Jewish Mysticism:
The Invention of an Unbroken Jewish Tradition

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1. Introduction

In 1906, the young Jewish philosopher and Zionist activist, Martin Buber (1878 – 1965) published his book, *The Tales of R. Nachman*. He introduced the tales with a short essay entitled "Jewish Mysticism," in which he stated:

> Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav … is perhaps the last Jewish Mystic. He stands at the end of an unbroken Jewish tradition, whose beginning we do not know. For a long time men sought to deny this tradition; today it can no longer be doubted … we must recognize its unity, its individuality and at the same time the many limitations out of which it developed. Jewish Mysticism may appear quite disproportionate, often confused … yet, it is one of the great manifestations of ecstatic wisdom.[1)]

Buber continues to delineate the history and major characteristics of the "unbroken Jewish Mystical tradition," which he regards as a Jewish national expression of universal ecstatic wisdom. The unbroken Jewish Mystical tradition began, according to Buber, in Talmudic times, and it includes the *Sefer Yezirah*, The *Zohar*, Lurianic Kabbalah and Sabbatianism. Its last and most developed manifestation was the early Hasidic movement.[2)]

Buber was not the first scholar to identify Kabbalah and Hasidism as Jewish Mysticism. Yet, Buber's introduction is one of the most succinct and influential formulations of the notion of "Jewish Mysticism," which was invented and constructed in the late 19th and early 20th century.

This new discursive construction was adopted by other Jewish scholars – first and foremost, by Gershom Scholem (1882 – 1897), who made Jewish mysticism the foundational category of a new academic discipline in Jewish studies, which became highly esteemed and influential.

Although much of Scholem's historiography of Jewish mysticism has been contested since the 1980's, the foundational assumption of the field – that Kabbalah, Hasidism, and some other Jewish texts and movements are the expressions of Jewish mysticism--still governs the field, and regulates the ways these texts and movements are perceived and studied. In this short essay, I would like to

examine the invention of Jewish mysticism and its construction as the foundational category of the academic study of Kabbalah and Hasidism.

Before I begin my genealogical analysis, I would like to clarify two main arguments which underlie my discussion.

First, in contrast to the common assumption that mysticism is a universal religious phenomenon, I regard mysticism in general, and Jewish mysticism in particular, as modern, culturally-dependent, discursive constructions. Mysticism, I claim, is not a universal, trans-historical, inherent religious phenomenon. Rather, it is a modern category that emerged in Western Europe and the Unites States in the nineteenth century, in the context of the various ideological, theological and political interests of that period. This new category was used in order to define, organize, and interpret a wide variety of social practices and cultural products.

The various practices and products commonly described as mystical do not have any common denominator and they do not resemble one another more than any other "non-mystical" social practices and cultural products do. I have not been able to find any common traits or characteristics for things which are included under the label "mysticism," except for the assumption that they were all formed under the impact of an ecstatic encounter between human beings and the divine or transcendent reality.

My second claim is that this assumption reflects a modern, ecumenical theological stance, which was adopted, explicitly or implicitly, by modern scholars who use the term as an analytical category. As we shall see in the following, mysticism was defined, from the late nineteenth century and up to the present, as an ecstatic encounter with the divine or with a metaphysical reality. Scholars who accept this definition, assume that various historical events, cultural products and social structures, which they perceive as "mystical," were formed under the impact of human encounters with the divine, or with a transcendent reality. According to such scholars, mystical experiences, i.e., encounters with the metaphysical reality, have had a considerable effect on cultural production, social behavior, and historical events. The assumption that encounters with a divine or transcendent reality explain social, historical or natural events, is a theological supposition, which is unaccepted in most contemporary academic disciplines.

This short article will examine the context and cultural significance of the adoption of the modern category mysticism and its application to various Jewish texts and movements. Before turning to examine the invention of Jewish mysticism, I would like to discuss, shortly, the genealogy of the term mysticism, which underlies the idea of Jewish mysticism.

2. Mysticism

I will not dwell too long on the origins of the term mysticism and its use in late antiquity and the middle-ages. These have been discussed at length by Louis Bouyer.[3] The origins of the term mysticism is the Greek adjective μυστικός, stemming from the verb μύω, whose meaning is to close, or shut (the eyes or mouth), and hence means something secret. It was applied to secret rites and their participants (οί μυστικοί). In medieval Christian theology the term was applied to Christological hermeneutics, to the secret of the Eucharist and to contemplative knowledge of God.

Significant semantic shifts occurred in the use to the term during the early-modern period and it was gradually disconnected from its specific liturgical, hermeneutical and Christological contexts. In the Enlightenment period, the term was used negatively to denote religious excess and applied primarily to Christian sectarians.[4] According to the third edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (1797), "Mystics" are:

> A kind of religious sect, distinguished by their professing pure, sublime and perfect devotion, with an entire disinterested love of God, free from all selfish considerations … The principals of this sect were adopted by those called Quietists in the seventeenth century, and under different modifications, by the Quakers and Methodists.

It was only during the nineteenth century that mysticism came to be perceived as a universal phenomenon. This new construction of mysticism came to the fore in the eighth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1852-1860). The entry still retains the Enlightenment negative perception of mysticism, but applies it also to non-Christian cultural formations:

> a form of error…which mistakes the operation of a merely human faculty for Divine manifestation … Its main characteristics are constantly the same, whether they find expression in the Bagvat-Gita of the Hindu, or in the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg.

A positive perception of mysticism emerged during the same period, under the influence of Romanticism, Idealist philosophy and Spiritualist and metaphysical movements in Europe and the United States. It regarded mysticism not as a form of error, but rather, as an essential component of religion. Instead of regarding it as a negative, excessive, and pathological, it valorized it as the essence of the religious experience.

The new construction and valorization of mysticism as an encounter between human and the divine was formulated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by several highly influential

scholars and liberal Christian theologians, including William Ralfe Inge (1860-1954), William James (1842-1910), Rufus Jones (1863-1948), Friedrich Von Hügel (1852-1925), and Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941).[5] Notwithstanding the assertion of these scholars that it is difficult to define mysticism, they produced very similar definitions, such as that of the Quaker Philosopher and Theologian Rufus Jones:

> I shall use the word to express the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct an intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence. It is religion in its most acute, intense and living stage.[6]

Jones and other scholars who adopted similar definitions of mysticism regarded it as a liberating, subversive, and vitalizing force within religion, which contributes to reforming and advancing society:

> We cannot lightly pass over the spiritual service of mystics. Far from being the unpractical, dreamy persons they are often conceived to have been… They have let great reforms, championed movements of great moment to humanity and they have saved Christianity from being submerged under scholastic formalism and ecclesiastical systems, which were alien to man's essential nature and need.[7]

This modern theological notion of mysticism became highly influential, and still regulates the way mysticism is perceived today. It was adopted, from the late-nineteenth century by Jewish scholars who applied it to various Jewish texts and movements, primarily, Kabbalah and Hasidism.

3. Jewish Mysticism

Interestingly, much of the nineteenth-century literature on mysticism as a universal phenomenon does not identify Kabbalah as mysticism. Furthermore, some nineteenth-century scholars (including Jewish scholars),[8] argued that Judaism was incompatible with mysticism, and denied the existence of Jewish mysticism. Such a view can be found in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1910-1911):

> For opposite reasons, neither the Greek nor the Jewish mind lent itself readily to mysticism: the Greek, because of its clear and sunny naturalism; the Jewish, because of its rigid monotheism and its turn towards worldly realism and statutory observance. It is only with the exhaustion of Greek and Jewish civilization that mysticism becomes a prominent factor in Western thought.

The negation of this position played a significant role in the modern construction of Jewish mysticism.

Although the term "Jewish mysticism" did not appear before the nineteenth century, it should be noted that the adjective mystical was applied to Kabbalah in several texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Kabbalah was described in this period as a mystical theology, and the *Zohar* as a mystical commentary.[9] The term was used with reference to Kabbalah mostly in its medieval sense of esoteric, Christological hermeneutics and was not used as a basic category for the description of Kabbalah. Yet the fact that the adjective "mystical" was applied to Kabbalah at that time contributed to the later reception of Kabbalah as Jewish mysticism.

The term "Jewish mysticism" appeared for the first time, as far as I know, in the first volume of the magnum opus of the Christian theosopher, Franz Molitor. *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* published in 1827. Although Molitor uses the term several times in his book,[10] he describes Kabbalah firstly and foremostly as a philosophy of history. It should also be noted that Molitor mainly used the term mysticism to indicate esoteric and allegorical meanings of the scriptures and not in the sense of an unmediated experience of the divine.

Later in the nineteenth century, the application of the adjective "mystical" to Kabbalah and the use of the term "Jewish mysticism" became more prevalent in the writings of both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars. Yet, there was still no established notion of a Jewish mystical tradition. Kabbalah was usually perceived as religious Philosophy, as for example in Adolph Franck's influential *La Kabbale ou philosophie religieuse des hebreux* (Paris: L. Hachette., 1843), or in David Heymann Jöel's *Midrash ha-Zohar: Die Religionsphilosophie des Sohar* (Leipzig: Louis Lamm., 1849).

It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that scholars began to apply the new perception of mysticism as a universal, essential component of religion to Kabbalah and Hasidism that the term "Jewish mysticism" became more prevalent. This perception comes to the fore in Adolph Jellinek's *Auswahl Kabbalisticher Mystik*, from 1853 in which he claims: "Mysticism is such an essential stage in the spiritual development of humanity, that it can be found in all nations and all religions. Yet, while Egyptian, Hindu, and Arab mysticism has been studied, Kabbalah has not been researched."[11]

The term "Jewish mysticism" became the major category for the description, interpretation, and research of Kabbalah in the early twentieth century. Scholars such as Erich Bischoff, S. A. Hirsch, Joshua Abelson, and many others use the term extensively in their studies of Kabbalah.[12] The modern assumptions concerning the nature, historical development, and cultural impact of the newly-

imagined Jewish mystical tradition, comes to the fore in Buber's 1906 article, "Jewish Mysticism", mentioned at the beginning of this study.

Gershom Scholem, who recognized Buber as "the first Jewish thinker who saw in mysticism a basic feature and continuously operating tendency of Judaism,"[13] adopted the newly-constructed notion of Jewish mysticism, and established it as the foundational category for academic research on Kabbalah and Hasidism. Scholem accepted the modern definition of mysticism as a direct and unmediated ecstatic experience of the divine and adopted Buber's assumptions regarding the existence of Jewish mysticism as a continuous and significant movement in Judaism. Scholem and his disciples devoted great efforts to the historical-philological study of the texts and movements they perceived to belong to Jewish mysticism. They turned the research of Jewish mysticism into a highly prestigious academic discipline. Scholem`s assumptions concerning the scope, the nature and the historical impact of Jewish mysticism became authoritative and highly influential. Following the research of Scholem and his school, the identification of Kabbalah and Hasidism as Jewish mysticism came to be taken for granted.

Since the 1980's many of Scholem's theories have been contested and new perspectives and research directions have been suggested by Moshe Idel, Yehuda Liebes, Elliot Wolfson and other scholars. These scholars disputed Scholem's assumptions regarding the source of Jewish mysticism and its historical development. They questioned the exclusivity of the historical-philological method prevalent in the research of Kabbalah and suggested adding other research methods, first and foremost, the phenomenological comparative study prevalent in religious studies.

Yet, the new research did not abandon the fundamental category of the field. The understanding of Kabbalah and Hasidism as Jewish mysticism, and the modern theological definition of mysticism, were not contested. They became even more central in scholarship post Scholem. Thus, for instance, Moshe Idel said in an interview that followed the publication of *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*:

> I wanted to emphasize the elements that turn this literature into mysticism. Not to describe when someone lived, when someone died and if he wrote X number of books or Y number of books. These things are important, without a doubt, and they were done quite well up to now, but this does not touch on Kabbalistic literature as mystical literature, rather as historical literature. This makeover is done to this literature as if it were medieval belles-lettres or poetry. I wanted to deal with the characteristic of this literature as mystical literature.[14]

Following Idel, many contemporary scholars emphasize the experiential and ecstatic aspects of the Kabbalah and Hasidism and through phenomenological and comparative studies. From this

viewpoint, the fundamental category of the research field - the identification of the Kabbalah and Hasidism as Jewish mysticism, continues to delineate the research field and determine its research practices.

4. The Historical Contexts and Cultural Significance of the Invention of Jewish Mysticism

As mentioned above, the idea that Judaism was incompatible with mysticism was prevalent at the time. Buber declared explicitly that his aim in writing the *Tales of Rabbi Nachman* was to prove the existence of such a denied tradition. Buber aimed to prove that Judaism includes mystical components, highly valued in fin de siècle neo-Romanticism, and that Jewish mysticism played a vital part in Jewish national history. In a note he attached to a copy of his newly published book, which he sent to his friend, the renowned German publisher and neo-Romantic, Eugen Diederichs (1867 – 1930), Buber wrote:

> I am sending you a book, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, which you may find interesting. Do you perhaps recall that once – a few years ago – we discussed the question of the existence of Jewish mysticism? You didn't want to believe it. With this book on Nachman I have opened up a series of documents that will expose its existence.[15)]

Attempts to demonstrate the existence of a Jewish mystical tradition were made from a Jewish nationalist perspective. Buber and Scholem, as well as other Jewish scholars of their time, supported Zionism and perceived Jewish mysticism as an essential component of Judaism that expressed its national character. Buber identified Jewish mysticism as the hidden reality of the Jewish "folk soul."[16)] The power and nature of Jewish mysticism was related to Jewish national characteristics and to the vicissitudes of Jewish history:

> [T]he strength of Jewish mysticism arose from an original characteristic of the people that produced it [so] the later destiny of this people has also left its imprint on it. The wandering and martyrdom of the Jews have again and again transposed their souls into that vibration of despair out of which, at time, the lightening flash of ecstasy breaks forth.[17)]

Buber adopted the neo-Romantic perception of mysticism as an anarchic and liberating power that subverts petrified religious establishments. Buber juxtaposed Jewish mysticism to halachic Judaism, and described Hasidism, which he considered to be the most developed expression of Jewish mysticism, as a liberating movement that released the people from the yoke of *halacha*:

> The teaching of the Baal-Shem soon found access to the people who were not equal to its idea yet eagerly welcomed its feeling for God. The piety of this people was inclined from of old to mystical immediacy; it received the new message as an exalted expression of itself. The proclamation of joy in God, after a thousand years of a dominance of law that was poor in joy and hostile to it, acted like a liberation. In addition, the people up till then had acknowledged above them an aristocracy of Talmud scholars alienated from life, yet never contested. Now the people, by a single blow, were liberated from this aristocracy and established in their own value.[18)]

Gershom Scholem accepted and further developed the perception of Jewish mysticism as the vital, national force of Judaism that enabled its preservation in the diaspora. Scholem, like Buber, juxtaposed Jewish mysticism to Jewish legalism. He explicitly declared that the project of the academic study of Jewish mysticism was embedded in a Zionist perspective:

> I wanted to enter into the world of *kabbalah* out of my belief in Zionism as a living thing—as the restoration of a people that had degenerated quite a bit. […] I was interested in the question: Does halakhic Judaism have enough potency to survive? Is *halakhah* really possible without a mystical foundation? Does it have a enough vitality of its own to survive for two thousand years without degenerating?[19)]

The adoption of the modern category mysticism and its application to Jewish culture involved Orientalist presuppositions. Mysticism was perceived as an essential feature of the "Mystic East," whose past was valorized and its present disparaged.[20)] Such a stance was expressed by Jewish scholars towards Jewish mysticism, perceived as connected to the "Oriental essence" of Judaism. In the framework of a Jewish orientalist perspective, Kabbalah and Hasidism had been vital and positive powers in the past but had degenerated and lost their significance in the present. This stance comes to the fore in Buber's claim that R. Nachman was the last Jewish mystic, and that contemporary Hasidism declined and degenerated.[21)] Similarly, Scholem perceived Hasidism as the last stage of Jewish mysticism, and claimed that contemporary Kabbalah became "the esoteric wisdom of small groups of men out of touch with life and without any influence on it."[22)]

The invention of Jewish mysticism was involved in the adoption of a modern ecumenical theological stance, which emerged in the framework of 19th century liberal Christian theology. As described above, this stance regarded mysticism as experiences of encounter with the divine or transcendent reality that exist in every human culture. These experiences were perceived as the

essence of religion, which vitalize and animate human history and culture. These theological assumptions, which were accepted by Buber, Scholem and their followers, are embedded in the contemporary definitions of Jewish mysticism, which still regulate the academic study of Kabbalah and Hasidism.[23)]

5. Conclusion

Jewish mysticism, which was invented in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, became a powerful and productive category. It shaped modern understanding of Kabbalah and Hasidism, and enabled the formation of a central and prestigious discipline within Jewish studies. In the framework of this discipline, highly important studies of texts and movements perceived as part of the Jewish mystical tradition were, and are, conducted.

The productive use of the category mysticism as the foundational analytic category in the study of Kabbalah and Hasidism regulated their research according to the ideological and theological assumptions embedded in this category. The classification of various texts and movements under the rubric of "Jewish mysticism" associates them with other cultural formations, both in Jewish culture and other cultures, to which they have no special affinity, apart from scholars' assumption that they are all based on mystical experiences. This assumption encourages the research and interpretation of unrelated historical phenomena as essentially connected, because of their supposedly mystical origin.

On the other hand, the classification of these texts and movements as mystical tends to detach them from other social arenas, which can be significant for their understanding. As I have argued, the use of the category mysticism involves a theological assumption that explains historical and social realities as products of encounters with the Divine, or transcendent reality. Such theological assumptions tend to differentiate between what are perceived as mystical phenomena, and other, historical, social and political structures and to encourage ahistorical study of Kabbalah and Hasidism. As Ron Margolin diagnosed in connection to Moshe Idel's phenomenological approach: "Idel's phenomenological approach emphasizes inquiry into different manifestations of phenomena such as theurgy, *Unio Mystica* or magic, within the entire Kabbalistic-Jewish body of works, on all its periods. In his research, the historical-diachronic aspect is used as a secondary aid, and the focus is on the actual spiritual phenomenon."[24)]

Hence, I believe that research that aspires to understand Kabbalah and Hasidism in their historical and social context, and seeks to avoid mixing theological presuppositions in academic research, should give up using the category mysticism as an analytic category in research. In my opinion,

Jewish mysticism should be considered as a powerful and productive modern discursive invention, rather than an unbroken Jewish tradition that manifests universal ecstatic wisdom.

Notes

1) Martin Buber, *The Tales* of *Rabbi Nachman* (New York: Horizon Press, 1956), 3.
2) Ibid, pp. 3-17.
3) Louis Bouyer, "Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word," in Richard Woods (ed.), *Understanding Mysticism (*New York: Doubleday), pp. 42-55. See also Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and The Mystic East* (London and New York: Routledge 2002), 7-20.
4) Michel de Certeau, "Mysticism," *Diacritics* 22 (1992), pp. 11–25. Eric Leigh Schmidt, "The Making of Modern Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71 (2003), 273–302.
5) William R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (London: University of Oxford press, 1899); James, William James *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London and Bombay: Longmans, Green and Co, 1902); Rufus M. Jones*, Studies in Mystical Religion* (London: MacMillan. 1909); Friedrich Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, London: General Books LLC, 1909); Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Dutton, 1911).
6) Rufus M. Jones*, Studies in Mystical Religion* (London: MacMillan. 1909), XV.
7) Ibid, p. XXX.
8) Such as for instance, Leo Baeck (who later changed his position). See Alexander Altmann, *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1981), 295–298.
9) See for instance the title of Henry More's book, published in 1662: *A Conjectural Essay of Interpreting the Mind of Moses According to a Threefold Cabbalah viz. Literal, Philosophical, Mystical, or Divinely Moral*. The *Zohar* is described as 'mystical and Kabbalistic commentary' (comentarii Mystici & Cabbalistici) in the Latin title page of the Zohar edition published in Sulzbach in 1684 in the circle of the Christian Kabbalist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636-1689). In the early eighteenth century, the Kabbalah was described as 'mystical theology' in the preface of Jacques Basnage, *The History of the Jews from Jesus up to the Present* (London: T. Beaver and B. Lintot, 1708), VII.
10) Joepsh F. Molitor, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Hermann), 44, 135.
11) Adolph Jellinek, *Auswahl Kabbalisticher Mystik* (Leipzig: Colditz.1853), 3-4.
12) Eric Bischoff, *Die Kabbalah: Einfuhrung in die judische Mystick und Geheimwissenschaft* (Leipzig: T. Grieben's Verlag 1903); S.A. Hirsch, "Jewish Mystics: An Appreciation," *JQR* 20, (1907), 50-73; Joshua Abelson, *Jewish Mysticism: an Introduction to the Kabbalah* (New York: Hermin Press1914).
13) Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* (New York: Schocken Books,

1976), 145.

14) Avi Katzman, "Almost a Revolt," *Ha'aretz,* 20.10.1989, p. 23 [Hebrew].
15) Grete Schaeder, (ed.), *Martin Buber: Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten, Band 1: 1897–1918*, (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1972), 253.
16) Martin Buber, *The Tales* of *Rabbi Nachman* (New York: Horizon Press, 1956), 9.
17) Ibid. p. 4.
18) Ibid. p. 15.
19) Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books 1976), 18-19.
20) Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge 1999), 96-108.
21) Martin Buber, *The Tales* of *Rabbi Nachman* (New York: Horizon Press, 1956), 3-17.
22) Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 34.
23) See Boaz Huss, "The Theologies of Kabbalah Research," *Modern Judaism* 34 (2014), 3-26.
24) R. Margolin, "Moshe Idel's Phenomenology and its Sources," Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies, Vol. 6, No. 18 (Winter 2007), 43.