the major exception of some manifestations of the Sabbatian and Frankist movements—there is no clash between ceremonial observance and mystical performance. Parenthetically, I note that even in the vast majority of those cases, the nullification of the law was judged to be a more profound fulfillment of the law. To capture this dimension of the kabbalistic worldview, I have suggested that we replace the word "antinomianism" with "hypernomianism."[6] Utilizing this locution, I

4. For a similar approach to my own, albeit framed in a different terminological register, see Shaul Magid, "Lurianic Kabbalah and Its Literary Form: Myth, Fiction, History," *Prooftexts* 29 (2009): 362–97. The method of reading Lurianic Kabbalah as a literature that simultaneously reflects and constructs historical narratives, in line with the school of New Historicism, is carried out in more detail in Shaul Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala* (Bloomington, Ind., 2008).

5. For analysis of Scholem's view and citation of relevant sources, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford, 2006), 232–40.

6. Elliot R. Wolfson, "Mystical Rationalization of the Commandments in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia," in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, ed. A. Ivry, A. Arkush, and E. R. Wolfson (Reading, 1998), 345–59; Wolfson, "Beyond Good and Evil: Hypernomianism, Transmorality, and Kabbalistic Ethics," in *Crossing Boundaries: Ethics, Antinomianism and the History of Mysticism*, ed. G. W. Barnard and J. J. Kripal (New York, 2002), 103–56. Greatly

would argue that Schechter fails to ponder the degree to which the demands of asceticism surpass the strict boundaries of the law even as they are not eviscerated. The promoting of self-denial, as opposed to self-indulgence, is illustrative of the hypernomian axiom that the law most fully expresses its potentiality as law at the point when it exceeds the limits of its prescriptions; the law, one might say, is affirmed in the negation of its propensity to negate. That the kabbalists managed to adopt an ascetic lifestyle in complete compliance with the halakhic axiology—the former ostensibly degrading the very body sacralized by the latter—demonstrates that extending beyond the law does not entail annulment but rather maximum realization. The extreme of saintliness, on this score, is the means by which one attains the margin that delimits the center in which one's experiential and interpretive framework is irrevocably circumscribed.

The disagreement with Schechter is not merely a pedantic quarrel between scholars; it points to a fundamental divergence in how to understand the lifeworld of these kabbalists. Despite Schechter's acknowledging the importance of the ascetic dimension of Safedian Kabbalah, this recognition conflicted with his overall understanding of Judaism. He was clearly cognizant of asceticism in the annals of rabbinic piety, accentuated in kabbalistic sources, but it is evident that he felt the need to qualify its place in the landscape of Jewish religiosity. Thus, in one passage, Schechter reminds the reader that "it must not be thought that the Safed community was constantly on the mourning-bench and spent all its vitality in groaning and lamentations" (p. 248). This aside patently indicates that Schechter felt the need to qualify the weight he placed on the kabbalists' living a life of affliction and anguish. The discomfort to which I allude comes to the fore when Schechter notes that the "Safed emphasis on the God-likeness of man" precluded the acceptance of a "dualism of flesh and spirit, a conception un-Jewish in its origin" (pp. 282–83). The God-likeness of the human demanded a "superior holiness," which entailed sanctification of the world rather than its repudiation (p. 281). From the need to underline that kabbalists did not accede to the dualistic opposition of body and soul, we may deduce that even though Schechter problematized the conventional depiction of Judaism as a life-affirming

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revised versions of these studies appear respectively in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, Theurgy* (Los Angeles, 2000), 204–28, and in my *Venturing Beyond*, 186–285. For my most recent discussion, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York, 2009), 55–58 and 161–99.

religion that rejected the ascetic renunciation of the corporal world, he remained beholden to this oversimplification. As he elaborates regarding later kabbalists influenced by the ethos of Safed,

> In spite of the ascetic teachings, with their depreciation of the "turbid body," to be threatened by the terrors of hell and cajoled by the joys of paradise, they were thus able to insist upon the holiness of the flesh (*Kedushath ha-Guph*) and upon its purity as much as upon that of the soul, as well as to accord to the flesh a share in the bliss to come, held out to man as a consequence of a holy and religious life. (p. 283)

For the sake of comparison it is of interest to note that Scholem, too, succumbed to the same bias. A discussion of the sexual symbolism in the zoharic material, especially as it pertains to the chastity of the righteous one, represented by the biblical figure of Joseph, led Scholem to the following conclusion: "But at no time was sexual asceticism accorded the dignity of a religious value, and the mystics make no exception. Too deeply was the first command of the Torah, Be fruitful and multiply, impressed upon their minds." Scholem goes on to contrast Kabbalah and mysticism in other religious cultures on this basis: "Non-Jewish mysticism, which glorified and propagated asceticism, ended sometimes by transplanting eroticism into the relation of man to God. Kabbalism, on the other hand, was tempted to discover the mystery of sex within God himself. For the rest it rejected asceticism and continued to regard marriage not as a concession to the frailty of the flesh but as one of the most sacred mysteries. Every true marriage is a symbolical realization of the union of God and the Shekhinah."[7]

I concur with Schechter that the binary antagonism between soul and body is not a totally advantageous lens through which to view the anthropological teachings promulgated by the rabbis and amplified by the kabbalists, although it must be admitted that some Lurianic texts do seem, on the face of it, to subscribe to a more dualistic vantage point, describing the body as the "dark matter from the side of the shell" and the soul as the "divine portion from above."[8] I am also prepared to accept Scholem's

7. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1954), 235. I have offered a different approach to the relationship between asceticism and eroticism in kabbalistic sources, one that somewhat narrows the gap between Jewish and non-Jewish sources, even though I readily acknowledge that unqualified celibacy is vilified by kabbalists.

8. See the passage from *Sha'ar ruaḥ ha-kodesh* translated and analyzed in Fine, *Physician*, 151–52.

caveat that the religious mandate to procreate precluded the affirmation of an absolute celibacy on the part of kabbalists. However, as I have argued elsewhere, one may elicit from the Kabbalah a more complex interface between the erotic and the ascetic such that abstaining from sex is not necessarily denigrating the sensual nor is engaging in sex necessarily exulting the sensual.[9] Be that as it may, and far more important to the purpose of this examination is that according to Schechter's taxonomy, and to some extent that of Scholem as well, there is a tension at the core of the kabbalistic mindset between viewing the body as something potentially aberrant that needs to be disciplined, on the one hand, and representing it as the image of the divine, on the other hand. The resolution of this tension calls for a different way of looking at materiality. The positive valorization of the body is predicated on the isomorphic correspondence between the limbs of the human body and the sefirotic emanations, which assume the corporeal form of the primordial anthropos in the imagination. The kabbalistic ascription of a body to God is not merely a rhetorical device to enunciate the inherent metaphoricity of theological language; it is rather a mode of discourse that calls into question our naturalistic assumptions about corporeality.

That this way of thinking was not available to Schechter is evident in his comments regarding the Lurianic doctrine of the *partsufim*, which he astutely observed was indebted to the Idrot sections of the Zohar, a point that has been affirmed in more recent scholarship: "The danger of this system, with its bold negations on the one hand, and its hazardous 'anthropology' on the other, is evident enough and needs no further explanation. It should, however, be remarked that no one felt this danger more deeply and warned against it more emphatically than the Cabbalists themselves" (p. 262).[10] Schechter supports his claim by referring to

9. Elliot R. Wolfson, "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath: Becoming Male and the Ascetic Ideal in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. J. Cohen and B. Wheeler (New York, 1997), 151–85; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York, 2005), 296–332. My view accords with the judicious comment of R. J. Zwi Werblowsky in *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic* (Philadelphia, 1977), 134–35: "Kabbalism seems to have been the first ascetic system to develop a mystical metaphysic of the sexual act. . . . The kabbalists . . . were ascetic in the extreme and could justify the sexual act and praise its mystical significance only if and because it was performed without carnal pleasure." One may quibble with the claim that Kabbalah is the first doctrinal system to enunciate the convergence of asceticism and eroticism, but there can be no question that it is an appropriate description.

10. On the central role of the Zohar, and especially the Idrot, in Luria's circle, see *Studies*, p. 267. See also p. 277, where Schechter notes that Luria and his

Simeon ben Yoḥai's exhortation in the preamble to the Idra Rabba (Zohar 3.127b) to the other members of the fraternity not to make a sculptured or molten image and set it up in secret (Deut 27.15) (p. 263).[11] Tellingly, Schechter renders R. Simeon's use of the biblical admonition as an effort to communicate to his colleagues that the anthropomorphic metaphors used to depict the divine should not be taken literally. And yet, Schechter discerned the power of these symbols. If one examines Luria's hymns and other treatises attributed to him, one detects that "the anthropomorphic element is more conspicuous, and the terminology more concrete than in the works of his predecessors, and it is not impossible that it was just this novel feature in his teaching which proved attractive to the more daring spirits" (p. 263). Schechter is right to stress the power of the anthropomorphic dimension of the kabbalistic imaginaire, but he did not have a theoretical paradigm to interpret this mythopoetic way of thinking adequately.

No kabbalist presumed that the depictions of the divine body should be construed literally as affirming that God is a fleshly being subject to generation and corruption. It is also clear that no kabbalist could accept the philosophical insistence that these expressions are merely allegorical, thereby denying the ontic reality of the entity to which the expressions refer. In my scholarship, I have employed the locution *imaginal body*, borrowed from the work of Henry Corbin on Islamic esotericism, in order to convey this sense of embodiment that is not material flesh but which is nevertheless a concrete phenomenon and not merely a figure of speech. The body, when thought in this manner, is not subject to the metaphysical distinction between the real and the imagined; rather, it occupies an intermediate space in which the imaginary is real and the real imaginary, since there is no reality apart from what is imagined to be real.[12]

The imaginal body in kabbalistic tradition is related, more specifically, to the much older belief that the initial enfleshment of Adam was that of

disciples "represented the reincarnation of the supposed heroes of the Zohar, headed by R. Simon ben Yochai and his son R. Eleazar."

11. For an alternate analysis of this passage, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Iconicity of the Text: Reification of the Torah and the Idolatrous Impulse of Zoharic Kabbalah," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 11 (2004): 18–19.

12. I have discussed this theme in many of my writings, but for one of the more concise treatments, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Bifurcating the Androgyne and Engendering Sin: A Zoharic Reading of Gen 1–3," in *Inner Biblical Truths: Esoteric Interpretations of Genesis 1–3*, ed. C. Vander Stichele and S. Scholz (Atlanta, 2014), 84–91.

the glorious or luminous body, which was changed, as a consequence of the sin of eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, into the mortal body made of corruptible skin, identified in some sources as the skin cast off by the serpent. The eschatological future is marked by the shedding of the garments of skin and the donning of the garments of light. For some kabbalists, including those discussed by Schechter, the corporeal body could be transfigured proleptically in the present through ascetic practices into the ethereal or angelic body, which they also viewed as the textual or linguistic body, a conception based on the widely held conviction—attested in earlier streams of Jewish mysticism and magic—that the name of an entity is its essence or literally its body (*guf*). This perspective, which has run its course through the history of Jewish esotericism, presupposes an intrinsic connection between language and being, not simply in the mimetic sense that the former mirrors the latter but rather in the mythopoeic sense that words—both spoken and written—configure the nature of reality by which they are configured.

After decades of study, I have not discovered any kabbalist who would not assent to the view that the material existents of the multiverse, when viewed subphenomenally, are the manifold permutations of the twenty-two Hebrew letters, themselves enfolded in the Tetragrammaton, identified as the mystical essence of the Torah. The ineffable name is thus the linguistic measure of carnality in the divine, human, and cosmic planes. The semiological nature of embodiment is the mystical import of the kabbalistic appropriation of the archaic belief that the human body is a microcosm of the macroanthropos. Insofar as ascetic disavowal facilitated the transubstantiation of the somatic body into the semiotic body—the body that participates in and thus can be conjoined to the name—kabbalists were able to uphold it as ritually legitimate. As we might expect, the homology between body and language looms large in the kabbalistic orientation: just as the ineffable delineates the limit of human language, but the only way to approach that limit is through language—the unsayable is inaccessible except by way of what is spoken, albeit spoken as what remains unsaid—so there is no way beyond the body but through the body. Similarly, the gesture of venturing past the law is itself nothing but a particular turn on the path of the law. To transcend is not to surmount but to twist free from that to which one remains attached. Common to all three topics—language, body, and law—is the wisdom that there is no overcoming except by undergoing.[13]

13. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 232.

MYSTICAL QUIETISM AND THE INTERIORIZATION OF THE MESSIANIC

It is well known that Scholem famously argued that the convergence of mystical and messianic tendencies is a salient feature of the kabbalistic teachings that circulated in the name of Luria. Utilizing this material, Scholem inferred that there is no conflict between the sociopolitical and the spiritual-mystical interpretations of the messianic idea. Rather than deny the literal belief in the coming of the Messiah, Scholem was of the opinion that the Lurianic kabbalists viewed the historical event of the redemption of the Jewish people as the external sign of the internal restoration of the unity of all being within the divine. Scholem draws the inevitable conclusion: "The kabbalist laid far greater emphasis on the spiritual nature of redemption than on its historical and political aspects." After arriving at that conclusion, however, Scholem immediately qualified his position by declaring that the historical and political aspects "are by no means denied or discounted, but they tend more and more to become mere symbols of that mystical and spiritual process. The historical redemption is as it were a natural by-product of its cosmic counterpart, and the kabbalists never conceived the idea that a conflict might arise between the symbol and the reality which it was supposed to express."[14] Furthermore, according to Scholem, the dialectical merging of the national-political and the universal-cosmic holds the key to understanding the latent potency of Lurianic messianism and its volcanic eruption in the Sabbatian movement.[15] But Scholem himself was careful to distinguish between Lurianic Kabbalah and Sabbatianism on this issue. In the case of the former, the spiritualization of the eschatological did not lead to a split between the inner-symbolic and the external-historical, since the messianic expectations were not put to the test of history. By contrast, in the case of the latter, the internalization of the messianic ideal without any apparent application in history did lead to a suppression of the this-worldly proclivity of Jewish messianism, which in turn occasioned the break between symbol and reality.[16]

I am in general agreement with Scholem's conjecture regarding the messianic posture of the Kabbalah disseminated by Luria and his colleagues in the wake of the Spanish expulsion.[17] With respect to the exact

14. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 305.

15. Ibid., 287.

16. Ibid., 306.

17. Ibid., 245–50, 284–86. My discussion here is a highly abbreviated version of my analysis in Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Engenderment of Messianic Politics: Symbolic Significance of Sabbatai Ṣevi's Coronation," in *Toward the Millennium:*

nature of that messianism, however, I take issue with Scholem's assertion that there is a necessary harmony between the symbolic and the historical. In my judgment, Schechter's insight regarding the centrality of asceticism to the life experience of the Safedian kabbalists provides a corrective to Scholem's hypothesis. The augmented prominence bestowed on asceticism as a means to transmute material reality into a more reified state of being suggests that the impact of the expulsion from Spain and Portugal did not take the form of a messianic activism with a nationalistic focus but rather that of a spiritualistic and individualistic nature.[18] To be sure, Schechter's wide-ranging sketch of the Safedian Kabbalah contains some minimal references to messianism. For instance, he does remark that Luria "was looked upon as one of those superhuman beings who, by a special act of Providence, are permitted to visit us mortals for the especial purpose of our salvation" (p. 265).[19] He also mentions the Lurianic teaching that the process of metempsychosis will cease with the messiah's coming (p. 276). In a still broader stroke, he notes that "salvation" was the "absorbing topic" of the community of kabbalists in Safed, and hence the ever-present terror of sin delaying the materialization of that salvation operated as a constant reminder that the exile persisted and "Zion was still in ruins" (p. 247). The eschatological expectation in Safed is typified by the story of Joseph de la Reina, who sought to destroy the force of evil as the "preliminary condition to the advent of the Messiah" (p. 248).

Additionally, there are two references to the Sabbatian pseudomessianism, which serve as a rhetorical counterpoint to edify the strictly nomian character of the messianic interests of the Safedian kabbalists (pp. 281, 285). The prescribed rituals of Sabbath are singled out as the means to "give man a foretaste of the blissful Messianic times when sin and sorrow shall have disappeared from the world" (p. 249).[20] Schechter is correct to emphasize that the kabbalists, obviously developing the nexus between Sabbath and the end of days already found in rabbinic dicta, maintained

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Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco, ed. P. Schäfer and M. Cohen (Leiden, 1998), 203–17.

18. With respect to this claim, my view dovetails with Liebes and Idel. For references, see Wolfson, "Engenderment," 216–17, n. 41, to which should be added Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 154–82, esp. 162–78. It should be noted, however, that neither of them makes the explicit link between the ascetic and the erotic, let alone speaks of an ascetic eroticism or an erotic asceticism, in describing the kabbalistic attitude to sensuality. In this respect, both of them seem to continue in the path of Scholem.

19. See the legend about Luria's birth cited on p. 253.

20. On the importance of Sabbath for Luria, see ibid., 275 and 278.

that Sabbath is a day of joy, both physically and spiritually. What he does not consider, however, is that it is precisely the asceticism required during the week that gives way to the full embrace of the carnal on the Sabbath, since on that day the corporeal is uplifted so that the immaterial is disclosed by the material. The Sabbath, in other words, incarnates the axiom that through the physical the spiritual is perfected. Schechter espouses the diametrically opposite view, arguing that the celebration of Sabbath, together with that of the New Moon and the biblical festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, "must have contributed more or less toward mitigating the evil effects of an exaggerated asceticism" (pp. 249–50). I would tweak Schechter's position by noting that on those holy days the coarse body is transposed into an angelic-like materiality—or, for the kabbalists, the body that is letter, the flesh that is word—a modification that allows the physical to function as a means to attain spiritual enlightenment. It is proper for Schechter to play up the joy experienced in fulfilling the commandments, but he neglects to note that this joy is a refined sensibility that ensues from the elevation of the sensual into a more sublime form of physicality. Corporal indulgence is permissible, nay recommended, on the Sabbath because it is a prolepsis of the eschaton, a day that will be entirely Sabbath, a day in which there will be no more desire for or need of sentient pleasures, a day in which there will be an unmitigated coincidence of the erotic and the ascetic.[21]

Neither Schechter nor any scholar since has provided much compelling evidence that the kabbalists, including Luria and his disciples, understood messianism predominantly in geopolitical terms. Needless to say, these kabbalists did employ the traditional language of a personal messiah and the anticipated return of Jewish exiles to the land of Israel, culminating in the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstitution of the sacrificial cult. Some may have even assumed a messianic posture for themselves. However, the attuned ear will grasp that these expressions have been substantially transformed in the crucible of the theosophic symbolism.[22]

21. Elliot R. Wolfson, "Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and the Ritual of Androgynisation," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6 (1997): 307–10; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 363–71. See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, 56–57: "Penitence, strict observance of the Law, and moral and spiritual perfection, though undoubtedly efficacious in hastening the advent of redemption, were mere preliminaries which 'man should do and live by them'; but the life intended here was the *vita contemplativa* of communion with God (*devekuth*), which in sixteenth-century Safed acquired an almost erotic quality reminiscent in many ways of Sufi piety."

22. See my comments in Wolfson, "Engenderment," 209, n. 13.

If we understand by redemption a radical change in the nature of the mundane, then the displacement from the Iberian Peninsula did not encourage kabbalists in Safed to believe that the redemption was temporally proximate or that it could be achieved proactively by human intervention. The suffering of exile, which was understood principally as a spiritual and not merely a geographical condition, led to a quietistic and rather negative, perhaps even gnostic, assessment of the spatiotemporal world. One is redeemed from rather than in time. The ascetic pietism of the Safedian kabbalists—and I would include in this calculation the midnight vigils known as *tikun ḥatsot*[23]—highlights the fact that their eschatology puts into sharp relief the question of whether history is a viable stage for emancipation of either the nation collectively or the soul individually. Although Schechter did not draw this conclusion explicitly, it is noteworthy that, in his discussion of the kabbalistic circles in sixteenth-century Safed, he put his finger on this very pulse.

Let me conclude by saying that at one juncture in his far-reaching study, in the context of discussing the relationship of Luria and Cordovero, Schechter modestly wrote, "I lay no claim to be initiated in the science of the invisible" (p. 258). Not only is this a most felicitous definition of Kabbalah but I submit that his essay belies his own self-effacing evaluation. His mastery over historical and conceptual issues related to sixteenth-century Safed is exemplary. There are some generalizations with which we might disagree today, but every one proffered by Schechter was grounded in textual specificity, and many of them have continued to shape our understanding of this extraordinary moment and place in Jewish history.

23. Concerning this ritual, see Elliott Horowitz, "Coffee, Coffeehouses, and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 14.1 (1989): 17–46; Shaul Magid, "Conjugal Union, Mourning and Talmud Torah in R. Isaac Luria's *Tikkun Hazot*," *Da'at* 36 (1996): xvii–xlv (English section); Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 308–20.