Jewish mysticism

This page lists the main trends and events in Jewish mysticism. Further explanation is given at Kabbalah#History of Jewish mysticism in the context of traditional vs. academic views on the antiquity of Kabbalah.

Academic study of **Jewish mysticism**, especially since Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941), distinguishes between different forms of mysticism across different eras of Jewish history. Of these, Kabbalah, which emerged in 12th-century Europe, is the most well known, but not the only typologic form, or the earliest to emerge. Among previous forms were Merkabah mysticism (c.100 BCE–1000 CE), and Chassidei Ashkenaz (early 1200s CE) around the time of Kabbalistic emergence.

Kabbalah means “received tradition”, a term previously used in other Judaic contexts, but which the Medieval Kabbalists adopted for their own doctrine to express the belief that they were not innovating, but merely revealing the ancient hidden esoteric tradition of the Torah. This issue is crystallised until today by alternative views on the origin of the Zohar, the main text of Kabbalah. Traditional Kabbalists regard it as originating in Tannaic times, redacting the Oral Torah, so do not make a sharp distinction between Kabbalah and early Rabbinic Jewish mysticism. Academic scholars regard it as a synthesis from Medieval times, but assimilating and incorporating into itself earlier forms of Jewish mystical tradition, as well as other philosophical elements.

The theosophical aspect of Kabbalah itself developed through two historical forms: "Medieval/Classic/Zoharic Kabbalah" (c.1175 - 1492 - 1570), and Lurianic Kabbalah (1569 CE - today) which assimilated Medieval Kabbalah into its wider system and became the basis for modern Jewish Kabbalah. After Luria, two new mystical forms popularised Kabbalah in Judaism: antinomian-heretical Sabbatean movements (1666 - 1700s CE), and Hasidic Judaism (1734 CE - today). In contemporary Judaism, the only main forms of Jewish mysticism followed are esoteric Lurianic Kabbalah and its later commentaries, the variety of schools in Hasidic Judaism, and Neo-Hasidism (incorporating Neo-Kabbalah) in non-Orthodox Jewish denominations.

Two non-Jewish syncretic traditions also popularised Judaic Kabbalah through its incorporation as part of general Western esoteric culture from the Renaissance onwards: theological Christian Cabala (c.1400s - 1700s) which adapted Judaic Kabbalistic doctrine to Christian belief, and its diverging occultist offshoot Hermetic Qabalah (c.1400s - today) which became a main element in esoteric and magical societies and teachings. As separate traditions of development outside Judaism, drawing from, syncretically adapting, and different in nature and aims from Judaic mysticism, they are not listed on this page.

1 Three aims in Jewish mysticism

The Kabbalistic form of Jewish mysticism itself divides into three general streams: the Theosophical/Speculative Kabbalah (seeking to understand and describe the divine realm), the Meditative/Ecstatic Kabbalah (seeking to achieve a mystical union with God), and the Practical/Magical Kabbalah (seeking to theurgically alter the divine realms and the World). These three different, but inter-relating, methods or aims of mystical involvement are also found throughout the other pre-Kabbalistic and post-Kabbalistic stages in Jewish mystical development, as three general typologies. As in Kabbalah, the same text can contain aspects of all three approaches, though the three streams often distill into three separate literatures under the influence of particular exponents or eras.

Within Kabbalah, the theosophical tradition is distinguished from many forms of mysticism in other religions by its doctrinal form as a mystical “philosophy” of Gnosis esoteric knowledge. Instead, the tradition of Meditative Kabbalah has similarity of aim, if not form, with usual traditions of general mysticism; to unite the individual intuitively with God. The tradition of theurgic Practical Kabbalah in Judaism, censored and restricted by mainstream Jewish Kabbalists, has similarities with non-Jewish Hermetic Qabalah magical Western Esotericism. However, as understood by Jewish Kabbalists, it is censored and forgotten in contemporary times because without the requisite purity and holy motive, it would degenerate into impure and forbidden magic. Consequently, it has formed a minor tradition in Jewish mystical history.

2 Historical forms of Jewish mysticism timeline

For a fuller list of Kabbalistic mystics and texts, see List of Jewish Kabbalists. This timeline shows general

developments:

3 See also

- Jewish mystical exegesis
- Kabbalah: Primary texts
- List of Jewish Kabbalists
- List of Jewish mysticism scholars

4 Notes

[1] Structure of the table based on an expanded version of the table in *Kabbalistic Metaphors: Jewish Mystical Themes in Ancient and Modern Thought*, Sanford L. Drob, Jason Aronson, 2000; "The Historical Context" p.2-4

[2] There is academic debate whether Prophetic Judaism is phenomenologically a mysticism. While the prophets differed from many (not Hasidic) Jewish mystics in their social role, there are mystical passages in the prophetic books; eg. Ezekiel 1 became the basis of Merkabah mysticism. The Talmud says that there were hundreds of thousands of prophets among Israel: twice as many as the 600,000 Israelites who left Egypt; but most conveyed messages solely for their own generation, so were not reported in scripture (Judaism 101-Prophets and Prophecy). Scripture identifies only 55 prophets of Israel. In *Meditation and the Bible*, Aryeh Kaplan reconstructs meditative-mystical methods of the Jewish prophetic schools.

[3] There is academic debate about how the mystical references in early exoteric Rabbinic literature relate to, or the degree it can be identified with, the mysticism and methods of subsequent esoteric Merkabah-Hekhalot texts.

[4] *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, Menachem Kellner, Littman Library: describes Judah Halevi as "Proto-Kabbalistic" in his conception of prophecy and Jewish chosenness in the Kuzari

[5] While Menachem Kellner reads Maimonides as anti-"Proto-Kabbalah" (*Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, Littman Library), David R. Blumenthal (*Philosophic Mysticism* and anthologies) reads Maimonides as a rationalist mystic: "The thesis of the book is that medieval philosophers had a type of religious mysticism that was rooted in, yet grew out of, their rationalist thinking. The religious experience of "philosophic mysticism" was the result of this intellectualist and post-intellectualist effort." ()

[6] The shemitot and the age of the universe, 3 part video class from inner.org

[7] Traditionalist historiography *Meditation and Kabbalah*, Aryeh Kaplan, Samuel Weiser publishers; overview of the Meditative schools in Kabbalah. Some medieval Meditative Kabbalists also followed the Theosophical Kabbalah, though not its greatest exponent Abulafia in his esoteric system. In turn, the 1500s Safed culmination of theosophy by Cordovero, Luria and Vital dominated and subsumed the previous divergent Kabbalistic streams into their meditative methods, drawing from the earlier schools. After Luria, Meditative Kabbalah followed his new system of Yichudim. In *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Yale University Press 1988, chapter 5 Mystical Techniques, Moshe Idel reinstates the meditative and experiential dimensions of Kabbalah as an inherent companion to the theosophical in academic historiography. Kabbalists often attributed their theosophical doctrines to new meditative revelations.

[8] *Torah Lishmah-Torah for Torah's Sake*, Norman Lamm, Ktav 1989; summarised in *Faith and Doubt*, Norman Lamm, chapter "Monism for Moderns". Identifies Chaim of Volozhin as the main kabbalistic-theological theorist of Mitnagdism, and Schneur Zalman of Liadi as the main theorist of Hasidism, based on interpretation of Lurianic Tzimtzum. For Chaim Volozhin, Divine immanence is monistic (the acosmic way God looks at the world, reserved for man only in elite kabbalistic prayer) and Divine transcendence is pluralistic (man relates to God through pluralistic Jewish law), leading to Mitnagdic transcendent Theism and popular ideological Talmudic study focus. For Shneur Zalman, Immanence is pluralistic (man relates to mystical Divine immanence in pluralist Nature) and Transcendence is monistic (Habad Hasidic meditation on acosmic nullification of world from God's perspective), leading to Hasidic Panentheism and popular mysticism Deveikut fervour amidst materiality

[9] *Reasoning After Revelation: Dialogues in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy*, Steven Kepnes - Peter Ochs - Robert Gibbs, Westview Press 2000. "Postmodern Jewish thinkers understand their Jewishness differently, but they all share a fidelity to what they call the Torah and to communal practices of reading and social action that have their bases in rabbinic interpretations of biblical narrative, law, and belief. Thus, postmodern Jewish thinking is thinking about God, Jews, and the world—with the texts of the Torah—in the company of fellow seekers and believers. It utilizes the tools of philosophy, but without their modern premises." Commentaries in later chapters describe the contribution of Kabbalistic mythological thinking to this project.

[10] newkabbalah.com

5 References

- Heschel, Abraham Joshua *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, edited and translated by Gordon Tucker, Bloomsbury Academic 2006
- Jacobs, Louis *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, Schocken
- Kaplan, Aryeh *Meditation and the Bible*, Red Wheel/Weiser 1978

- Scholem, Gershom *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken, first pub.1941

6 External links

- Don Karr's Bibliographic Surveys of contemporary academic scholarship on all periods of Jewish mysticism
- Abraham Joshua Heschel's view of Rabbinic Judaism as aggadah and mystical experience

7 Text and image sources, contributors, and licenses

7.1 Text

- **Jewish mysticism** *Source:* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish%20mysticism?oldid=649440270 *Contributors:* IZAK, AnonMoos, Vegaswikian, RussBot, JL-Bot, Editor2020, April8, Redirect fixer, QaBobAllah, Snotbot, H. 217.83, Monozigote, ChrisGualtieri, Khazar2, DavidLeighEllis, YiFeiBot and Anonymous: 3

7.2 Images

- **File:4Q201.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2c/4Q201.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/scrolls/scr3.html *Original artist:* Unknown
- **File:Abraham_abulafia.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/34/Abraham_abulafia.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* The Vatican Library, Vat. ebr. 597 leaf 113 recto. *Original artist:* Unknown artist; the author of the book is Abulafia.
- **File:Albero_della_Vita_di_Davide_Tonato.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/75/Albero_della_Vita_di_Davide_Tonato.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* Rodrigotebani
- **File:Besht.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/Besht.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* JCR-UK *Original artist:* John Singleton Copley
- **File:Cairo_Genizah_Fragment.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/56/Cairo_Genizah_Fragment.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* ? *Original artist:* ?
- **File:Commons-logo.svg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/4/4a/Commons-logo.svg *License:* ? *Contributors:* ? *Original artist:* ?
- **File:Everyday_life,_Babylon.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/18/Everyday_life%2C_Babylon.jpg *License:* CC BY-SA 3.0 *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* Sodabottle
- **File:Ezekial'{}s-Tomb-at-Kifel.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7d/Ezekial%27s-Tomb-at-Kifel.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* This image is available from the United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division under the digital ID matpc.13265.
This tag does not indicate the copyright status of the attached work. A normal copyright tag is still required. See Commons:Licensing for more information.
Original artist: American Colony (Jerusalem). Photo Dept., photographer / Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection.
- **File:Frank-ruehl.png** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/40/Frank-ruehl.png *License:* CC-BY-SA-3.0 *Contributors:* Originally from he.wikipedia; description page is/was here. *Original artist:* Original uploader was Iorsh at he.wikipedia
- **File:GermanJews1.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ad/GermanJews1.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Originally from en.wikipedia; description page is/was here. *Original artist:* ?
- **File:Girona_-_Museu_d'Història_dels_Jueus_-_20110123_(2).jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b9/Girona_-_Museu_d%27Hist%C3%B2ria_dels_Jueus_-_20110123_%282%29.jpg *License:* CC BY-SA 3.0 *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* Olybrius
- **File:GraveOfIsaacLuria.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/95/GraveOfIsaacLuria.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Photo by Jonathan Stein *Original artist:* Jonathan Stein
- **File:Image-Diaspora_synagogues_in_Antiquity.png** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/99/Image-Diaspora_synagogues_in_Antiquity.png *License:* CC BY-SA 3.0 *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* Marsyas
- **File:Isroel_Hopsztajn.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/68/Isroel_Hopsztajn.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Radomir 5 (11) 87 Kwartalinik Turystyczno-Krajoznawczy Zarządu Wojewódzkiego PTTK-Radom *Original artist:* NN
- **File:Judah_Halevi.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/39/Judah_Halevi.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* KeepOptions based on image File:ריהל ראלי.jpg by he:user:Raananms
- **File:Knesset_Menorah_Jochanan_ben_Sakkai.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Knesset_Menorah_Jochanan_ben_Sakkai.jpg *License:* CC BY-SA 3.0 *Contributors:* This file was derived from: Knesset Menorah P5200011.JPG**:**
Original artist: Knesset_Menorah_P5200011.JPG: Deror avi
- **File:Kookbooks2.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/43/Kookbooks2.jpg *License:* GFDL *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* Atzmonit
- **File:Loew-rabin-tombstone.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d8/Loew-rabin-tombstone.jpg *License:* GFDL *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* MKPiekarska
- **File:Lublinyeshiva.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e1/Lublinyeshiva.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* ? *Original artist:* ?
- **File:Ohel_Baal_Shem_Tov.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/19/Ohel_Baal_Shem_Tov.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* Eliyahu (Eli)
- **File:PikiWiki_Israel_3982_nevoraya_synagogue.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2b/PikiWiki_Israel_3982_nevoraya_synagogue.jpg *License:* CC BY 2.5 *Contributors:* Avishai Teicher via the PikiWiki - Israel free image collection project *Original artist:* אבישי טייכר

- **File:Safed1.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ac/Safed1.jpg *License:* CC-BY-SA-3.0 *Contributors:* ? *Original artist:* ?
- **File:Scholem_collection_room.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fc/Scholem_collection_room.jpg *License:* CC0 *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* Haimlevy
- **File:Sefer_raziel_segulot.png** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2d/Sefer_raziel_segulot.png *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Transferred from en.wikipedia; transferred to Commons by User:Doug using CommonsHelper. *Original artist:* Original uploader was Mobius1ski at en.wikipedia
- **File:Shabbatai2.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/94/Shabbatai2.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Transferred from en.wikipedia; transferred to Commons by User:Storkk using CommonsHelper. *Original artist:* Original uploader was Briangotts at en.wikipedia Later version(s) were uploaded by Storkk at en.wikipedia.
- **File:Shivchei_besht.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cf/Shivchei_besht.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* National Library of Israel *Original artist:* Yisrael Yafe
- **File:Tree_of_life_bahir_Hebrew.svg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/91/Tree_of_life_bahir_Hebrew.svg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Vector equivalent of File:Tree of life bahir hebrew.png based on File:Kabbalistic Tree of Life (Sephiroth).svg *Original artist:* User:AnonMoos
- **File:Tsiyoun_Maran_HaRaShaSh_.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/2/2a/Tsiyoun_Maran_HaRaShaSh_.jpg *License:* CC-BY-3.0 *Contributors:* ? *Original artist:* ?
- **File:Vilna_Gaon,_Winograd_picture.jpg** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/36/Vilna_Gaon%2C_Winograd_picture.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* Winograd
- **File:Zohar.png** *Source:* http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/21/Zohar.png *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* ? *Original artist:* ?

7.3 Content license

- Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0