

The Claim to "Hidden Truths" as the Reason for the Rejection of Kabbalah by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*

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Abstract

The essay analyses several reasons for the well-known rejection of the theological "worth" of kabbalah by two of the leading scholars of the 19th century German-Jewish movement of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: Heinrich Graetz and Abraham Geiger. Kabbalistic esotericism, resting on fraudulent claims to authorship and masking the irrationality of its doctrines, was among the major objections of these historians. Dealing in mysticism was understood to ruin the morality of human relations by leading to a secretive, elitist individualism instead of creating a healthy human society — kabbalah focused on the capturing of imaginary worlds instead of improving the existing world. Particularly disturbing was that kabbalah often blurred the boundary between the bodily and the spiritual, specifically by formulating a new, hallowed dialectic relation between human limbs and the human intellect that was purportedly superior to common morality. Eventually, both scholars agreed that kabbalah could therefore not promote the modern Judaism that nineteenth-century German Jews wished to see as a viable, ethical alternative to traditional religion, a Judaism that is capable of survival in the modern age.

We may define science as the analysis and explanation of the laws of nature, as well as the rules that govern human society and history, with results that lay open this research's methodology and allow the scientific outcome to be reproduced. Given this definition, science in essence becomes the ultimate disclosure of all secrets. Esotericism anchored in revelation or a purported authoritative tradition that can be known only by the initiate thus stands in contradiction to scientific research. The kabbalist, who speaks of "hidden truths" which he believes to be universally true but not in need of or even open to rational proof, is not only being irrational from a scientific perspective but also falsely pretentious. The present study will look into the exciting question of what happened when these two methods of knowledge, the scientific and the kabbalistic, came for the first time in close contact within the realm of Judaism.

I

The story of the modern scientific research into kabbalah probably began when, in 1838, the young Jewish scholar Meir Hirsch Landauer (1808-1841) decided that there was no better place to begin his studies of kabbalistic manuscripts than the Court Library in Munich. There he read hundreds of manuscripts in this field, and soon a new world opened up for him. Fascinated, he developed several highly original theories about the history and essence of kabbalah.¹ Four years later, in the fall of 1842, another young man interested both in science and in kabbalah came to the city of Leipzig, then the stronghold of German academic orientalism; soon, this scholar would turn into a worthy successor of Landauer, whom he held in great respect. During the almost fifteen years of his stay in Leipzig, Rabbi Adolf Jellinek (1820-1889) became the leading and most prolific German-Jewish scholar of kabbalistic thought of his time, probably even of the entire nineteenth century.² During the first half of the 1850s alone, Jellinek published five books on kabbalah, correcting most of Landauer's wild theories.³ Already in the 1850s, Moritz Steinschneider (1816-1907), one of the most famous Jewish bibliographers, catalogized all known kabbalistic literature in a ten-page list, included in his landmark "Jewish Literature" (1857).⁴

In parallel to this development, almost at the same time, several young German-Jewish theologians developed the first detailed and sophisticated theories about the reasons and conditions of the emergence of kabbalah in the history of Jewish thought. They all seem to have been well acquainted with kabbalistic thought, at least with

- 1 Landauer's ideas were published posthumously in several installments of *the Literaturblatt des Orients* of 1845. On Landauer see Eveline Goodman-Thau, "Meyer Heinrich Hirsch Landauer: Bible Scholar and Kabbalist," in *Mysticism, Magic, and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism*, ed. K. E. Grözinger (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1995), 275-94.
- 2 On Jellinek, see Samuel J. Kessler, "Rediscovering the Study of Spanish Kabbalism in Wissenschaft des Judentums: Adolf Jellinek in Leipzig, 1842-1856," in *Pardes* 24 (2018): 125-44.
- 3 Most important: Adolf Jellinek, *Moses ben Shem-tob de Leon und sein Verhältnis zum Sohar* (Leipzig: Hunger, 1851).
- 4 Moritz Steinschneider, *Jewish Literature from the Eighth to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1857). For the long story of the emergence of this essay, see Ismar Schorsch, "Moritz Steinschneider: The Vision beyond the Books," in *Studies on Steinschneider*, ed. Reimund Leicht and Gad Freudenthal (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 3-36.

the main mystical works, the *Sefer Yezirah* and the *Sefer haZohar*. Already in 1840, Rabbi Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) published a philosophical analysis of the emergence of kabbalah within Judaism, claiming it was a direct result of the theological confrontation between the talmudic and philosophical schools in the intellectual history of the Jewish religion.⁵ In 1846 the young historian Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891) first constructed the connection between Gnosis and kabbalah, analyzing in depth the *Sefer Yezirah*,⁶ and in 1849 Rabbi David Joel (1815-1882) wrote an ambitious book on the more intellectual aspects of the *Sefer haZohar*.⁷ A lengthy and pathbreaking philological study of the same work was published in 1858 by the Hungarian scholar Ignatz Stern (ca. 1810-1865), re-opening the question of the authorship of the Zohar, a question that Adolf Jellinek assumed to have settled before, when he established that the Spanish kabbalist Moses de Leon (1250-1305) was the main originator of the *Zohar*.⁸ Stern showed that this subject was far more complex: he was convinced that the *Zohar* is in fact a patchwork of at least three layers of text, from different periods of time, transitioning one into the other — a claim that has remained essentially valid until today.

The 1860s belonged to Heinrich Graetz's magisterial *History of the Jews*, eventually spanning eleven volumes, a work that fundamentally changed German-Jewish identity during the nineteenth century.⁹ In the seventh volume, published in 1863, Graetz devoted two full chapters and two essay-long endnotes to the emergence of kabbalah, demonstrating the surprising amount of manuscript study he had undertaken to produce reliable research results in the field of Jewish mysticism. Graetz re-established Moses de Leon as the sole author of the *Zohar* and provided a more detailed foundation for modern kabbalah research when he introduced and discussed several minor, previously mostly unknown figures of kabbalistic thought until the eighteenth century. In addition, Graetz first analyzed at length the

5 Abraham Geiger, *Melo Chofnaim*, "Biographie Josef Salomo del Medigo's," (Berlin: L. Fernbach, 1840), ix-xxi.

6 See Heinrich Graetz, *Gnosticismus und Judenthum* (Krotoschin: B. L. Monasch, 1846).

7 David Joel, *Die Religionsphilosophie des Sohar und ihr Verhältnis zur allgemeinen jüdischen Theologie* (Leipzig: Fritzsche, 1849).

8 Ignatz Stern, "Versuch einer umständlichen Analyse des Sohar," in *Ben Chananjah* 1858), several installments.

9 Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden, Von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart. Aus den Quellen neu bearbeitet*, 11 vols. (Leipzig: Leiner, 1853-1875).

thought of the great Christian kabbalists of the renaissance, especially of Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) and his appropriation of kabbalah for the proof of the truth of Christianity.¹⁰ Eventually, in the 1880s, lengthy accounts of kabbalah found entrance even into textbooks for Jewish schoolteachers published by *Wissenschaft* scholars like David Cassel or Gustav Karpeles, and into the first ever Jewish encyclopedia, written by Jacob Hamburger, that appeared in 1883.¹¹

II

The groundbreaking results of this German-Jewish kabbalah scholarship must of course be validated within the historical context of the nineteenth century, a century, as is widely known, that brought revolutionary new developments, not only in the natural sciences and medicine, but also in the humanities. Indeed, it was the century when a completely new intellectual ideal, the idea of scientificity (*Wissenschaftlichkeit*), replaced the old ideal of *Bildung* that still ruled Europe during the Age of the Enlightenment. If the Enlightenment promised a rationality that made it possible to prove or disprove dogmatic belief by the study of nature, to reveal a new rational world through science — the nineteenth century extended the critical, scientific method to the humanities. Beginning with Kant's great project to investigate whether metaphysics could be scientific, soon many more empirical disciplines followed suit and were established on the basis of rational laws: philology, jurisprudence, historiography, and, ironically, eventually even theology itself.

Now, beginning essentially with the foundation of the Berlin University by the Humboldt brothers in 1809, a new age dawned that replaced the aestheticist (*schönegeistig*) rationalism of the previous century with the dry technicism of the scientific state employee, paid for by the government, to produce useful and practical research results in increasingly specialized disciplines. But this was not only the age when the trained expert replaced the aristocratic polymath; it was also during the nineteenth century that a new critical, empirical, and inductive method of research replaced the great

10 Graetz, *Geschichte*, vol. 9, 3rd edition (Leipzig: Leiner, 1891), 172-77.

11 For the entire history of the foundation of kabbalah research in the nineteenth century, see: George Y. Kohler, *Kabbalah Research in the Wissenschaft des Judentums (1820-1880)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019).

metaphysical ideas and theo-philosophical concepts that had shaped the development of thought for so long.¹² It was in the nineteenth century that Wilhelm von Humboldt demanded that the historian must rather extract the ideas underlying history from the concrete events collected by empirical research, a concept that was literally transferred into Judaism by Heinrich Graetz's essay on the "Structure of Jewish History" in 1846.¹³ This was the century when Friedrich Carl von Savigny demanded that the primary sources of the law must be purified from the "slags of history" (*Schlacken*), that is, from erroneous additions compiled over the course of the centuries, in order to rediscover the original ideas — a concept soon applied consistently not only to all the legal texts of Jewish literary tradition by Abraham Geiger and many others,¹⁴ but also to the much-contested question about the true authorship of the *Zohar*. It is no coincidence that after Jellinek and Graetz established that we were dealing with a fraudulent work, Gershom Scholem, the great kabbalah scholar of the twentieth century, made an initial (but eventually unsuccessful) attempt to show that some sections of the *Zohar* were in fact ancient. When this appeared to be almost out of the question, Scholem took an exceptionally apologetic stance to the false claim of the Kabbalists about the *Zohar*'s origin, expressing his desire to see in this work the essence of Judaism and not the "slags," as the Wissenschaft scholars

- 12 This is not to say, of course, that there was no critical thought before the modern era, especially in the philosophical tradition. Many humanist Renaissance scholars come to mind here, such as Dante, Bacon, and Erasmus, who replaced the dogmatic, clerical scholastics—but most of their works are still shaped by the great, overarching ideas of their time that they tried to discover in the ancient texts they studied. Only the nineteenth century produced the unbiased, inductive method of "bottom-up" research that believed in nothing but the manuscript itself.
- 13 Heinrich Graetz, "Die Construction der jüdischen Geschichte" first in *Zeitschrift für die religiösen Interessen des Judenthums* (1846): 81–97, 121–32, 361–81, and 413–21, here 83–84. New German edition by Nils Roemer, Düsseldorf: Parerga, 2000. English translation: "The Structure of Jewish History" in Heinrich Graetz, *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, ed. Ismar Schorsch (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1975). For Humboldt's famous 1822 lecture "Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers," see *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Werke*, vol. I, Berlin: Reimer, 1841, 1–25 (English: "On the Historian's Task," in *History and Theory* 6, no. 1 (1967): 57–71.)
- 14 Cf. John Edward Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

did.¹⁵ Ultimately, the nineteenth century was the age when Leopold Ranke declared empirical historiography to be also a new *religious* enterprise that had to reveal not metaphysical truth, but the very cultural properties of the nation—an idea that was adopted into Judaism by the *Wissenschaft* movement as a new and effective means to understand the Jewish national ‘essence’ of religious thought.¹⁶ In all those and more respects, Jewish scholars took part in the general intellectual trends of the nineteenth century, so that their work and thought cannot be properly understood when not placed into the context of their own time. Concerning their kabbalah research specifically, anachronistic, dissociated readings seem to be a major source of twentieth-century misunderstandings of these efforts, if not even of deliberate misinterpretations.

The first Jewish kabbalah scholars belonged to the first generation of Jewish intellectuals who added to their traditional Jewish education in the classical texts of Judaism the critical method of the university. Many of them were practicing rabbis, but they chose this profession only because after graduating from German universities they could not continue their academic career without accepting baptism. Nevertheless, this first generation of *Doktor-Rabbiner* was not only in constant contact with other Jews interested in *Wissenschaft*, but also networked with Gentile scholars, and published new discoveries regularly in non-Jewish academic journals. All this is true for the Jewish *Wissenschaft* project in general, and for the field of Jewish mysticism specifically. There was no secrecy at play at all on the side of the Jewish kabbalah scholars — not only did they not willfully neglect research into Jewish variants of mysticism, as

15 Scholem’s justification of pseudo-epigraphy seems to be based on the idea that the authority of the alleged author was exerted in order to give more weight to what was perceived as an authentic expression of this sage’s theological thought. As per David Biale: ‘Pseudo-epigraphy became a means for legitimizing a creative work as part of a hidden tradition. The authority of tradition is recognized, but the freedom of literary creation is preserved’ (*Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978], 119).

16 For Ranke’s influence, see *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline*, eds. Georg G. Iggers and James M. Powell (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989).

was often claimed, they even published their results widely, so that the whole academic world would know.¹⁷

Soon an interesting tension began to emerge from the encounter between the new scientific method and the kabbalistic traditions of Judaism: While many of the first Jewish kabbalah scholars distinctly rejected the theological importance of mysticism for the Jewish religion, this harsh assessment had in fact surprisingly little influence on their motivation to continue to research and discuss kabbalah. Given this dialectics, kabbalah scholarship turns out to be an illuminating test case for the understanding of the Jewish *Wissenschaft* movement itself—that is, for its methodological foundations and its cultural or even religious motivations.¹⁸ The *Wissenschaft* movement's kabbalah research constitutes an ideal standard for the examination of nineteenth-century Jewish intellectual and religious agendas, precisely because it unites apparent opposites: the emphasis on the critical method as the foundation of all science is applied to the understanding of kabbalah — essentially a subject not necessarily dominated by dry, logical, and reproducible thought, but rather by ornate literary motifs and mystical metaphor. The task to reach harmony between an outright theological rejection of kabbalah and the diligent, non-partisan research of the relevant texts would turn the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* first and foremost into an inner-Jewish movement, applying itself to Jewish identity building in the modern era. I will investigate this tension using the example of two leading *Wissenschaft* scholars, Abraham Geiger and Heinrich Graetz—both essentially historians, and both generally in deep divergence of opinion when it comes to theological questions.¹⁹ Among the few subjects they widely agree upon is their blatant and explicit rejection

17 The theory ultimately goes back to Gershom Scholem, who frequently asserted that kabbalah was “thrown out as un-Jewish or, at the least, half-pagan” by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. See his “The Science of Judaism – Then and Now,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 309.

18 Boaz Huss has claimed repeatedly that calling kabbalah ‘mysticism’ is in itself a theological assumption that is not a fruitful designation for kabbalah research. But this raises the question whether kabbalah research then becomes pure philology or cultural history. See Huss, “The Theologies of Kabbalah Research,” in *Modern Judaism* 34, no. 1 (2014), 3–26.

19 Cf. Michael A. Meyer, “From Combat to Convergence: The Relationship between Heinrich Graetz and Abraham Geiger,” in *Reappraisals and New Studies of the Modern Jewish Experience: Essays in Honor of Robert M. Seltzer*, eds. Brian M. Smollett and Christian Wiese (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 145–61.

of the “religious worth” of kabbalah for Judaism, while both scholars studied this subject throughout their lifetime.

While it is true that in the wake of Graetz, Geiger, and other scholars, history, seen in itself as *Wissenschaft*, became the “new religion” for the modern Jew during that time, this was hardly a process of secularization of Judaism. If history, or more precisely, historical awareness, was still a *religion* for the “believers” in it, historical knowledge created a spiritual and at the same time intellectual connection to Judaism within a past totality.²⁰ And Judaism, for many nineteenth-century German Jews, had the longest and most heroic past of all known cultures. “A little nomadic crowd (*Völkchen*) encountered a whole world...” Geiger once described the biblical beginning of what was seen as a major and irreversible civilizing impact of the descendants of those nomads on world history down the millennia to Geiger’s own days and even beyond.²¹ The very notion of a *world-religion* goes back to Judaism, and it is only through history that the divine influence on human society is discernable. Geiger’s friend and colleague Rabbi Samuel Holdheim (1806-1860) also saw history, and not supernatural revelation, as the ruling force for the legal part of Judaism: the destruction of the Temple meant the divine abolishment of the sacrificial service, Holdheim claimed, and not its mere suspension.²²

Thus, no part of this history should remain unstudied, the first *Wissenschaft* scholars believed, not even the mystical traditions, in order to achieve this new spiritual-scientific connection between the rich and influential Jewish past and an eternal, outstanding Jewish *Geist*. The nineteenth century created for the first time an unconditionally critical, undogmatic rationalization of the Jewish religion: Historicism was religious and religion was scientific. But the critical method of science left no room for the theological pretexts that even great pre-modern rationalists like Maimonides or Mendelssohn still upheld to save the last Jewish principle of faith. The

20 Yosef Yerushalmi oddly called history the “faith of the fallen Jews” (see: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996], 86), betraying a view of religion that is closer to Christian dogmatism than to Jewish legalism. Nineteenth-century German Jews, at any rate, saw themselves rather as *elevated* by historical consciousness.

21 Geiger, *Das Judentum und seine Geschichte*, vol. 1 (Breslau: Schletter, 1864), 38.

22 Samuel Holdheim, *Das Ceremonialgesetz im Messiasreich* (Schwerin: Kürschner, 1840), 40.

nineteenth century thus also brought a specifically religious enlightenment — for the modern Jewish scholars saw religion first and foremost as an openly ethical and not a secretive and mystical enterprise. The scientific-historicist destruction of the last dogma, the sanctity of the biblical letter, ironically also dispelled the last Jewish myths, and thus allowed for Judaism to become what was then widely perceived as “a pure religion” of ethical monotheism.²³

Kabbalah, in the eyes of rationalist Jewish historians of the nineteenth century, could not be theologically rejected if it had not first been studied with the same intensity and depth as was applied to the study of medieval Jewish philosophy, for example. They studied kabbalah because Jewish history would not be complete without it, but they studied the complete Jewish history “to no other end other than to be good Jews,” as Moritz Lazarus once admitted.²⁴ Through the study of the “totality of Judaism,” discernable in its history, and exclusively this way, wrote Heinrich Graetz in 1844, we are able to understand the “soul of Judaism,” the great underlying principle(s) of the Jewish religion.²⁵ Judaism was everything Jews historically chose to think or do, emphatically including adopted “foreign” influences, no matter if they came from Greek, Muslim, or German philosophical thought.²⁶ Only if one had accomplished this dry, technical philology of all Jewish sources exhaustively, Graetz believed, would one be able to discern what among those various aspects is *essential* about Judaism — and what is not. The essence of Judaism, therefore, must not be confused with the concept of “authentic Judaism,” which excluded outside influences and thus much of the historical development of Judaism. Jewish thinkers of the nineteenth century

23 The term is actually of Christian origins but soon appeared also in Jewish thought—where throughout the nineteenth century it became the ultimate formulation to describe “the essence of Judaism.” (For early instances, see: Salomon Formstecher, *Die Religion des Geistes* (Frankfurt: Hermann, 1841), 109, Josef Lewin Saalschütz, “Der Monotheismus in sittlicher Beziehung,” *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für jüdische Theologie* 5, nos. 1, 2, & 3 (1844), 44–53, 152–74, 391–95.) For discussion, see Steven Kepnes, *The Future of Jewish Theology* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

24 Moritz Lazarus, *Was heisst und zu welchem Ende studiert man jüdische Geschichte und Literatur?* (Leipzig: Kaufmann, 1900), 34.

25 Heinrich Graetz, “Die Construction der Jüdischen Geschichte,” here 83.

26 Maimonides’ partial dependence on Aristotle, for example, was only criticized by traditional figures, never by Geiger and Graetz, who rather complained about his consequent dry rationalism. See here: George Y. Kohler, *Reading Maimonides’ Philosophy in 19th Century Germany* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

would certainly admit that there is a scale of theological value beyond history. One must know history well, however, to identify which specific values Judaism historically promoted — again, by an unbiased, empirical, inductive method of historical research. How precisely social values are scaled theologically, how rationality and spirituality are interconnected, is often not yet clear to those thinkers by the mid-nineteenth century. But contrary to Hegel, for Geiger and Graetz “moral freedom” is explicitly the highest value on the scale, only followed by true (not mystically shallow) spirituality, that is, the collective spirituality of the community. Moral freedom, though, is achieved by historical Judaism through the strictest distinction of the divine from the natural world, whereby no mystical remnant remained in the idea of God.²⁷

III

This newly discovered ethical aspect is probably the most important among the many different and complex reasons for the rejection of the theological value of kabbalah for what Jewish scholars in the nineteenth century believed was the “essence,” the “fundamental idea” (*Grundidee*) of Judaism.²⁸ Already by the 1840s, liberal Jewish theologians had developed, out of universal, progressive-messianic considerations, the notion of Judaism's unique mission to general human culture, countering the still-widespread Christian supersessionism of the age: the strict monotheism of the Jewish religion was the original and decisive contribution Judaism had to offer to the progress of world civilization.²⁹ Based on an idealized reading of the Biblical prophets, the Jewish people itself became the messiah who suffered for the atonement of the sins of the entire world, so that through Jewish ideas the entire world would be redeemed. Jewish monotheism and messianism stood now in an inextricable rational relationship: If there is but One God, then there

27 Graetz, *ibid.*, 85. For the spirituality of the community, see Geiger's view in the next section.

28 This is what Graetz proposed to find already in 1846, long before Leo Baeck wrote his well-known “The Essence of Judaism” in 1905 as the climax of this long-nineteenth-century development. See Graetz, *Construction*, 83.

29 See here Cf. Max Wiener “The Concept of Mission in Traditional and Modern Judaism,” in *YIVO Annual* 47/48, 9–24. See also David Novak, *Jewish Social Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 225–28.

is only one ethical truth and one humanity as a united whole to be saved in the approaching messianic age.

Heinrich Graetz wrote in 1863 that kabbalistic literature, with its “absurdities” and its appeal to the senses instead of reason, made its readers eventually “unable to tell right from wrong.”³⁰ But this very ability was one of the basic purposes of religion in the universal history of humanity for the thinkers of the nineteenth century. It was probably also one of the reasons for many Jewish scholars to cling to practical Judaism, as they did, notwithstanding their academic approach to Jewish history, theology, and eventually even to the Biblical text. Elliot Wolfson has shown impressively how indeed “the mystical experience truly embraces a form of non-dual consciousness” that would basically collapse the polarity of good and evil. The mystical union with the pantheist deity causes a “salvific gnosis,” a contemplative ideal of unified opposites, that precludes morality precisely the way Graetz had feared it would. “Just as the One to whom the mystic is conjoined is the being in whom opposites coincide and thus there is no basis to differentiate between right and wrong,” writes Wolfson, “so the self that is absorbed in this indifference is itself located beyond good and evil and, stands outside the purview of moral concern.”³¹ Interestingly, here the seamless transition from “good” to “right,” that is, from a moral judgment to a truth-value, betrays an underlying lawful rationality of ethics that is otherwise often denied by the proponents of relativist ethics.

On the other hand, the nineteenth century’s objection to kabbalah is not simply based on an over-emphasis on rationality in the concept of religion, as was often claimed.³² Both Geiger and Graetz

30 Graetz, *Geschichte*, vol. 7, second edition (Leipzig: Leiner, 1873), 232–33.

31 Elliot R. Wolfson, “Morality and Mysticism: Parallel or Intersecting Lines,” in the introduction to *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7–8. Wolfson refers in this essay to a large number of scholars who all agree that the mystic is indifferent to moral values, prominent among them Søren Kierkegaard, who believed that mysticism *leads to a renunciation of one’s moral obligations to other human beings* (quoted in Wolfson, p. 10).

32 Thus wrote, for example, Andreas Kilcher of the “simple rationalism” in the treatment of kabbalah by the “bourgeois historiography of the 19th century,” probably meaning Graetz and Geiger. See Kilcher, “Kabbalah und Moderne – Gershom Scholem Geschichte und Metaphysik des Judentums,” in *Jüdische Traditionen in der Philosophie des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. J. Valentin (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000), 86–99; here 86.

propounded massive criticism against the philosophy of Maimonides for precisely the reason of the dry rationalism dominating the medieval philosopher's thought—while they themselves preferred a spiritual Judaism that elevated its followers rather than forcing reasonable explanations on all its many traditions.³³ The spirituality of mysticism, however, is not elevating but shallow; it is only that of a secret that one keeps for himself, instead of sharing this knowledge with human society. Geiger wrote explicitly with respect to kabbalah:

Equally wrong is the claim that kabbalah, only because it is dubious and effusive, because it breathes spirit into earthly matters, would possess depth or a greater inwardness. Inwardness, the life of the soul, must not be achieved by spiritual searching; it should rather be expressed through love in our relation to God and man. In mystical systems, all enthusiasm, all movement of the soul, is exhausted, as it were, and then there is nothing left for real life.³⁴

It is thus not that Geiger rejects inwardness per se and would permit only rational thought when it comes to a description of the essence of Judaism. But inwardness, that is, the emotional, intuitive side of religion, is an *interhuman* category for Geiger. It belongs to the field of ethics, and it is not an individualistic, elitist trait. Inwardness must find expression in the selfless love of God, and through God, in the love of our fellow human beings — not in an effusive searching for “deeper,” spiritual meanings in texts or symbols, as in kabbalistic thought. Truly *religious* inwardness must yield concrete moral results in real life, and not exhaust itself in mystical speculations and playful allegories. Even self-negation, the extinction of the ego, as often demanded for and necessarily found in mystical experiences of the “conjunction with God,” is essentially immoral from this interhuman point of view, for only by beginning from the “I” can the “Thou,” the *Other* to be loved as oneself and respected, be discovered, while the annihilation of the self in a mystical union with the divine precludes

33 Cf. Kohler, *Reading Maimonides' Philosophy*.

34 Abraham Geiger, “Literaturbriefe aus dem Jahre 1853,” in *Nachgelassene Schriften*, vol. II, ed. Ludwig Geiger (Berlin: Gerschel, 1875), 277–367, here 317.

the very alterity of the “neighbor,” the fellow human.³⁵ This moral demand, therefore, seems to be Geiger’s true motive behind the strong rejection of kabbalah: It does not promote the modern Judaism that nineteenth-century German Jews wished to see as a viable, ethical alternative to traditional religion, a Judaism that is capable of survival in the modern age.

Very likely, for many nineteenth-century scholars, Jewish and Protestant, the opposite is true: Dealing in mysticism was understood to ruin the morality of human relations. It did so by leading to a secretive, elitist individualism instead of creating a healthy human society—that is, as Geiger wrote elsewhere, because it focused on the capturing of imaginary worlds instead of improving the existing world. Geiger was sure that, whatever the intellectual worth of kabbalistic speculations, mystical activities in thought or in practice lead inevitably to an estrangement from real life at best, or to the immoral behavior of an arrogant elite at worst. Particularly disturbing for Geiger was that kabbalah often blurred the boundary between the bodily and the spiritual, specifically by formulating a new, hallowed dialectic relation between human limbs and the human intellect that was purportedly superior to common morality. For Geiger, however, ethical behavior is based on a strict distinction of the carnal and the spiritual in human beings.³⁶

On a more philological level, much of the *Wissenschaft* movement’s criticism was directed against the phenomenon of pseudo-epigraphy, which was typical of medieval kabbalistic literature. If indeed *history* was the “religion of the modern Jew,” deliberate false attribution amounted to idolatry. The secretiveness of kabbalah became the exact counter-image of the intellectual honesty of *Wissenschaft*, as the nineteenth century generally saw it. Even for the rather unbiased bibliographer Moritz Steinschneider, the connection of pseudo-epigraphy to the theological realm was

35 For the discovery of the “thou,” see Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft* (Frankfurt: Kauffmann, 1929), 18–20. Kant famously included the I in the end-in-itself-formula of the Categorical Imperative. This critique of self-negation might even be true of the rather non-mystical *conjunctio intellectualis*, arguably found in Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed* (III, 51), for even in this form it remains a selfish project. Cf. Wolfson, Introduction, 6.

36 Abraham Geiger, *Das Judentum und seine Geschichte*, vol. III (Breslau: Schletter, 1871), 71.

obvious.³⁷ *Deceit* [*Betrug*], he wrote in the introduction to an entire monograph dedicated to the pseudo-epigraphic literature of the Jewish Middle Ages, is the “natural companion” of superstition and enthusiasm (*Aberglauben und Schwärmerei*), the combination of which was Steinschneider’s usual characterization of kabbalah.³⁸ Also for Geiger and Graetz, this “secret of the true authorship” was a moral disaster, because it was not even truly mystical, but constructed—in other words, made up by man for a certain purpose. “The basic concept of the *Zohar* (if it is a concept at all),” Graetz wrote, is that the Pentateuch does not intend to transfer “the literal meaning of its text, but something higher, secret, and supernatural.” This secretiveness meant for Graetz that everything the author of the *Zohar* could think of could be “given a higher meaning, so that in the end a worthless doctrine” was created [*Afterlehre*] that was not only “unreasonable, but sometimes even absurd and immoral.”³⁹ Geiger also emphasized what he saw as the artificial, purposeful nature, and thus the actual emptiness, of the pseudo-epigraphic secret with reference to the *Zohar*. Once published, the book spread “like a disastrous avalanche,” he wrote, basically because of the arbitrariness of its thought “that concealed abysmal subjectivity with self-declared holiness, with *made-up secretiveness* and false attributions to ancient authorities.”⁴⁰

Clearly, therefore, esotericism resting on fraudulent claims and masking irrational doctrines was among the true reasons for the rejection of the religious “worth” of kabbalah by the scholars of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, based on their liberal Jewish theology and their religious convictions. In any event, religious thought stood in the background of this rejection much more than the politics of emancipation, or personal desires to assimilate into German society and culture. Ironically, thus strong *research* efforts, and not suppression of kabbalah, were the inevitable consequence of all coherent nineteenth-century criticism of mysticism and mystical

37 For Steinschneider, pseudo-epigraphy was either a rather technical outrage, “a capital offence in the realm of bibliography,” or egoistic, “immoral behavior,” as Giulio Busi called it. See Giulio Busi, “Steinschneider and the Irrational: A Bibliographical Struggle against the Kabbalah,” in *Moritz Steinschneider and the Emergence of the Science of Judaism in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, eds. Reimund Leicht and Gad Freudenthal (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 213–31, here 221.

38 Moritz Steinschneider, *Zur pseudoepigraphischen Literatur insbesondere der geheimen Wissenschaften des Mittelalters* (Berlin: 1862), 3.

39 Graetz, *Geschichte*, vol. 7, 223.

40 Geiger, *Delmedigo*, xvii (my emphasis).

traditions within religion.⁴¹ Where scientificity rules, these scholars believed, the truth must be openly told; it must always be rationally reproducible, and not accessible only to the few initiated. This is even more so when it comes to the discussion of religious or spiritual phenomena. If the decisive feature of science is the reproducibility of its results, philosophy, as the abstraction of all science, is elusive only in an empirical sense, given intellectual differences between human beings. But philosophy is always open to all thinkers being able to follow its arguments. Kabbalah and mysticism, by contrast, are elusive *by definition*, that is, in a very essential sense: their arguments are intuitive and thus not in need of justification, and so they are open and acceptable only for those who are ready to agree. Such an arbitrary elitism constitutes the opposite of the nineteenth century's scientific ethos and its humanistic underpinnings — which is why it was rejected so decisively.

IV

For a true appreciation of the hostile position of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* towards mystical esotericism, it might be useful to recall the arguments of the most outspoken critic of this movement — Gershom Scholem, who was also the most fervent twentieth-century proponent of the academic study of Jewish mysticism. It is not so much Scholem's apparent dislike for having productive predecessors in the project of the “foundation of the research of Jewish mysticism” that made him reject, and often ignore, the Jewish kabbalah scholars of the nineteenth century — Scholem adopted the study of mysticism for the very same goal and with the same methods that his scholarly predecessors pursued: the rescue, indeed the redemption, of Judaism in the age of modernity.⁴² It is well known that Scholem consistently

41 The stereotype of neglect or even suppression of kabbalah research by the *Wissenschaft* scholars reappears in countless articles. Eric Jacobson, for example, claimed that “the historians of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* school discouraged the interest in Jewish mysticism” — without giving any textual or other proof. See his “The Future of Kabbalah: On the Dislocation of Past Primacy, the Problem of Evil and the Future of Illusions,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity*, eds. B. Huss et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 47.

42 Almost all scholars who have studied both Graetz's and Scholem's research results marvel at how “surprisingly insignificant” (Nils Roemer) the differences

opposed the practical “Erlebnismystik” of cultural Zionism, and rather saw the dry, technical philology of kabbalah eventually being transformed into “philology as kabbalah,” that is, as rescuing kabbalah from the “slags” of the past.⁴³

The key notion to understand this basic difference between the scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is in fact the lawfulness of rationality. It turns out to be the difference between a universal, axiomatic ethics, supposedly found in prophetic Judaism, on the one hand, and a particularistic, consequentialist care for the national interest of the Jewish people on the other. It is in the sense of this tension about the law that Scholem called none other than St. Paul the “the most outstanding example known to us of a revolutionary Jewish mystic.”⁴⁴ What is attractive in Paul for Scholem is not the appeal of the Apostle to faith and divine grace as an alternative to the Jewish idea of the covenant, nor is it Paul’s challenge of the ‘dead letter’ of the law as opposed to the living spirit (2 Corinthians, 3: 4-6), as Paul was often misunderstood — it is rather Paul’s rejection of law and of lawfulness *as such* that obviously motivated Scholem. It is Paul’s original, anarchic antinomism, his ‘revolutionary’ claim that *any* lawful behavior could never bring about redemption, as the Jews believe. The usual term used to describe this motivation, *antinomism*, is actually too weak for what Scholem meant: In 1941, he writes instead about the “subversion of the law” by the mystics, out of revenge for legalism’s having “disturbed and broken the order of the mystical world” — the 1967 German translation of this passage has the even stronger “Zerstörung des Gesetzes” (destruction

actually are. What does deeply divide *Wissenschaft* and twentieth-century nationalist kabbalah scholars is that the former see kabbalah as a spiritual decline of the Jewish religion, while for the latter it comes as a “regenerating force within Judaism” (Nils Roemer, “Breaching the ‘Walls of Captivity’: Gershom Scholem’s Studies of Jewish Mysticism,” *The Germanic Review* 1 [1997], 23-41, here 28).

43 See Kilcher, “Kabbalah und Moderne,” 91.

44 Gershom Scholem, “Religious Authority and Mysticism,” in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 5-31, here 14. This might have led into what is today called political Neo-Paulinism, probably initiated by Jacob Taubes, and later followed by as diverse philosophers as Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek, who saw Paul as a nihilistic Jewish revolutionary against liberalism. For this development, see Philipp Lenard, “Aufstand gegen das Gesetz, Zur Kritik des Neopaulinismus,” in *Münchener Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 2012, 31-46.

of the law).⁴⁵ From this appreciation of the Christian apostle, a consistent line through history could be drawn to Johannes Reuchlin's kabbalistic justification of Christology,⁴⁶ Heinrich Graetz's ridiculing of Reuchlin for the same construction,⁴⁷ and eventually to Peter Schäfer's critique of Graetz's alleged esotericism: what this important mysticism-scholar of the Scholem school saw as Graetz's true (though well-hidden) motive for his rejection of kabbalah was in fact the first Jewish historian's deeply rooted aversion towards Christianity, Schäfer claimed.⁴⁸

This myth-based antinomism, detected by Scholem, soon became part of Zionist nationalism, in part because "mysticism is the nationalistic realm per excellence," as Scholem believed in the wake of German romanticism.⁴⁹ Probably liberal German-Jewish scholars and theologians opposed Zionism so strongly for the very same reason. It is short-sighted to reduce the explanation of their opposition to the Zionist idea to an unwillingness to leave "comfortable Germany" for rough Palestine. There were strong theological reservations at play as well. Hermann Cohen made the connection between Zionism and mysticism already in his 1916 essay "Religion and Zionism," the text that initiated his well-known controversy on the subject with Martin Buber: the Zionist reversal of

45 Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941), 35. Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), 38.

46 Moshe Idel believes that Reuchlin's influence on Scholem's view of Kabbalah was "quite formative." See Idel, "Hieroglyphs, Keys, Enigmas: on G.G. Scholem's Vision of Kabbalah," in *Arche Noah; die Idee der "Kultur" im deutsch-jüdischen Diskurs*, eds. Bernhard Greiner and Christoph Schmidt (Freiburg: Rombach, 2002), 227–48, here 228–29.

47 See Graetz, *Geschichte*, vol. 9, 84–85, referring to Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico* (Tübingen, 1494).

48 Peter Schäfer, "'Adversus cabbalam' oder: Heinrich Graetz und die jüdische Mystik," in *Reuchlin und seine Erben*, eds. P. Schäfer and I. Wandrey (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2005), 189–210. This is not a very sophisticated argument, since Graetz was in fact very outspoken in his critique of Christianity.

49 Amir Engel has shown how Scholem celebrated romanticism even after it was generally suspected as a major ideological source for German Nazism. See Engel, "Gershom Scholem's Kabbala und Mythos jenseits deutsch-jüdischer Romantik," *Gershom Scholem in Deutschland*, eds. G. Necker et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 214–15. For the Scholem quote (*Mystik als der nationalen Bezirk par excellence unter allen Gebieten des Judentums*), see: Gershom Scholem, "Franz Rosenzweig und sein 'Buch Stern der Erlösung'" [1930] in *Franz Rosenzweig: Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1988), 525–49, here 535.

the Maimonidean distinction between this-worldly messianism and mystical eschatology abolished what Cohen believed was “the central Jewish principle of rationalism.” Eschatological mysticism, in its nationalistic egoism, as seen by Cohen, would ultimately “block the main source of the ethical idealism of our religion.”⁵⁰

If it is true, as Cohen held, that religion begins only where mysticism ends, that is, where man and God are eventually on par,⁵¹ many of the liberal German-Jewish scholars concluded that the particularistic re-mythologizing of Judaism in the twentieth century was precisely the very secularization that the historicizing of religion during the nineteenth century had been accused of. Jewish liberalism’s rejection of Zionism can be traced to an emphasis on the humanistic and universal values that Judaism possessed in the eyes of the liberals. This includes the tradition of a messiah that is weak and suffering from his faithful service to God, a messiah that redeemed the nations of the earth by bearing their sins.⁵² On the opposite side stood Nietzsche’s rejection of shame and his nihilistic worship of strength, that is, a redemption, not from sin, but *through* sinning, as in the case of Sabbatai Zevi’s unfaithful, “heretical” messianism, at least in Gershom Scholem’s reading of it.⁵³ Scholem himself seems to prefer a Hegelian scheme of Jewish history, where indeed the mystical re-unification of man and God is seen as a symbiosis, consequent upon the dialectical sublation (*Aufhebung*) of transcendent, ethical monotheism. Mysticism, for Scholem, is the “quest for the secret” that will close the gap between man and God, “the hidden path that will

50 Hermann Cohen, *Jüdische Schriften*, ed. B. Strauss, vol. II (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), 324 (“God preserve us from a Zionist reading of the Prophets!” the text continues.) For the debate, see Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber, “A Debate on Zionism and Messianism,” in *The Jew in the Modern World*, eds. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

51 Hermann Cohen, *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie* (Gießen: Töpelmann, 1915), 32–33.

52 The concept goes back to a Jewish reading of Isa. 53, in which the “servant of God” is interpreted (first by Rashi) to be the Jewish people, atoning for the sins of their oppressors by their suffering. This is transformed by nineteenth-century liberal Jewish theology into a theodical form of universal messianism. See on this development: George Y. Kohler, “Prayers for the Messiah in the Thought of Early Reform Judaism,” in *Jewish Prayer: New Perspectives*, ed. Uri Ehrlich (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University, 2016), 5–29, here 12–16.

53 Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai ʿSevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2017). Eric Jacobson called Nietzsche “the only true kabbalistic philosopher of modernity.” See Jacobson, *Future*, 65.

span it.” It is *this quest* that will “bring back the old unity that religion has destroyed,” and it seems almost obvious that here “religion” in itself stands in the way of regaining this secret.⁵⁴ For Scholem, however, mysticism does not replace rationalism that Cohen held to be “the essence of Judaism”; Scholem rather rejects “essence” as an a priori category, above and beyond history.⁵⁵ His lifelong search for Jewish authenticity, a *core Judaism*, instead, is the search for the empirical Jewish *Volksgeist* which he found while studying kabbalistic mysticism. It seems that Jewish *Volksgeist*, for him, determines Judaism, rather than the Jews themselves determining their *Volksgeist*. The nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft* scholars, on the contrary, held on to the concept of essence, as we saw above, and rejected that of core/authenticity rather than defining it, because it would always remain empirical and would thus never be essential for their (ethical) view of Judaism.⁵⁶

In an often-overlooked book from 2000, Christoph Schmidt argued that according to Scholem, for the same reason that Sabbatai Zevi converted to Islam, liberal German Jewry converted to the “religion of historicism”: this step helped them to “heretically” act out their repressed, “authentically” Jewish inner life. This, of course, is a life of antinomian mystical messianism, that is, a secret rebellion against the (talmudic) law, against traditional Judaism.⁵⁷ The advantage of Schmidt’s assumption is that if the new German ideal of

54 Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941), 8 [emphasis mine].

55 For Scholem’s relation to “historical truth” and his rejection of an essential Judaism, see Ronny Miron, “The Mystics of the Historical Truth: A Metaphysical Commentary on Gershom Scholem’s Idea of Jewish History,” in *The Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 18 (2015): 135–56.

56 Compare here Rosenzweig and Buber, who believed that they had found “authentic Judaism” in the Hassidic ghettos of Eastern Europe, because it appeared to them unaffected by all the cultural influences they themselves despised.

57 Christoph Schmidt, *Der häretische Imperativ: Überlegungen zur theologischen Dialektik der Kulturwissenschaft in Deutschland* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000), 116–19. Schmidt even compares Scholem’s nationalist theology to that of the German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) who himself spoke of the national “myth of the vital life” (regarding Italian fascism) as being stronger than bourgeois, liberal democracy—which had lost its evidence vis-à-vis the new “vital movements.” Also for Schmitt, it was only the irrational that could create a new existentialism, defying the abstract, “relative” rationalism of parliamentarianism.

empirical science is no longer a foreign element imposed on Judaism from the outside, but a originally kabbalistic-heretical moment of liberation from the Talmud, Scholem himself can also continue to make use of philology in his scholarly project of the scientific construction of a genuine Jewish modernity. But nevertheless, this “revolt of authenticity” against the Talmud is at best an unconscious one (at least for the German liberals), and thus it is again *a secret* that drives Scholem’s agenda, if Schmidt is right. This mystical nescience, the Jewish secret behind the enlightenment, would thus not lead to a rationalization of religion but rather to secularization — not to a better, more moral world freed from dogmatic constraints, but to the particular redemption of Judaism, to a rather nationalistic version of messianism. As we saw, what Paul and Scholem reject is not the “dead letter,” the “slags” of the Talmud, but lawfulness as the foundation of rational religion as such — in the name of divine vitality and cultural authenticity. With lawfulness, however, one rejects ethics — because anarchism undermines the self-consciousness of the “I,” not as an individual, but as a rational, indeed as a legal subject, for whom others count as much as oneself. This is what the Jewish *Wissenschaft* scholars of the nineteenth century understood, however critical they might have been themselves towards the authority of the Talmud.

V

Expressed in theological terms, it is the possibility of a continuous reinterpretation and thus of a *transformation* of religious traditions that stands between orthodoxy and secular atheism while both inflexibly try to preserve the status quo: it is the possibility of the attempt to re-form Judaism along the rational lines of a modern reading of classical Jewish sources and concepts that both traditionalists and secularists reject. All of the nineteenth-century scholars who disputed the value of Jewish mysticism can be counted in the non-orthodox camp of religious Judaism, in various ways and degrees. If kabbalah was rejected as an essential form of Judaism on theological grounds by the nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft* scholars, one of the reasons was that the secret, unproven “truths” of mysticism (like the dogmatic “truths” of orthodoxy) oppose intellectual flexibility, that they actually circumvent and thus prevent the very adaption of Judaism to modernity.

It was in particular Abraham Geiger who identified this as a harmful effect of mysticism, in addition to its immorality, at least in view of Geiger's own ideal of a perpetual transformation of Judaism according to historically changing social and cultural circumstances. "As soon as the healthy mind, or the learned progress of thought, comes to contradict positive tradition, it is mysticism that intrudes with the purpose to refute this contradiction and to obliterate it by secret wisdom," Geiger argued. This opposition of the inherently unassailable authority of secrecy to all religious reform must certainly have been felt as an outright hostility, as a direct resistance to all that was important about Judaism for Geiger.⁵⁸

Many of the leading theologians of the *Wissenschaft* movement adhered to a concept of religious truth that was rather borrowed from the enlightenment of Lessing: a developing truth, which is to say, an approximation of truth, a becoming truth, or a truth in historical progress. For Lessing, only the search for religious truth was undiluted, because it was still unclouded by religious dogma, untouched by the corrupt coercion of theological allowances — according to Lessing, freedom of opinion and argument are more important than truth itself, for truth is dynamic and needs unrestricted room for its progressive development.⁵⁹ Geiger called Lessing's famous dictum that the perpetual striving for truth was to be preferred to the possession of full truth "a word of the deepest and most genuine *religiosity*."⁶⁰ In contrast, the "hidden truth" of mysticism, by dint of its metaphysical nature, is rather a rigid, immutable one, not open to arguments. While Gershom Scholem's project to write a "kabbalistic metaphysics of Judaism" aimed not by chance at a *secular* modernity,⁶¹

it is Geiger's own deep religiosity that provides the background for his opposition to kabbalah. For Geiger's reform project of Judaism — aimed as it was to preserve and not to destroy — this attempt of

58 Abraham Geiger, *Judentum* III, 66.

59 For this influence, see George Y. Kohler, "The Pattern for Jewish Reformation: The Impact of Lessing on Nineteenth-Century German Jewish Religious Thought," in *Harvard Theological Review*, forthcoming.

60 My emphasis. If God were to hold all truth in his right hand, and in his left only the steady and diligent drive for truth, Lessing would take the left hand (see his "Eine Duplik," in idem, *Gesammelte Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Heinz Puknus; 3 vols. [Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1966], 3:240). Geiger's quote is found in *Judentum* I (Breslau, 1865), 10.

61 Kilcher, "Kabbalah und Moderne," 93.

kabbalah to hinder religious development in the legal realm by obliterating contradictions between the rational and the outdated laws made Jewish mysticism the archenemy. The Jewish liberal theologians, who believed they radically *re-formed*, and therefore respected, talmudic Judaism, soon detected and deplored that kabbalah, while outwardly upholding talmudic law, in fact arrogantly ridiculed the Talmud as a whole as inferior to its own wisdom. Graetz tried to prove this point with a number of quotes from the *Zohar* that were supposed to show how legal talmudic categories of pure/impure, permitted/forbidden, or fit/unfit were unessential for Judaism, and therefore of minor importance compared to the vital spring of mystical dedication.⁶² As mentioned above, in Scholem's view, Jewish mystical vitalism came to dialectically (messianically) "sublate" law-based talmudic Judaism as a whole, as a concept. Ironically, kabbalah thus needed to preserve the un-reformed, unqualified authority of the mitzvot as its indispensable counterpart. This is probably the source of Scholem's dual attitude to kabbalah, which favored the antinomian aspect, but at the same time showed that kabbalah was a much stronger protector of the mitzvot than medieval Jewish philosophy.⁶³

Therefore, in a theological sense, the kabbalah-controversy is part of the more general argument concerning the possibility of a "rational religion," or at least the search for rational sources of religion. Can there be a reasonable middle way between tradition-bound orthodoxy and secular agnosticism? Is there indeed room for the dual assumption that philosophy is itself a religious obligation and that philosophical thinking is an expression of religiosity, as the great Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages believed? Geiger and Graetz are certain that religion derives its content from history, and they see it as their scholarly task to construct the theology of Judaism from historical sources, referring to a totality of empirical events. But especially the invocation of morality (versus kabbalistic mysticism) goes beyond the analysis of mere givenness — because morality, in their view, demands lawfulness that removes much of historical contingency. To refer to a "moral core" of religion (within the historical shell) clearly comes to avoid the obvious pitfall of historicism: to reduce religion to a folk myth, to a "culture." If religion

62 Graetz tried to prove this point with a number of quotes from the *Zohar* in *Geschichte*, vol. 7, 228–29.

63 See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 28–30.

wants to make claims to truth, even a progressive truth, it falls under the jurisdiction of reason. Graetz at times seems to be personally offended in his religiosity by the mystical literature of Judaism, most certainly in cases when the kabbalists “replaced the refined belief in God,” in his words, “with idolatrous phantasms [*gotteslästerliche Wahngebilde*].”⁶⁴

In particular, the concept of God must not remain arbitrary or intuitive for Jewish *Wissenschaft* theologians; it cannot be subject to allegories and metaphors at the will of the kabbalist. God must be rationally understood to be worthy of being called this name. This view of the divine, however, can only be achieved along ethical lines, or, in Jewish terms, by finding the ethical meaning of the purpose of divine legislation. For a majority of nineteenth-century German-Jewish thought, irrational, “vital,” or personal concepts of the deity would be considered idolatrous and consequently immoral. Rationality, on the contrary, was not a “dogma,”⁶⁵ something to be accepted against rational conviction, but rather a mitzvah, a divine commandment inherent within ethical monotheism.

64 Graetz, *Geschichte*, vol. 7, 206.

65 As David Biale thought; see his *Gershom Scholem*, 18.