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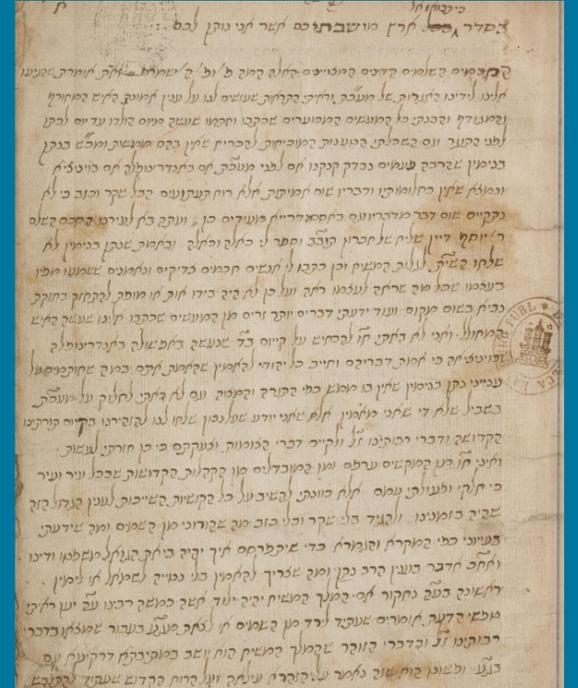
Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies
JEWISH SCEPTICISM

Workshop

Questioning Authority

Kabbalah between Dialectical Disputes, Religious Dissent, and Proto-Academic Scholarship in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

18–19 June 2024



Picture: Hamburg, The Hamburg State and University Library Carl von Ossietzky, Cod. hebr. 280a, 1r

In his autobiography, *Ani ha-Mekhunneh*, the erstwhile converso and later Sabbatian Kabbalist Avraham Miguel Cardozo (1626–1706) records the terms of a Jewish-Christian dispute on the nature of the *Shekhinah*. He relates that his beliefs were shattered to the core when a certain monk challenged the rabbis of Venice by asking whether the *Shekhinah* was eternal or created. Their inability to answer this question engulfed the young Cardozo in serious doubts: he became aware that behind the dilemma, which questioned the very notion of divine unity, lay the problem of the human ability to know God. From its emergence in the late Middle Ages and throughout the early modern period, kabbalistic literature was harnessed for controversy not only between Judaism and Christianity, but also within Judaism itself. Moreover, kabbalistic literature was often itself a matter of dispute, with its opponents frequently doubting the primordial antiquity of its texts and hence questioning their authority. As exemplified by the heterodox sceptic Cardozo, who was torn between kabbalistic Judaism, Sabbatian messianism, and Christianity, this workshop explores the role of controversies and religious dissent in the history of Kabbalah, both within Judaism and beyond.

Convenors

- Niels Eggerz (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main)
- Margherita Mantovani (Alma Mater - Università di Bologna)

Participants

- Emma Abate (Alma Mater - Università di Bologna)
- Saverio Campanini (Alma Mater - Università di Bologna)
- Matt Goldish (Ohio State University)
- Moshe Idel (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)
- Efrat Lederfein-Gilboa (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev)
- Agata Paluch (Freie Universität Berlin)
- Leore Sachs-Shmueli (Bar Ilan University)
- Tzahi Weiss (The Open University)

Venue

Maimonides Centre for
Advanced Studies

Please contact MCAS for registration
and further information.

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Tuesday, 18 June 2024

Welcoming Remarks

10:20 *Giuseppe Veltri, Universität Hamburg*

Panel I

Chair Giuseppe Veltri, Universität Hamburg

10:30 **Elias Levita's Position towards Kabbalah: Sceptical or Apologetic?**
Emma Abate, Alma Mater – Università di Bologna

11:00 *COFFEE BREAK*

Panel II

Chair Ilaria Briata, Universität Hamburg

12:00 **Sceptical Elements in the Controversy between Josef b. Asher and an Anonymous Critic of Asher Lemlein**
Margherita Mantovani, Alma Mater – Università di Bologna

12:30 **Doubt and Fear: Editing Practical Kabbalah in Early Modern Ashkenaz**
Agata Paluch, Freie Universität Berlin (online)

13:00 *LUNCH BREAK*

Panel III

Chair Patrick Benjamin Koch, Universität Hamburg

- 14:15 **Kabbalah Criticism and the Renaissance Critiques of *Prisca Sapientia* Literatures**
Matt Goldish, Ohio State University (online)
- 14:45 **Counter *Tikkunim*: Seventy Christian Interpretations of the Word *Bereshit***
Niels Páll Eggerz, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main
- 15:15 **COFFEE BREAK**

Panel IV

Chair Margherita Mantovani, Alma Mater – University of Bologna

- 15:30 **Marin Mersenne's *Quaestiones celeberrimae* (1623): Kabbalah and Scepticism in 17th Century France**
Saverio Campanini, Alma Mater – Università di Bologna
- 16:00 **Continuity or Resistance? Sabbatian Zohar Commentaries and Lurianic Teachings**
Efrat Lederfein-Gilboa, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (online)
- 19:30 **DINNER**

Wednesday, 19 June 2024

Panel V

Chair *Niels Páll Eggerz, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main*

- 10:30 **The Emergence of the Sefirotic Literature in the Early 13th Century and the Popularization of Philosophical Ideas**
Tzahi Weiss, The Open University (online)
- 11:00 **Are Emotions Enough for Effective Repentance? The (Ambivalent) Return of Penitential Practices in the Hasidic *Musar* Literature in the 19th-20th Centuries**
Leore Sachs-Shmueli, Bar Ilan University / MCAS Fellow (online)
- 11:30 **The Polemic between Abraham Abulafia and R. Shlomo ibn Adret: New Perspectives**
Moshe Idel, Hebrew University of Jerusalem (online)

12:00-13:00 Concluding Remarks

13:00 *LUNCH*

Abstracts

Elias Levita's Position towards Kabbalah: Sceptical or Apologetic?

Emma Abate

In his apologetic introduction to his *Massoret ha-Massoret*, published in Venice in 1538, Elias Levita justifies his cultural exchanges with Christians in front of an imaginary Rabbinic court. In Levita's words, "whether addressed to Christians or to Jews," his teachings "were simply related to the grammar of the sacred language and to the explanation of its rules." Esoteric doctrines like the speculation on Genesis, Ezekiel's vision, and *Sefer Yetzirah* "were only to be disclosed to the pious, to men of wisdom and intelligence who are of the children of Israel." Levita was attempting to convince his co-religionists that his teachings only dealt with grammar, lexicography, and *masorah*. Indeed, turning to his literary production, he mainly published works on grammar and linguistic topics: *Sefer ha-Harkhavah* (*Book of Compounding*) (on foreign and complicated Hebrew words, 1517), *Bahur* (a grammar, 1518), *Pirque Eliyahu* (articles on selected grammatical subjects, 1519), the biblical concordance *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*, and the Aramaic and Hebrew lexicons *Meturgeman* (*Translator*) and *Tishbi*. And yet, here and there in these works, allusions to Kabbalah and kabbalistic beliefs are found. For instance, a set of entries in Levita's *Tishbi* make the first known reference to the mystical tradition in a Hebrew lexicon. There are lemmas dedicated to mystical notions such as *gilgul* (reincarnation), Kabbalah, and *Pardes*, or to demons—Ashmedai, Lilith, and Samael—and angels—Metatron and Raziel. However, in presenting such matters, Levita is keen to stress his ignorance, scepticism, and lack of interest in kabbalistic and mystical doctrines.

What can we say about the copies of mystical and kabbalistic texts Levita produced for his patron Egidio da Viterbo? Should his signed copies of *Sod Maaseh Bereshit* (*Secret of the Work of Creation*), *Sod Maaseh Merkavah* (*Secret of the Work of the Chariot*), *Sefer ha-Shem* (*Book of the Name*), *Perush Sefer Yetzirah* (*Commentary on the Book of Formation*), and *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh* (*Wisdom of the Soul*) not be considered as a way of disclosing esoteric doctrines and secrets to the Christians? In my presentation, I will attempt to provide an assessment of Levita's positions towards Kabbalah and its study by both Jews and non-Jews by delving into the introductions, personal comments, and notes to be found in the manuscripts he copied and in the printed editions of his works.

Sceptical Elements in the Controversy between Josef b. Asher and an Anonymous Critic of Asher Lemlein

Margherita Mantovani

A copy of a letter now held at the Royal Library of the Monastery of San Lorenzo (El Escorial) provides significant details for reconstructing the early developments of the prophetic-messianic movement of Asher Lemlein of Reutlingen. This is particularly valid regarding the territories of the Venetian Republic in the first years of the sixteenth century. The authorship of the letter can be attributed to a direct follower of Lemlein in Northern Italy: Josef b. Asher. As scholars have noted, in the epistle, the author seeks to reinforce Lemlein's prophetic authority and to defend him from the accusations of illicit use of the divine names advanced by an anonymous critic.

After a palaeographical and codicological analysis of the entire codex, this paper will focus on the text of this epistle. The aim is to analyse the sceptical component of the controversy, which is reflected in the text and which reveals—on a more general level—the historical tensions within the local Jewish community in matters concerning philosophy and Kabbalah. This task requires the analysis of the rhetorical strategies employed by both the anonymous critic and Lemlein's defender and also a discussion of the philosophical sources mentioned in the text.

Doubt and Fear: Editing Practical Kabbalah in Early Modern Ashkenaz

Agata Paluch

According to Gershom Scholem, the pioneering scholar of Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah was a phenomenon that was chiefly related to the inner structure and processes taking place within the godhead. In this, it was distinct from the chronologically earlier mystical and magical traditions that were concerned with subduing supernatural powers and harnessing them in order to effect change in the physical world. Although Scholem acknowledged the existence of the practical side of Kabbalah extending beyond theurgy or meditative contemplation of the godhead, he hesitated to include “practical Kabbalah” (*kabbalah ma'asit*) within the same spectrum of mystical preoccupations of Kabbalists as theosophy or “speculative Kabbalah” (*kabbalah 'iyunit*). In doing so, Scholem (and scholarship on Kabbalah after him) emulated the inner tension ostensibly latent in the distinction between speculative (or theoretical) and practical aspects reflected in kabbalistic textual traditions. While many recent studies have re-evaluated Scholem's perspective and explored the magical bedrocks of various kabbalistic ideas and practices, less attention has been paid to the ways in which practical kabbalistic texts were transmitted by kabbalistic editors and compilers of these traditions.

In my talk, I will examine a series of manuscript marginalia found in several anonymous copies of practical kabbalistic compilations made in seventeenth-century Eastern and Central Europe. Guided less by a sceptical attitude towards the legitimacy or efficacy of practical kabbalistic performances, but rather by diligence and fidelity in transmitting textual matter

related to the veracity of divine names that underpins *kabbalah ma'asit*, these editorial apparatuses reveal a prevalent proto-philological attitude of doubt among the learned Ashkenazi copyists. This attitude was not aimed at the practical application of divine names writ large, but towards the editorial practices that ostensibly tainted the revelation with layers of falsification and error. I will argue that the extensive marginalia extant in the Ashkenazi manuscripts of practical kabbalistic content shed light on their editors' and copyists' careful consideration of the textual and rhetorical aspects of kabbalistic knowledge that aimed to position practical Kabbalah within the revered tradition of divine names with the support of philological evidence.

Kabbalah Criticism and the Renaissance Critiques of *Prisca Sapientia* Literatures

Matt Goldish

The Christian discovery of Kabbalah in the Renaissance placed it among the literatures of the “ancient wisdom” ransacked by humanists in search of truths known to the wise men of ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Persia. During the seventeenth century, however, some of these literatures were revealed to be pseudepigraphic forgeries from later centuries. This was the fate of the vaunted *Corpus Hermeticum*. The Zohar, too, was revealed to be a much later work than scholars like Pico had believed, but this revelation was made by Jewish authors. This paper will briefly discuss the fact that these rabbis did not use the same philological and historical tools that were used to unmask forgeries like the *Hermetica* or the *Donation of Constantine* in their critiques of the Zohar. While learned Jews were involved in the earlier stage of humanism, with its deep interest in ancient literatures and ideas, they were less involved in this other humanist venture of the philological and historical critique of texts.

Counter *Tikkunim*: Seventy Christian Interpretations of the Word *Bereshit*

Niels Páll Eggerz

Converts are notoriously sceptical regarding their former religion and often naively enthusiastic about their newly adopted one. Accordingly, the seventeenth-century Christian proselyte Claudio May, formerly the Innsbruck court merchant Shemaiah Horowitz, took a sceptical view of his erstwhile kabbalistic studies and writings, which he in turn sought to rectify by composing novel esoteric treatises expounding his newly found belief in Jesus Christ and the Trinity. One of these compositions is a Hebrew treatise entitled *Sod ha-Sodot* (*Mystery of Mysteries*), which is structurally modelled on the *Tikkune ha-Zohar* (*Restorations of the Zohar*) and thus, like the latter, presents seventy interpretations of the first word of the book of Genesis that are nevertheless fundamentally Christian in nature.

Drawing on comprehensive albeit hitherto almost entirely unstudied archival material, this paper sketches the life and works of Claudio May, whose surviving works include both Jewish and Christian exegetical texts. At its centre stands May's *Sod ha-Sodot* and the strategies its author employed to sceptically challenge the Jewish tradition and undermine the authority of one of its foremost works.

Marin Mersenne's *Quaestiones celeberrimae* (1623): Kabbalah and Scepticism in 17th-Century France

Saverio Campanini

Marin Mersenne (1588–1648) was not only a celebrated promoter of the *respublica litteraria* of seventeenth-century France, a friend of Descartes and a famous mathematician and theoretician of music: he was also a theologian, and in this capacity, he passionately battled Platonists, deists, and sceptics of many denominations. The paradox in the case of his commentary on the *Book of Creation* is that after having recurred to sceptical arguments against Kabbalah, especially in a polemical excursus aimed at Francesco Zorri's *In scripturam sacram problemata*, which appeared almost a century before (1536), but had been “dangerously” reprinted in 1622, he went on in his campaign against “Sceptics and Pyrrhonians” in a tract published in 1625 (*La vérité des sciences*). I will attempt to disentangle this blatant (or apparent?) contradiction by examining the role of Kabbalah in the contemporary debate about scepticism.

Continuity or Resistance? Sabbatian Zohar Commentaries and Lurianic Teachings

Efrat Lederfein-Gilboa

In the 1680s, followers of Nathan of Gaza migrated to Modena and Reggio, bringing novel teachings acquired in Thessaloniki, ostensibly from Nathan and Shabbetai Zvi. These teachings took the form of Zohar commentaries, which varied in length. One notable feature of these commentaries is their preference for zoharic terminology over the Lurianic lexicon, a puzzling decision considering Nathan of Gaza's historical background and his affiliation with the Lurianic circle in the Land of Israel.

The surprise intensifies upon discovering expressions of reservation towards Lurianic teachings within Modena and Reggio, which are distinctly Lurianic enclaves that were profoundly influenced by Moshe Zacuto. This presentation aims to prompt contemplation among the audience regarding the extent to which the shift in terminology can be seen as an act of resistance against the authority ascribed to Luria, who is considered the paramount commentator on the Zohar. It is important to consider whether it is appropriate to speak of resistance to Luria when diverse Lurianic school concepts were integrated into the worldview

of Sabbatian Kabbalists. Additionally, what can we learn about Italian Sabbatians by examining their views on authority and their scepticism towards the Ari's teachings?

The Emergence of Sefirotic Literature in the Early Thirteenth Century and the Popularisation of Philosophical Ideas

Tzahi Weiss

In this presentation, I will address anew the “problem” of the so-called beginning of Kabbalah. Based on my forthcoming book on the subject, I will demonstrate the complicated attitude of the early Sefirotic writers regarding two Maimonidean ideas: the problem of personal providence ensuing from the transcendent image of God and the prohibition against the worship of angels. As I will argue, one of the main reasons for the development of the divine Sefirotic structure was these Maimonidean notions and the need to present a God who is transcendent while still overseeing individual humans and maintaining a unified structure.

Are Emotions Enough for Effective Repentance? The (Ambivalent) Return of Penitential Practices in the Hasidic *Musar* Literature in the Nineteenth to Twentieth Centuries

Leore Sachs-Shmueli

Penitential practices, aiming at atonement and removing the guilt and stain of sin, originated in German pietistic circles during the Middle Ages. In thirteenth-century Castile, these practices were adapted to address theurgical damage and personal spiritual concerns of the soul. Subsequently, Lurianic Kabbalists and Sabbatean circles further developed these practices during the early modern period. However, by the eighteenth century, Hasidic teachers, such as Shneur Zalman of Liadi, were questioning their effectiveness and their relevance for contemporary practitioners. They advocated a shift towards emphasising emotional procedures of repentance. Solomon Maimon characterised this “new” Hasidism as a departure from the “old” Hasidism and its engagement with ascetic penitentials. Recent scholarship challenges this portrayal, problematising the notion of Hasidism as a rejection of ascetic penitential practices due to the perceived dangers of sadness and depression. This paper explores the ambivalent rhetoric and appropriation of various penitential practices, examining the roles of emotions and the body in the discourse of *teshuvah* in the modern period. The analysis focuses on three *musar* works: two from the nineteenth century, “Yesod Ha-Avodah” by Avraham of Slonim and “Pokeach Ivrim” by Dovber Shneerson, and one from the twentieth century, “Taharat Ha-Qodesh” by Aharale Roth.

The Polemic between Abraham Abulafia and R. Shlomo ibn Adret: New Perspectives

Moshe Idel

This lecture will explore some additional details of this sharp polemic and expand on its implications for the history of Kabbalah in Spain and Italy.