

The Mystification of the Kabbalah and the Modern Construction of Jewish Mysticism

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The study of 'Jewish mysticism', which was established as an autonomous academic field in the first half of the twentieth century by Gershom Scholem and his disciples, became during the second half of the twentieth century a prestigious academic discipline in Israeli academia and also in many academic institutes in the western world, mainly in the United States.¹ The formative assumption of this academic field is that different cultural phenomena, first and foremost the Kabbalah and its diverse trends (as well as Hekhalot literature, Ashkenazy pietism, and East European Hasidism) are specific Jewish manifestations of a universal mystical phenomenon, which is perceived as an experience of an encounter with a divine or metaphysical entity. This encounter involves a unique state of consciousness and constitutes the climax of religious experience. A clear formulation of this perception appears in Moshe Idel's *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*:

If mysticism is the quintessence of religion, the quintessence of mysticism is the sense of union with God. The intensification of religious life that characterizes most forms of mysticism culminates at times in paranormal experiences, whose literary expressions appear in descriptions of unitive relations with supermundane beings and sometimes ultimately with God himself.²

This perception of mysticism, formed in Europe in the 19th century, served as the basis for the founding of academic disciplines and fields of research that study 'mysticism' as a universal phenomenon as well as specific 'mystical' traditions, such as 'Jewish mysticism'. Within these academic frameworks scholars classify disparate phenomena from different cultures under the concept 'mysticism' assuming that these cultural formations constitute the expression of or are in close affinity with extraordinary experiences of encounter with a divine or transcendental reality. Because most scholars regard mysticism as an essential, *sui generis* phenomenon, which should not be reduced to economic, social or psychological factors, they study such cultural formations using phenomenological and comparative methods of research drawn from the field of religious studies. The assumption underlying the employment of these methods is that the way to understand so called mystical phenomena is to compare them to one another and reveal their common structures and characteristics.

In the last decades, a growing number of scholars have critically examined the concept 'religion' as a universal phenomenon, as well as the basic suppositions at the root of its academic study. These critiques pertain also to the notion of 'mysticism', which is considered the epitome of religious

experience. In 1982 Jonathan Z. Smith asserted that: 'Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy'³. Talal Asad wrote that: 'There cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because the definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes'⁴. In recent years Russel McCutcheon, Timothy Fitzgerald and Daniel Dubuisson have presented astute discussions of the theological meaning and political implications of the concept 'religion', and its academic study⁵.

Other scholars as well offered critical analysis of the notion 'mysticism'. Richard King analyzed the mystification of Hinduism and Buddhism from a post-colonial perspective, and Grace Jantzen examined the study of Christian mysticism from a critical gender perspective⁶. However, the conception that religion and mysticism are universal phenomena, requiring specific methodologies to understand them, is still accepted in academic studies, and is at the basis of the study of Kabbalah and 'Jewish mysticism'⁷.

In the following I will present a further analysis of the term 'mysticism' and a preliminary genealogy of the concept 'Jewish mysticism'. In contrast to the prevalent hypotheses in Kabbalah studies, I maintain that there are no features common to all - and only to - the cultural formations categorized as 'mysticism' in general and 'Jewish mysticism' in particular. Therefore, there is no need for a unique methodology to study the texts and practices perceived as 'mystical' and there is no justification for the existence of a special academic field for the research of 'Jewish mysticism'. I will argue that 'mysticism' in general and 'Jewish mysticism' in particular are discursive constructions which came into being in the modern era in Europe, as a result of the expansion of the meaning of the term 'mysticism' - a specifically Christian theological notion - and its application to different cultures that were not familiar with it and did not employ any congruent term. The application of the concept 'mysticism' to non-Christian cultures was carried out in the framework of western Imperialism and Colonialism and the construction of national identities of different cultures using European discursive terms. It is within this context, so I hope to show, that 'Jewish mysticism' was conceived.

I would like to emphasize that I do not deny the existence of the texts and practices included under the category 'Jewish mysticism' as significant historic phenomena or oppose the study of them. I do not doubt that people placed their heads between their knees, whispered songs and praises, recited names of angels and prostrated themselves on graves of saints. I have no doubt that people who employed these practices went through extraordinary occurrences which they described as descending to the chariot, ascending to heaven, attaining prophecy or cleaving to nothingness; neither do I invalidate the important studies that analyzed these experiences in their historical and social context. My argument is directed against the commonly accepted supposition that these phenomena are expressions of 'Jewish mysticism' and against the research practices that ensue from this premise. I deny the claim that these phenomena as well as those known as 'mystical' in other cultures (Christian, Muslim, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, American, etc.) have characteristics in common, which typify them

and them only, and which justify the establishment of specific academic fields and methodologies for their study and teaching⁸. I believe that the different cultural formations categorized as 'Jewish mysticism' should not be studied as expressions of a universal religious phenomenon and as different phases in the development of a Jewish mystical tradition, but rather as cultural products that were created as a result of various political interests, in distinctive historical, economic and social contexts.

The academic study of Jewish mysticism is based on the classification of disparate practices, texts and traditions within the category 'mysticism'. The term 'mysticism', or any other designation with similar meaning, did not exist in Jewish culture⁹ nor in any other non-Christian cultures in which western scholarship identifies 'mystical' phenomena. Similarly, the term 'experience', which is at the root of the different definitions of mysticism, did not exist in Hebrew (nor in other non-European languages)¹⁰ until the word *havaia* was coined by A.D. Gordon¹¹. The use of the word 'mysticism' (*mistika*) has indeed become wide-spread in modern Hebrew. However, those who are usually referred to as 'mystics' in colloquial Hebrew (astrologers, mediums, alternative healers, Tarot card readers, etc.), are in the main not included in the spectrum of research of the scholars of 'Jewish Mysticism'. Even though I do not believe that a scholar is confined to the terms and categories that are used by the objects of his study, I see no justification for using a concept of Christian theological provenance as an analytic category in academic discourse.

Defining different manifestations in Jewish culture (as well as in other non-European-Christian cultures) as 'mystical', presumes that this appellation denotes a universal phenomenon, appearing in various forms in every, or almost every culture. Scholars and philosophers formulated, and continue to formulate, diverging definitions for the nucleus common to all the cultural formations labeled as 'mystical'. Most of these definitions describe this common denominator as an experience of encounter with a divine or metaphysical reality.¹² At the base of these definitions, at times explicitly at others implicitly, lies a theological assumption, according to which human beings are able in certain conditions, to reach a state of consciousness in which they experience a transcendental reality that differs from the material reality perceived through regular means of perception. This presupposition is shared by many scholars in the field of religious studies, by esoteric movements of the late 19th-and the early 20th century, and by new age movements of the second half of the 20th century¹³. I do not disparage this theological stance; however, I think that academic research should not be based on theological postulations and categories. Inasmuch as theological explanations of physical and biological phenomena based on the will of God (or 'Intelligent design') are unacceptable in the academic study of the natural sciences, a theological explanation according to which the cause for historic, social and cultural phenomena is an experience of meeting God or a 'transcendent reality' should not be accepted in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Descriptions of the nature of the supermundane reality experienced in a mystical state vary according to the religious and ideological approach of the researcher. Some scholars describe the experience in monotheistic theological terms, speaking of 'God' or 'the divine' while others use more neutral metaphysical concepts such as 'the absolute', 'the metaphysical reality', 'pure consciousnesses',

'the transcendent', etc.¹⁴ Other scholars, offer naturalistic, psychological and neuro-psychological, explanations of 'mystical experiences' (theories which are dismissed by most researchers in the study of religion as 'reductionist')¹⁵. Although these explanations reject the theological assumption concerning the nature of the mystical experience, they too are based on the essentialist hypothesis that 'mysticism' represents a universal phenomenon.

Since the late 1970's, many scholars of mysticism, headed by Steven Katz, rejected the 'perennial' position, according to which at the core all mystical phenomena stands a pure universal mystical experience; they claim that all mystical phenomena are culturally mediated. This 'contextual' or 'constructive' stance develops Gershom Scholem's notion that 'there is no mysticism as such, there is only the mysticism of a particular religious system, Christian, Islamic, Jewish Mysticism, and so on'¹⁶. According to Steven Katz who formulated the contextual position:

There is NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experience. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, all experience is processed through, organized by and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways [...] A proper evaluation of this fact leads to the recognition that in order to understand mysticism it is not just a question of studying the reports of the mystic after the experiential event but of acknowledging that the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience.¹⁷

Yet, in my opinion, the contextual position does not offer an alternative definition of 'mysticism', justifying the use of this term as an analytic category in academic research. Katz, who rejects the idea of an unmediated universal mystical experience as the basis of mystic phenomena in different cultures, as well as the reduction of mystical experiences to psychological states,¹⁸ fails to clarify what the common denominator of all mystical experiences is, and on what grounds one can base a 'suitable phenomenological and philosophical research of mysticism.'¹⁹ Elliot Wolfson, who, following Katz, rejects the 'perennial' approach (which he refers to as the 'doctrine of unanimity') and who claims that mystical experience, like any other experience, is context dependent, offers a 'modified contextualism', which claims that:

[...] the interpretative framework of a mystic's particular religion shapes his or her experience at the phenomenal level and not merely in the description or narrative of the experience. This does not, however, logically preclude the possibility of underlying patterns of experience or deep structures that may be illuminated through a comparative study of various mystical traditions.²⁰

However, Wolfson does not state which are the criteria for the classification of the traditions, whose deep structures he seeks to illuminate, as 'mystical' traditions. Joseph Dan suggested a contingent approach to the study of mysticism, that: 'emphasizes the study of a specific context, striving to reach

general conclusions based on a comparative study of particular cases in detail, rather than using any abstract concept and imposing it on individual religious phenomena²¹. Dan claims that 'mysticism as a historical phenomenon ... can be characterized in a generalized way only in *negative terms*.²² I cannot see how any term defined in a negative way can be used in a meaningful way in academic studies.

Bernard McGinn, the acclaimed scholar of Christian mysticism, observed that Katz's contextualism precludes the possibility of conducting a comparative study of mystical experiences. Therefore he calls for a modification of the contextual approach to enable comparative research of mystical experiences.²³ McGinn, however, does not offer such a modification and leaves it at stating that a lack of agreement exists regarding the epistemological basis for comparative study of mysticism.²⁴

Recently, Jess Byron Hollenback, who claims to hold the contextual thesis (yet also maintains that some mystical experiences cannot be explained by means of this paradigm),²⁵ suggested seven attributes of the mystical experiences that distinguish them from other modes of human experience. Yet, some of these characteristics are too general, whereas others are too narrow or too vague to clarify the meaning of the category of 'mysticism'.²⁶ Grace Jantzen's attempt to uphold the constructivist analysis of mystical experience, but nevertheless to find a common denominator to so called mystical experiences, is unconvincing. Jantzen suggests that even the most dissimilar experiences have something in common, for example the recognition that there is more to life than the material and physical.²⁷ I however, am not convinced that all 'mystical' experiences share a recognition of a metaphysical reality (since many of the so called 'mystics' acted within a cultural framework which made no distinction between physical and metaphysical reality) and even if they did share this recognition, it is also shared by numerous other phenomena that Jantzen would not include in the category of 'mysticism'.

Thus, scholars who sustain the contextual stance yet continue to refer to 'mysticism' as a universal phenomenon that justifies comparative study of 'mystical' experiences are reproducing the essentialist theological perception of 'mysticism'. For instance, Gershom Scholem, the 'founding father' of the contextual approach maintains it would be absurd to deny that there is a common characteristic to mystical experiences, uncovered in comparative research.²⁸ This common characteristic, according to Scholem, is the encounter with the 'divine', 'the metaphysical reality', or the 'absolute being' within the depths of the human soul.²⁹ Similarly, Steven Katz, who conceptualized the contextualist approach, asserts that there is a common factor to mystical phenomena in different cultures, and identifies it as the experience of 'the mystic reality'.³⁰ Elliot Wolfson, despite his objection to the 'perennial' standpoint returns to the essentialist theological stance according to which the characteristic of mysticism is 'an immediate experience of the divine presence'³¹.

In recent years, several scholars who recognized that the essentialist definitions of 'religion' and 'mysticism' are problematic suggested using the Wittgensteinian theory of 'family resemblance' to define these terms³². There can be no doubt that among the phenomena referred to as 'mystical', one

may find 'family resemblances', (as in any other group defined by the users of a language), and that Wittgenstein's famous discussion of 'game' in *Philosophical Investigations* (aphorisms 66-67) could indeed be applied to the term 'mysticism' and 'religion'. However, the suggestion that there are no features shared by all the phenomena we refer to as 'religion' or 'mysticism', but only a network of overlapping similarities, poses a question regarding the benefits of establishing a field of research dedicated to these phenomena. Furthermore, scholars who explain the category 'religion' using Wittgenstein's observations, but who continue to base their research on this category, smuggle the essentialist theological approach to religion back into research. As Timothy Fitzgerald observed:

[...] to save the baby, the concept of religion must have some essential characteristic, and if it does not, then the family of religion becomes so large as to be practically meaningless and analytically useless. The theory of family resemblance, if it is not illegitimately smuggling in an essentialist definition under the table, is defining religion into oblivion by making it indistinguishable from ideologies, worldviews, or symbolic systems in general.³³

Scholars who apply the family resemblance theory to the categories 'religion', and 'mysticism', assume that these terms reflect or capture 'organic families', rather than families formed by the users of language, in specific historical and social contexts. As Richard King wrote:

Virtually all contemporary studies of mysticism fail to appreciate the sense in which notions of the 'mystical' (including those that are adopted in the studies themselves) are cultural and linguistic constructions dependent upon a web of interlocking definitions, attitudes and discursive processes, which themselves are tied to particular forms of life and historically specific practices. Not only are contemporary notions of the 'mystical' subject to the cultural presuppositions of the day, they are also informed by and overlap with a long history of discursive processes, continuities and discontinuities and shifts in both meaning and denotation³⁴.

I suggest therefore to abandon the use of 'mysticism' as an analytic tool, and instead investigate the genealogies of the terms 'mysticism' and 'Jewish mysticism', the historical, social and political circumstances in which they were formed and the manner in which they shaped the field of study. In the following, I will offer a preliminary discussion of these issues, which I hope to expand in further detail elsewhere.

'Mysticism', a theological Christian term of Greek origins received, in the nineteenth century, the denotation of a universal religious phenomenon based on an experience of encounter or union with a divine or metaphysical entity, which involves a unique state of consciousness.³⁵ The modern category 'mysticism' and the academic study of the cultural formations that were classified under this category were created in the context of European colonialism and the formation of non-European National movements. 'Mysticism' was, to a great extent, perceived as the essence of 'religion' which - together with its complementary term, 'the secular', were the formative categories of modern European

culture.³⁶ The definition of mysticism as a private, subjective, experiential, a-political and a-social phenomenon encapsulates the modern perception of religion, which was applied to non-European cultures, in the framework of the imperialist expansion of the West and its aspiration to grant its modern values global hegemony. In this context, disparate traditions, practices and institutes in non-European cultures were classified as belonging to the religious and mystical spheres.³⁷ These cultural formations were deemed legitimate according to western liberal standards, and valorized within romantic and neo-romantic perspectives, as long as they remained inside the scope of the modern conception of the 'religious' and the 'mystical'; in other words, as long as they were confined to the private, experiential and subjective realms, without bearing upon political, economic and social issues.

The western labeling of the non-European and non-Christian cultural phenomena as 'religious' and 'mystical' was accepted and elaborated by intellectuals and political leaders of non-Western societies, who were active in the forming of their national collective identities. Texts, practices, traditions and institutions identified as 'religious', 'spiritual' and 'mystical' served in fashioning national traditions of the different collectives³⁸. As different scholars have recently pointed out the spiritualization and mystification of 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' was accepted and developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by political leaders and philosophers in India and Japan in the context of the coming into being of Indian and Japanese nationalism³⁹.

A similar process also took place in the framework of the construction of a Jewish national identity in Europe. In the second half of the 19th century, Jewish scholars adopted the category of 'Jewish mysticism' from Christian Romantic writings (a notion based on the identification of the Kabbalah as 'mystical theology' by Christian scholars in the 18th century),⁴⁰ and identified the Kabbalah and other expressions of Jewish culture, as the Jewish national manifestation of a universal mystical phenomenon. In 1853, Aharon (Adolph) Jellinek described the Kabbalah as 'Jewish mysticism' and stated that mysticism is an essential stage in the development of every nation and religion⁴¹. The use of the category 'Jewish mysticism' became more wide-spread in the writings of Jewish European scholars in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; the basic assumptions concerning the scope and character of this 'mystical' tradition (which, to a great extent, are still accepted today) were determined in this period. Defining traditions, practices and doctrines in Jewish culture as 'mystical' and comparing them to so called 'mystical' phenomena in other, mainly 'Oriental' cultures, was done to defend the image of Judaism in tandem with the neo-romantic and orientalist values of the Fin de Siécle period.⁴² An additional purpose, though by no means less important, was to construct a Jewish spiritual tradition that was considered as different from legalistic Judaism, and represented the Jewish national spirit.

These two objectives are clearly expressed in Martin Buber's essay *Jewish Mysticism (Die Jüdische Mystik)*, published for the first time in 1906 as an introduction to *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman (Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman)*, constituting one of the most significant documents in the formation of the modern perception of 'Jewish mysticism'.⁴³ Buber, whose interest in Hasidism emerged following his Zionist activity and in the context of the Fin de Siécle enthusiasm for Oriental mysticism, described various phenomena (The Book of Creation, the Zohar, Lurianic Kabbalah,

Sabbateanism, and Hasidism), as part of a continuous Jewish mystical tradition, which originated in the Talmudic era. He compared the Jewish mystical tradition to the doctrines of Eckhart, Plotinus and Lao Tzu but emphasized the national uniqueness of Jewish mysticism: 'we must recognize its uniqueness and its absolute dependency on the character and destiny of the nation it developed within'⁴⁴. Notwithstanding his glorification of Jewish mysticism, which he described as 'a wonderful blossoming on an ancient tree' (die wunderbare Blüte eines uralten Baumes), Buber was ambivalent towards Jewish mysticism and described it as 'unbalanced to some extent, at times dark and at times petty, when we compare it to Eckhart, Plotinus or Lao Tzu. Its fragility cannot be ignored when we compare it to the Upanishads'.⁴⁵

Gershom Scholem, recognizing that 'Buber was the first Jewish thinker who saw in mysticism a basic feature and continuously operating tendency of Judaism'⁴⁶, adopted Buber's perception of Jewish mysticism and his delineation of its history to a large extent, and established them as the founding paradigms of the modern academic study of Kabbalah⁴⁷. Like Buber (and under his influence) Scholem took on the study of 'Jewish Mysticism' following his espousal of Zionist ideology and under the impression of the neo-romantic enthusiasm for mysticism and the East.⁴⁸ Scholem identified the mystical element of Judaism as the vital national force which had kept Judaism alive in exile, dialectically leading to Jewish Enlightenment and Zionism⁴⁹. As he himself said:

I wanted to enter into the world of *kabbalah* out of my belief in Zionism as a living thing, as the restoration of a people that had degenerated quite a bit. [...]. I was interested in the question: Does halakhic Judaism have enough potency to survive? Is *halakhah* really possible without a mystical foundation? Does it have enough vitality of its own to survive for two thousand years without degenerating?⁵⁰

Although Scholem regarded Jewish mysticism as an expression of a universal phenomenon, he was much more interested in the particular, cultural specific aspects of Jewish mysticism, than in its universal features. Scholem described Jewish mysticism as a totality of Jewish streams evincing to 'certain broad lines of organic development' that operated within, 'existing Jewish historical framework of their time'. He enumerated six major periods in its dialectic development: Merkabah mysticism; Ashkenazic pietism, Sephardic Kabbalah, Lurianic Kabbalah, the Sabbatean movement and East European Hasidism.⁵¹

This schema, which, as stated above, is, to a large extent, based on the one presented in Buber's introduction to *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, is developed in Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, first published in 1941, and which became the founding text of modern Kabbalah studies. Similar to Buber, Scholem also revealed an ambivalent stance towards Jewish mysticism, which he perceived as a vital force in Diaspora Judaism, whose role ended (at least in its traditional forms) with the Zionist national revival.⁵²

In the last few decades, many of Gershom Scholem's perspectives and hypotheses, especially his *grand narrative* on the dialectic development of Jewish mysticism have been contested by a number of scholars of Jewish Mysticism, first and foremost, by Moshe Idel, Yehuda Liebes and Elliot Wolfson.⁵³ This revision questioned both the chronological framework of Jewish mysticism as delineated by Scholem, as well as his assumptions concerning its dialectical development and historical influence. However, these scholars and their students did not contest the founding paradigm of the field, that is, the identification of various Jewish cultural formations as 'Jewish mysticism', which is considered the national expression of a universal spiritual phenomenon.⁵⁴ Yet, following the weakening of the hegemonic national narrative that formed the modern perception of Jewish mysticism, in today's research there is a tendency to emphasize the universal aspects of the Jewish mystical tradition, and to employ comparative and phenomenological methods in its research.⁵⁵

The continuing use of the term 'mysticism' by scholars of Kabbalah to categorize a wide range of phenomena, belonging to different historical periods and disparate cultures, creates a contrived affinity between phenomena that in many cases have no significant concrete (geographic, historic or literary) connection. As we have seen above, Jewish scholars in the early 20th century applied the category 'mysticism' to the Kabbalah and other cultural formations as part of constructing a national 'mystical' tradition which begins with the Heikhalot literature and ends in East European Hasidism. Even though there are historical links and similarities between some of the range of phenomena that were included in the schema of 'Jewish mysticism', in my opinion, there is no justification to view these as part of a stream, or organic tradition evincing to its own unique traits.

The employment of the category 'mysticism' creates an artificial affinity not only between various cultural configurations in Jewish history, but also between 'mystical' Jewish practices and traditions and 'mystical' phenomena in other cultures. As mentioned, placing an emphasis on the universal aspect of 'Jewish mysticism' and employing comparative and phenomenological methods in its research has become even more wide-spread in recent years. While there are usually a number of historical connections between the different phenomena that are labeled 'mystical' in the Jewish tradition, the universal formations tagged by this term have usually nothing in common, beyond the scholars' assumption that behind them lie experiences of encounters with a transcendental reality. This hypothesis is, as stated, shared by different esoteric movements, scholars of religious studies and New Age movements. From this point of view, the phenomenological study of Jewish mysticism (as well as the comparative study of religion) and new age movements act within a similar ideological structure⁵⁶.

The study of 'Jewish mysticism' not only artificially connects cultural patterns that have no significant affinity, but it also tends to disconnect them from the specific contexts within which they were created and in which they operated. In spite of the fact that most researchers of mysticism will agree that the phenomena known as 'mystical' function within specific historical and social backgrounds, the claim that they are an expression of a universal mystical experience, and that the way to study them is through comparative and phenomenological methods, extricates these phenomena from their historical contexts and obscures their political and social character.⁵⁷ The essentialist

perception of mysticism contributes not only to the extrication of certain cultural phenomena from their social and historical contexts, it also isolates the study of Jewish mysticism from research currents in other disciplines in the Social Sciences and the Humanities.⁵⁸

In conclusion, 'mysticism', in general, and 'Jewish mysticism' specifically are research categories that are based on a Christian theological term that was applied to non-Christian and non-European cultures in the framework of European colonialism and the formation of national identities in modern western discursive terms. The categorization of disparate traditions, texts, doctrines and cultural practices, as 'mystical', based on the theological assumption concerning the universality of the 'mystical experience', creates an artificial link between unconnected phenomena and extricates these from their social and historical contexts. In my view, the distinct cultural formations classified, and studied as 'mysticism' in general and 'Jewish mysticism' in particular, have no common trait, or traits, belonging to them, and only to them, which justify the use of special methods in their research, or the creation of special fields for their study. The texts, traditions and practices included within the field of research of 'Jewish mysticism' should not be studied as expressions of a universal religious experience, but rather as cultural products anchored in the social, political and historical contexts in which they were created.

¹ See: Moshe Idel, 'Academic Studies of Kabbalah in Israel, 1923-1998: A Short Survey', *Studia Judaica* 8 (1999), pp. 91-94.

² Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven 1988, p. 35.

³ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion, From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago 1982, p. XI.

⁴ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore & London 1993, pp. 29, 40-43, 47-48.

⁵ Russel T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, New York & Oxford, 1997; Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, New York, 2000, Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*, Baltimore 2003. See also: Willie Braun, 'Religion', Willie Braun & Russel T. McCutcheon (eds.) *Guide to the Study of Religion*, London & New York 2000, pp. 3-21; William E. Arnal, 'Definition', *Ibid*, pp. 21-35. Daniel Dubuisson, 'Exporting the Local: Recent Perspectives on "Religion" as a Cultural Category' *Religion Compass* 1/6 (2007), pp. 787-800.

⁶ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and The Mystic East*, London & New York, 1999, pp. 7-34, 161-186; Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge, New York & Melbourne, 1997, pp. 4-25. See also: Robert H. Sharf, 'Experience', Mark C. Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago & London, 1998, pp. 94-116. Despite King and Jantzen's important critical analyses of 'mysticism', they both continue to accept the existence of mysticism as a universal category. As opposed to their approaches, in this article I don't propose to 'correct' the use of this category, but rather to completely abandon it. H.H. Penner suggested to forgo the use of this category in 'The Mystical Illusion', S.T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, Oxford, New York, Toronto & Melbourne, 1983, pp. 94-116. The difference between Penner's position and my own is that while he criticizes the term 'mysticism', but accepts the category 'religion', I claim that both are unnecessary and misleading as analytic concepts. For a recent defense of the use of the category 'mysticism' in the study of Kabbalah, and a redefinition of the term, see: Shaul Magid, 'Is Kabbalah Mysticism?: Another View', *Zeek*, (March 2008). And see my response: 'Paying Extra: A Response to Shaul Magid', *Ibid*, <http://www.zeek.net/803huss/>

⁷ There are, however, several scholars who are uncomfortable about employing the term 'mysticism' in a Jewish context. See the reservation of Gruenwald, who prefers the term 'spirituality', Ithamar Gruenwald, 'Reflections on the nature and Origin of Jewish Mysticism', Peter Schefer and Joseph Dan (eds.), *Gershom Shalom's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 50 years after*, Tübingen, 1993 pp. 28-29. Recently, criticism on the identification of the Kabbalah as Jewish mysticism has also been

expressed by Joseph Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain*, Oxford 2002, pp. 7-9. In spite of his observation that '[...] to identify the Kabbalah with Jewish mysticism [...] is wrong and misleading' (ibid, p. 7), Dan continues to describe 'Jewish mysticism' according to the schema delineated by Gershom Scholem. See, ibid, pp. 15-41. Yehuda Liebes also criticized the choice of the term 'mysticism' to describe Kabbalah in his essay 'Spirituality and Spirit', *Makor Rishon*, 20/10/06, p. 6. For a critique of the use of the term 'mysticism' in the study of Kabbalah (which raises claims that differ from those that will be presented in the following), see Gil Anijar, 'Jewish Mysticism Alterable and Unalterable: On Orienting Kabbalah Studies and the Zohar of Christian Spain', *Jewish Social Studies* 3, 1996, pp. 100-104.

⁸ I follow here, *mutatis mutandis*, Fitzgerald's argument concerning 'religion'. See Timothy Fitzgerald, 'Playing Language Games and Performing Rituals: Religious Studies Ideological State Apparatus', *Method & Theory* 15 (2003), p. 249.

⁹ Jewish scholars used the Hebrew term *mistorin*, as translation for the term 'mysticism', at the start of the 20th century. However, despite the fact that both words have a common Greek etymology, the traditional Hebrew use of the word *mistorin* is different from the modern use of the term 'mysticism'.

¹⁰ Robert Sharf in his discussion of the term 'experience', shows that in ancient Japanese there is no lexical equivalent to the word 'experience' and that the Japanese terms for it (*taiken* and *keiken*) are modern neologisms, created as translations of 'experience' and 'erlebniss' in modern western philosophical writings, in the Miji era (1868-1912). Sharf adds that Chinese has no equivalent to these terms either, and that Chinese translators used the Japanese words in their translations of western texts. See: Sharf (note 7 above), pp. 99-10. The term 'spirituality' also does not have an equivalent in non European languages. On the fact that there is no parallel for the concept 'spirituality' in Sanskrit or Hindu, even though the Indian 'religions' are labeled as 'spiritual', see: Peter Van Der Veer, *Imperial Encounters, Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, Princeton 2001, p. 70. On the modern western construction of 'spirituality' see: Jeremy Carrette & Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, London & New York 2005, pp. 30-53.

¹¹ See: A.D. Gordon, *Man and Nature*, Jerusalem 1951, pp. 44, 87 [Hebrew]. The term *havaia* is a translation of the German 'erlebniss' which played a central role in the neo-romantic discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century. Also see: Melila Helner-Eshed, *A River Runs through Eden: The language of the Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, Jerusalem 2005, p. 28 note 22 [Hebrew]. Helner-Eshed discusses the absence of this word from the sources she studied but does not acknowledge the difficulty this raises.

¹² For a detailed survey of the plethora of modern theories of mysticism, see: Bernard McGinn, *The Foundation of Mysticism*, New York 1991, pp. 265-343.

¹³ See King (note 7 above), pp. 162-163. To a great extent, this perception underlies the position that was described by Steven Wasserstrom as 'Religion after Religion', which he believes is shared by the three most influential scholars of religion of the 20th century: Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin and Gershom Scholem. See: Steven .M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion, Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, Princeton 1999, pp. 29-30. On the affinity between the modern study of religion, Christian Kabbalah and the esoteric movements of the beginning of the 20th century, see pp. 37-51. On the connection between the study of religion and the new age movement, see pp. 142-143. Also see Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Albany 1998, pp. 327-330 and King (note 7 above), p. 23. For more on new age trends in the study of Jewish Mysticism see: Boaz Huss, 'The New Age of Kabbalah Research' *Theory and Criticism* 27 (2005), pp. 246-253 [Hebrew].

¹⁴ 'God' is the object of mystical experience in the well known definition by Rufus Jones. See: Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, New York 1909, p. XV. William James, who included non-monotheistic and secular phenomena under the category 'mysticism' described the mystical state as 'overcoming the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute'. See: William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, New York 1902, p. 418. Frits Staal speaks of an experience of different and unfamiliar areas of reality. See: Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1975, p. 195. Louis Dupree writes about the 'absolute selfhood' and 'transcendental source of the self'. See: Louis Dupree, *Transcendent Selfhood: The Loss and Recovery of the Inner Life*, New York 1976, p. 102. Robert Forman describes the subject of the mystical experience as 'pure consciousnesses'. See: Robert K.C Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, New York & Oxford 1990, pp. 21-25.

¹⁵ For a review, and a rejection, of several of the naturalistic approaches, see McGinn (note 13 above), pp. 331-332, 343; Jerome Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Aldershot, Singapore & Sydney, 2001, pp. 75-102. The scholars who reject naturalist explication as 'reductionist'

apparently assume that their explanations of mysticism avoid such a reduction. However, any explanation, or description of cultural or natural phenomena is necessarily a reduction and the difference is not between a reductionist explanation and one which is not so, but rather between a naturalist reduction and a theological one.

¹⁶ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York 1974 (1946), p. 6.

¹⁷ Steven Katz, 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism', Idem (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, London 1978, p. 26. Also see Idem, 'The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience', Idem, (ed.), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, Oxford 1983, pp. 3-60.

¹⁸ Katz, 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism', *ibid*, p. 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 65. Bernard McGinn (note 13 above, p. 324) discussed the difficulty of resolving Katz's phenomenological research of mysticism and his contextual approach.

²⁰ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton 1994, pp. 54-55. Wolfson bases his position on Mircea Eliade's approach to the study of religions, which he calls 'structural'.

²¹ Joseph Dan, 'In Quest of a Historical Definition of Mysticism: The Contingental approach' *Studies in Spirituality* 3 (1993), p. 58.

²² *Ibid*, p. 89.

²³ 'These and other reactions to Katz's position show that there are serious reasons for holding that this form of what might be called "mystical nominalism" based on an unqualified contextualism, needs to be modified in the direction of a position that will both recognize the mediated aspects of all mystical experience and still not preclude the possibility of comparison' McGinn (note 13 above), p. 324.

²⁴ '... There is obviously no agreement on the epistemological basis upon which a more cautious and more adequate comparativism based on a qualified contextualism should be reconstructed', *ibid*.

²⁵ Jess Byran Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* University Park, PA, 1996, p. VII: 'Although I confirm the contextualist thesis... I suggest that various sorts of supernormal experiences... do not appear to be explicable in terms of the contextualist paradigm'.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 40-41. The first attribute that defines the mystical experience as a radical metamorphosis of the subject's mode of consciousness while he or she are awake is too general in my mind, and can apply to many situations which are not usually considered 'mystical' (such as hallucinations). The second attribute according to which the mystical experience gives the subject access to things his or her culture regards as ultimately real is a cumbersome formulations of the contextual theory (which does not converge with Hollenbank's thoughts in other places in his book). This is true also of the sixth attribute that the mystical experience is fundamentally amorphous and its content historically conditioned. The third attribute according to which the mystical experience provides knowledge about matters that are of ultimate soteriological concern to their community does not apply to many so called 'mystical' phenomena in Jewish culture (and probably in other cultures). The fourth, fifth, and seventh attributes (that mystical experience is heavily laden with affect, that it is both literal and metaphorical and usually has its genesis in the recollective act), are too generalized and vague. For a critique of Hollenback's attempt to list the attributes of the mystical experience, see Jonathan Garb, 'Mystics' Critiques of Mystical Experience', *Revue de l'histoire des Religions* 221 (2004), p. 298.

²⁷ 'Constructivist analyses of mystical experience have the advantage of making obvious sense of the wide diversity of experiences to be found even in the literature of Christian mysticism, let alone that of other religious traditions... Nor does it make nonsense of the idea that even experiences that differ sharply may still have some things in common, such as, for instance, a recognition that there is more to life than the physical or material.' Jantzen (note 7 above) p. 338.

²⁸ 'That there remains a common characteristic it would be absurd to deny, and it is this element which is brought out in the comparative analysis of particular mystical experiences', Scholem (note 17 above) p. 6.

²⁹ Scholem, who relied on Rufus Jones's definition, was influenced by William James's perceptions, and warmly recommended Evelyn Underhill's book on Mysticism, describes the mystical experience as an encounter with God or the metaphysical reality: 'The fundamental experience of the inner self which enters into immediate contact with God or the metaphysical reality', *ibid* p. 4; Or as: 'an encounter with the absolute being in the depths of one's own soul', *ibid* p. 15. For a discussion of Scholem's definitions of mysticism see Eliezer Schweid *Mysticism and Judaism according to Gershom Scholem, Jerusalem Studies of Jewish Thought, Second Supplement*, Jerusalem 1983, pp. 5-9 [Hebrew]; Wolfson (note 21 above) p. 56; Ron Margolin, *The Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in Early Hasidism*, Jerusalem 2005 pp. 22-26 [Hebrew].

³⁰ Katz (note 18 above), p. 27: 'Thus, for example, the nature of the Christian mystic's pre-mystical consciousness informs the mystical consciousness such that he experiences the **mystic reality** in terms of Jesus, the Trinity or a personal God, ...'.

³¹ Wolfson (note 21 above, p. 55): '... the immediate experience of the divine Presence that is characteristic of mysticism as a historical phenomenon'.

³² On attempts to use the concept of family resemblance and Wittgenstein's theory of language games for defining the concept 'religion', see: Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, London, 1973; Peter Byrne, 'Religion and the Religious', Sutherland et al (eds.), *The World's Religions*, London, 1988; Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion, Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories*, New York & Oxford, 1993; A.M. McKinnon, 'Sociological Definitions, Language Games and the "Essence" of Religion', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 14 (2002), pp. 61-83.

³³ Fitzgerald (note 6 above), p. 73. See also *ibid*, pp. 72-97; Idem (note 9 above), pp. 214-224 and Idem 'Religion, Philosophy and family resemblances', *Religion* 26 (1996), pp. 215-236.

³⁴ King, (note 7 above), p. 9. Also see Jantzen, (note 7 above), p. 12 (quoted by King, *ibid*).

³⁵ On the history of the term 'mysticism', and the history of its study see: L. Bouyer, 'Mysticism, An Essay on the History of the Word', R. Woods (ed.), *Understanding Mysticism*, London 1981, pp. 42-55; Michel De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, London 1992, vol.1, pp. 76-112. Michel de Certeau, 'Mysticism', in: *Diacritics* 22 (1992), pp. 11-25; Leigh Eric Schmidt, 'The Making of Modern Mysticism', in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 71 (2003), pp. 273-302. Idem, Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, New York, 2006, pp. 36-41; William B. Parson, 'Psychologia Perennis and the Academic Study of Mysticism' in: William B. Parsons, Diane Jonte-Pace, Susan Henking (eds.), *Mourning Religion*, Charlottesville 2008, pp. 97-123.

³⁶ Fitzgerald (note 9 above), pp. 209-210.

³⁷ *Ibid* pp. 234. Also see Fitzgerald (note 6 above), pp. 8-9.

³⁸ P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments, Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, 1993, p. 8.

³⁹ Sharf (note 7 above), pp. 99-103; King (note 7 above), pp. 136-142; Van Der Veer (note 11 above), pp. 69-77.

⁴⁰ In the early 18th century Kabbalah was described as 'Mystical Theology' by Jean Basnage (Jean Basnage, *The History of the Jews from Jesus Christ to the Present Times*, (London 1708), p. VII. As far as I know the term 'Jewish mysticism' appeared for the first time in the writings of Franz Joseph Molitor. See Franz Joseph Molitor *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, (Frankfurt a.m. 1827), pp. 44, 135.

⁴¹ Adolph Jellinek, *Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik*, Erstes Heft, Leipzig 1853, pp. 3-4: 'Die Mystik ist ein so wesentliches Moment in der geistigen Entwicklung der Menschheit'.

⁴² Paul Mendes-Flohr, 'Fin de Siecle Orientalism: The Oustjuden and Aesthetics of Jewish Self Affirmation', in Idem, *Divided Passions*, Detroit, MI, 1991, pp. 77-132.

⁴³ Martin Buber, *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman*, Leipzig 1920, pp. 5-19 (For an English translation see: Martin Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, London 1974, pp. 3-17). See: Boaz Huss, 'The Introduction of Martin Buber to the Tales of Rabbi Nachman and the Genealogy of Jewish Mysticism', *By the Well: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Halakhic Thought Presented to Gerald J. Blidstein*, eds, Uri Ehrlich, Howard Kreisel & Daniel J. Lasker, Beer-Sheva 2008, pp. 97-121 [Hebrew].

⁴⁴ 'Doch warden wir ihre Einheit, ihre Besonderheit und ihre starke Bedingtheit durch die Art und Schicksal des Volkes aus dem sie heraufwuchs, anerkennen müssen', *Ibid*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ 'Die jüdische Mystik mag recht ungleichmässig erscheinen, oft trübe, zuweilen kleinlich, wenn wir sie an Eckhart, and Plotinos, and Laotse messen; sie wird ihre Brüchigkeit nicht verbergen können, wenn sie gar neben den Upanischaden betrachten wollte.' *Ibid*.

⁴⁶ Gershom Scholem 'Martin Buber's conception of Judaism' in *Ibid*, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, ed., Warner J. Dannhauser, New York 1978, p. 145. See: Margolin (note 30 above) p. 8.

⁴⁷ As Ron Margolin argued (*ibid*), Buber's introduction presents the schema which underlies Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.

⁴⁸ See: Boaz Huss, 'Admiration and Disgust: The Ambivalent Re-Canonization of the *Zohar* in the Modern Period', Haim Kreisel (ed.), *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, Beer Sheva 2006, pp. 227-228.

⁴⁹ See: Amnon Raz-Karkozkin, *The Nationalistic representation of Exile, the Zionist Historiography and the Jews of the Middle Ages*, PhD dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 1996, p. 129. Boaz Huss, 'Ask

No Questions: Getshom Scholem and the Study of Contemporary Jewish Mysticism', *Modern Judaism* 25 (2005), p. 143. Idem, 'Admiration and Disgust', pp. 228-229.

⁵⁰ 'With Gershom Scholem: An Interview', in Geshom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism a Crisis*, New York 1976, pp. 18-19.

⁵¹ Gershom Scholem, 'The Historical Development of Jewish Mysticism' in Idem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays*, ed., Avraham Shapira, Jonathan Chipman (trans.), Philadelphia & Jerusalem, 1997, pp. 121-122 (the article was published originally in Hebrew, in 1944)

⁵² See: Huss, 'Ask No Questions' (note 50 above), p. 154, note 29, Idem, 'Admiration and Disgust' (note 49 above), p. 233.

⁵³ A. Funkentshein, 'L'Histoire d'Israël parmi les Chardons: l'histoire face aux autres disciplines' F. Heymann & M. Abitbol, *L'historiographie israélienne aujourd'hui*, Paris 1998, pp. 29-46. Huss (note 14 above), pp. 247-248.

⁵⁴ See Raz-Karkozkin (note 50 above), p. 134; Huss, *Ibid*, pp. 248-252.

⁵⁵ See: Huss, *Ibid*.

⁵⁶ See Huss, (note 14 above), pp. 251-252.

⁵⁷ King (note 7 above), p. 24; Huss, *Ibid*, p. 249. See also: Asad (note 5 above), p. 28; McCutcheon (note 6 above) p. 9; Idem, *The Discipline of Religion, Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric*, London & New York 2003, pp. 55-56.

⁵⁸ Huss (note 14 above), p. 247.