

Prolegomena to the Study of Jewish Occultism: Definition, Scope, and Impact

Samuel Glauber-Zimra and Boaz Huss
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Abstract

This article presents a preliminary overview of Jewish involvement in modern occult movements and representations of occultism in Jewish culture from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Jews across the world at this time took an interest in occult currents that emerged in European and North American society. This entailed both a centrifugal movement on the part of Jews toward broader occult movements, as well as a centripetal incorporation of occult trends within Jewish popular culture and religious thought: many Jews joined Western esoteric movements, while occult currents were integrated into Jewish popular culture and religious literature. Those interested in occultism and esoteric movements included leading Jewish writers, scholars, rabbis, artists, and political activists. Many Jews who took part in the esoteric milieu aspired to integrate Judaism with Western esotericism, at times yielding novel modes of modern Jewish occultism. These modern Jewish occult forms, largely forgotten today, were interwoven into numerous works of Jewish literature, art, and religious thought from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, while also exerting an influence on broader alternative spiritual movements to this day. The article discusses the challenges of defining Jewish occultism and examine its scope and impact within the respective fields of Jewish studies and Western esotericism. The framework of Jewish occultism, we argue, calls into question several conventions of modern Jewish historiography. Long overlooked, the study of modern Jewish occultism stands to challenge prevailing conceptions of Jewish modernity and secularization, while offering new research paradigms for the historical study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Judaism and Western esotericism.

Introduction

From the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, Jews across the world took an interest in occult currents that emerged in

European and North American society. This entailed both a centrifugal movement on the part of Jews toward broader occult movements, as well as a centripetal incorporation of occult trends within Jewish popular culture and religious thought: many Jews joined Western esoteric movements, oftentimes playing leading roles in them (in some instances, special Jewish sections and lodges were established within these movements), while occult currents were integrated into Jewish popular culture and religious literature, most notably in the Yiddish-speaking Jewish communities of Eastern Europe and North America.¹ Those interested in occultism and esoteric movements included leading Jewish writers, scholars, rabbis, artists, and political activists. Many Jews who took part in the esoteric milieu aspired to integrate Judaism with Western esotericism, at times yielding novel modes of modern Jewish occultism. These modern Jewish occult forms, largely forgotten today, were interwoven into numerous works of Jewish literature, art, and religious thought from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, while also exerting an influence on broader alternative spiritual movements to this day.

Notwithstanding the central role that Jews played in modern esoteric movements and the importance of Jewish occultism in the development of modern Jewish thought and culture, academic scholarship has almost completely ignored Jewish engagement with modern occult currents. In this article, we present a preliminary overview of Jewish involvement in modern occult movements and representations of occultism in Jewish culture from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. We discuss the challenges of defining Jewish occultism, and examine its scope and impact within the respective fields of Jewish studies and Western esotericism. The framework of Jewish occultism, we argue, calls into question several conventions of modern Jewish historiography. Long overlooked, the study of modern Jewish occultism stands to challenge prevailing conceptions of Jewish modernity and secularization, while offering new research paradigms for the historical study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Judaism and Western esotericism.

¹ Occult currents were incorporated into Jewish popular culture in other vernaculars, as well; a survey of these developments remains a desideratum.

Jewish Occultism and the Academic Study of Western Esotericism

Before we turn to Jewish occultism, a brief discussion of the academic study of Western esotericism and occultism is in order. The terms “occultism” and “Western esotericism” denote a wide spectrum of heterodox and alternative religious and spiritual currents, from late antiquity to our days, which modern hegemonic religious and scientific establishments have generally marginalized, rejected, and disparaged.² Esoteric and occult currents include alchemy, Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, Swedenborgianism, esoteric streams of Freemasonry, mesmerism, spiritualism, astrology and other mantic arts, the Theosophical and Anthroposophical Societies, the Traditionalist School, the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, George Gurdjieff’s (1866–1949) and Peter Ouspensky’s (1878–1947) Fourth Way, and many others. Psychological research and parapsychology — attempts to subject occult and esoteric phenomena to scientific scrutiny, oftentimes with the aim of discovering hitherto-unknown forces of nature — may also be included. In recent decades, occult and esoteric currents previously ignored and disparaged by the academy have received considerably more scholarly attention, most notably within the framework of the emerging academic field of Western esotericism. Although the terms “esotericism” and “occultism” have different genealogies and semantic fields, there is considerable overlap between the terms, and many times they are used interchangeably to refer to the same movements and currents.³ However, the term Western esotericism covers a much larger historical period and denotes movements and currents from late antiquity to our day, while the term occultism is more often restricted to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century esoteric currents, where

² Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 13–14; idem, “Occult/Occultism,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 884–89; idem, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Marco Pasi, “Occultism,” in *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, ed. Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1364–68; Olav Hammer, “Mysticism and Esotericism as Contested Taxonomical Categories,” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 29, no. 1 (2020): 5–27.

³ Hanegraaff’s definition of Western esotericism as rejected knowledge, for instance, bears a strong resemblance to James Webb’s declaration that “the occult is rejected knowledge.” James Webb, *The Occult Underground* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1974), 191.

it is popularly understood to refer to practices and beliefs believed to engage with hidden dimensions of reality.⁴ In light of the chronological boundaries of this study, which is concerned with Jewish engagement with esoteric currents in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we generally refer to Jewish occultism rather than Jewish Western esotericism, while acknowledging that much of the phenomena under consideration may fall under the rubric of Western esotericism as well.

The scope and definition of occultism and Western esotericism have been subject to much debate in recent years.⁵ Notwithstanding these debates, the study of Western esotericism is flourishing, with a great number of publications on esoteric and occult currents appearing each year. Several regional and international scholarly associations (such as the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism and the Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism) foster the growth of the field. Scholars around the world study Western esoteric, occult, and alternative spiritual movements in the framework of special programs and centers (such as the Centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam and the Chair for History of Esoteric Currents at the L'École pratique des hautes études) or within departments of religious studies, cultural studies, history, sociology, literature, and the arts. Two peer-reviewed academic journals are dedicated to the study of Western esotericism (*Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* and *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism*), as well as three monograph series put out by prominent academic publishing houses (SUNY series in Western Esoteric Traditions, Aries Book Series at Brill, and Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism at Oxford University Press). A great number of recent

⁴ Pasi, "Occultism," 1367.

⁵ Michael Bergunder, "What is Esotericism? Cultural Studies Approaches and the Problems of Definition in Religious Studies," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 22, no. 1 (2010): 9–36; Hammer, "Mysticism and Esotericism"; Kocku von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation," *Religion* 35 (2005): 78–97; Helmut Zander, "What Is Esotericism? Does It Exist? How Can It Be Understood?" in *Occult Roots of Religious Studies*, eds. Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2021), 15–43; Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, "Introduction," in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 1–19.

articles, monographs, and edited volumes, as well as a comprehensive encyclopedia,⁶ have been dedicated to the study of Western esoteric and occult movements, and the research of Western esotericism has expanded to new areas such as esotericism in South and East Asia,⁷ Islamic esotericism,⁸ esotericism in South America,⁹ and African American esotericism.¹⁰ There is a growing interdisciplinary consensus today about the importance of studying Western esotericism, occultism, and alternative spiritual movements and the influence these currents have exerted on religion, culture, politics, and the arts.

Notwithstanding the increased academic interest in occultism and the expansion of the study of Western esotericism to new areas, Jewish involvement in modern Western esoteric movements, as well as Jewish adaptations of occult beliefs and practices, remain understudied. Historically, scholars of Jewish studies, most prominent

⁶ Hanegraaff, *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*.

⁷ See, *inter alia*, Michael Bergunder, "Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82 (2014): 398–426; Helena Čapková, "A Brief History of the Theosophical Society in Japan in the Interwar Period," *CESNUR* 4, no. 5 (2020): 3–26. Mriganka Mukhopadhyay, "The Occult and the Orient: The Theosophical Society and the Socio-Religious Space in Colonial India," *Presidency Historical Review* 1, no. 2, (2015): 9–37; idem, "Mohini: A Case Study of a Transnational Spiritual Space in the History of the Theosophical Society," *Numen* 67, (2020): 165–90; Chienhui Chuang, "Theosophical Movements in Modern China: The Education Provided by Theosophists at the Shanghai International Settlement," in *Theosophy Across Boundaries: Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Modern Esoteric Movement*, eds. Hans Martin Krämer and Julian Strube (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021), 149–78.

⁸ See, *inter alia*, Liana Saif, "What is Islamic Esotericism," *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–59; idem, "'That I Did Love the Moore to Live with Him': Islam in/and the Study of 'Western Esotericism,'" in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, eds. Asprem and Strube, , 67–87; Mark Sedgwick, "Islamic and Western Esotericism," *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 7, no. 1 (2019): 277–99.

⁹ See, *inter alia*, Juan P. Bubello, *Historia del Esoterismo en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2010); Mariano Villalba, "The Occult Among the Aborigines of South America? Some Remarks on Race, Coloniality, and the West in the Study of Esotericism," in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, eds. Asprem and Strube, 88–108.

¹⁰ Stephen C. Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory and Hugh R. Page, Jr. (eds.), *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014); Justine M. Bakker, "Hidden Presence: Race and/in the History, Construct, and Study of Western Esotericism," *Religion* 50, no. 4 (2020): 479–503.

among them scholars of Jewish mysticism, have exhibited contempt for modern occult forms of Kabbalah, as well for Jews who study Kabbalah in accordance with occult interpretations. Modern scholars of Jewish Mysticism have largely denied the mystical authenticity of both Jewish and non-Jewish occult Kabbalah, dismissing them as pseudo-Kabbalah.¹¹ This contempt has extended to the study of Jewish occultism as a whole. The study of Jewish occultism, especially of Jewish occult interpretations of Kabbalah, thus not only broadens the field of modern Jewish thought, but also challenges assumptions embedded in the category of Jewish mysticism that have historically hindered the study of Jewish occultism and occultist forms of modern Kabbalah.

Having said that, several articles have been published in recent years on Jewish involvement in Freemasonry (a topic that was first studied by Jacob Katz in his seminal work, *Jews and Freemasons in Europe*).¹² Scholars have examined Jewish appropriations of mesmerism,¹³ as well as Jewish engagement with spiritualism in the

¹¹ Boaz Huss, *Mystifying Kabbalah: Academic Scholarship, National Theology, & New Age Spirituality*, trans. Elana Lutsky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 102–23.

¹² Jacob Katz, *Jews and Freemasons in Europe, 1723–1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970). Recent studies (most of them related to the Jewish freemason and Kabbalist David Rosenberg) include Jean-Pierre Brach and Pierre Mollier, “Franc-maçonnerie et Kabbale: les planches théosophico-maçonniques du Frère David Rosenberg (circa 1830),” *Renaissance Traditionnelle* 143–144 (July–October 2005): 203–19; Peter Lanchidi, “Between Judaism and Freemasonry: The Dual Interpretation of David Rosenberg’s Kabbalistic Lithograph, *Aperçu de l’Origine du Culte Hébraïque* (1841),” *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 6, no. 2 (2018): 1–27; idem, “A Kabbalistic Lithograph as a Populariser of Judaism in America—Max Wolff, *Origin of the Rites and Worship of the Hebrews* (New York, 1859),” in *Kabbalah in America – Ancient Lore in the New World*, ed. Brian Ogren (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), 115–37; idem, “A Kabbalistic Lithograph in Australia: Rabbi A.B. Davis’s Lectures on the Origin of the Rites and Worship of the Hebrews,” *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 34 (2021): 188–223; idem, “The Masonic Career of a Kabbalistic Lithograph: Max Wolff, *Origin of the Rites and Worship of the Hebrews* (New York, 1859),” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (2021): 191–218.

¹³ Jonatan Meir. “Haskalah, Kabbalah and Mesmerism: The Case of Isaac Baer Levinsohn,” in *Finden und Erfinden: Die Romantik und ihre Religionen 1790–1820*, eds. Daniel Cyranka, Diana Matut, and Christian Soboth (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2020), 205–27; Daniel Reiser, “The Encounter in Vienna: Psychotherapy, Guided Imagery, and Hasidism Post-World War I,” *Modern Judaism* 36 (2016): 277–302.

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁴ Several studies have been dedicated to Jewish involvement in the Theosophical Society,¹⁵ and to Jewish followers of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) and the Anthroposophical Society, chief among them the Jewish anthroposophist and scholar of Jewish mysticism Ernst Müller (1880–1954).¹⁶ Further studies have been dedicated to Max Theon (1850–1927), the Jewish founder of the Cosmic Movement, and his Jewish followers,¹⁷ the Jewish occultist Oskar Goldberg (1885–1953),¹⁸ Moses

¹⁴ J. H. Chajes, “Entzauberung and Jewish Modernity: On ‘Magic,’ Enlightenment, and Faith,” *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 6 (2007): 191–200; Jonathan Sarna, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Cosella Wayne: Or, Will and Destiny*, ed. Jonathan Sarna (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2019), xi–xl; Samuel Glauber-Zimra “Summoning Spirits in Egypt: Jewish Women and Spiritualism in Early-Twentieth Century Cairo,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 38 (2021): 25–45; idem, “Writings on Spiritualism from the Archive of R. Eliyahu Mordekhai Halevy Wolkowsky,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 52 (2022): 145–90; Samuel Glauber-Zimra and Boaz Huss, “No Religion Could be More Spiritual than Ours’: Anglo-Jewish Spiritualist Societies in the Interwar Period,” *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 53 (2022): 83–104.

¹⁵ Boaz Huss, “‘The Sufi Society from America’: Theosophy and Kabbalah in Poona in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, eds. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku von Stukrad (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 167–93; idem, “‘Qabbalah, the Theos-Sophia of the Jews’: Jewish Theosophists and their Perception of Kabbalah,” in *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions*, eds. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss, (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016), 137–66; idem, “‘To Study Judaism in Light of Theosophy and Theosophy in the Light of Judaism’: The Association of Hebrew Theosophists and its Missions to the Jews and Gentiles,” in *Theosophy Across Boundaries*, eds. Krämer and Strube, 253–78; Alexandra Nagel, “The Association of Jewish Theosophists in the Netherlands: The Efforts of Louis Vet and Others to Revive Judaism,” *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 7, no. 2 (2019): 411–39.

¹⁶ Ansgar Martins, *Hans Büchenbacher: Erinnerungen 1933–1949* (Frankfurt am Main: Mayer Info3, 2014); Andreas Kilcher, “Kabbalah and Anthroposophy: A Spiritual Alliance According to Ernst Müller,” in *Theosophical Appropriations*, eds. Chajes and Huss, 197–222; Gerold Necker, “Ernst Müller’s Encounter with Jewish Mysticism and Gershom Scholem,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 40 (2018): 203–24.

¹⁷ Boaz Huss, “Cosmic Philosophy and the Arts,” *Nova Religio* 19, no. 4 (2016): 102–18; Boaz Huss and Julie Chajes, “Introduction,” in *The Cosmic Movement: Sources, Contexts, Impact*, eds. Boaz Huss and Julie Chajes (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2021), 9–53.

¹⁸ Bruce Rosenstock, *Transfinite Life: Oskar Goldberg and the Vitalist Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

Gaster and his esoteric interests,¹⁹ Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942) and his engagement with various esoteric currents,²⁰ and the Jewish Sufis of Lausanne and their affiliation with traditionalism.²¹ With that said, many other manifestations of Jewish occultism have yet to be researched and a comprehensive study of the scope, significance, and impact of Jewish adaptations of occult ideas and practices remains a desideratum. In what follows, we first present a working definition of Jewish occultism. This is followed by a preliminary survey of Jewish engagement with modern occult currents and a discussion of the challenges and prospects of the study of Jewish occultism.

Toward a Definition of Jewish Occultism

The definition and delineation of Jewish Western esotericism and Jewish occultism presents a considerable challenge. Scholars have offered different definitions and understandings of esotericism and occultism, and the use of these terms are problematized and debated among scholars of Western esotericism.²² Antoine Faivre, the founding father of the academic study of Western esotericism, regarded esotericism as a “form of thought,” and enumerated several characteristics that are shared by different Western esoteric schools, such as the belief in an intrinsic correspondence between the different parts of the seen and unseen universe, the perception of the cosmos as a living nature, the achievement of knowledge through imagination and intermediate symbols and images, rituals, and the experience of transmutation.²³ Faivre, following the sociologist Edward Tiryakian, defined “occultism,” meanwhile, as encompassing

¹⁹ Boaz Huss, “‘The Quest Universal’: Moses Gaster’s Interest in Kabbalah and Western Esotericism,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 40 (2018): 255–66; Glauber-Zimra and Huss, “‘No Religion Could be More Spiritual than Ours’.”

²⁰ Oz Bluman, “The Moment of Worldwide Renewal: Hillel Zeitlin and the Theosophical Activity in Warsaw 1917–1924,” *Modern Judaism* 41, no. 2 (2021): 137–61; Samuel Glauber-Zimra, “‘From Time to Time I Dream Wondrous Dreams’: Esotericism and Prophecy in the Writings of Hillel Zeitlin,” *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 9, no. 1 (2021): 5–48.

²¹ Paul Fenton, “Les judéo-soufis de Lausanne: un point de rencontre dans la mouvance de guénonienne,” in *Réceptions de la cabale*, eds. Pierre Gisel and Lucie Kaennel (Paris: Editions de l’Éclat, 2007), 283–313.

²² See above, note 5.

²³ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 10–16.

the practical dimensions of esotericism.²⁴ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, among the leading scholars of Western esotericism today, suggests another approach, characterizing Western esotericism as the forms of knowledge that were rejected by early-modern Protestant theologians and enlightenment and post-enlightenment thinkers.²⁵ However, Hanegraaff contends that despite the great diversity of “rejected knowledge,” there are some shared world views and epistemologies — at odds with normative post-Enlightenment intellectual culture — that characterize Western esoteric currents.²⁶

Notwithstanding our recognition of the ambiguities of the terms, and the difficulties of defining them, we suggest using Jewish occultism (and, by extension, Jewish Western esotericism) as heuristic and tentative terms that refer to (1) Jewish involvement in movements and currents that are commonly denoted by the terms “Western esotericism” and “occultism” and/or (2) Jewish adaptations and appropriations of doctrines and practices espoused by these movements and currents. As noted above, although certain connections existed between Jews and earlier forms of Western esotericism, significant Jewish involvement with esoteric and occult movements, currents, and ideas began in earnest only in the late nineteenth century. We would like to emphasize that while many Jewish occultists were interested in Kabbalah and developed new forms of Jewish occult Kabbalah, Jewish esotericism and occultism should be distinguished from traditional forms of Jewish Kabbalah, which are sometimes also deemed “esoteric” and “occult.” Furthermore, while there have been calls in recent years from within the field of Western esotericism to discard the qualifying adjective “Western,” we have nevertheless elected to preserve the original term Western esotericism in order to maintain the distinction between Jewish esoteric traditions, i.e., Kabbalah, and those esoteric traditions that emerged within the Western cultural sphere that formed the basis of Jewish occultism, while acknowledging that Jewish occultists were active across the globe.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., 33–35; Edward A. Tiryakian, “Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture”, in *On the Margin of the Visible: Sociology, the Esoteric, and the Occult*, ed. Edward A. Tiryakian (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), 257–80.

²⁵ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 77–152.

²⁶ Ibid., 369; idem, *Western Esotericism*, 12–14.

²⁷ On this debate, see Egil Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences: Journal for the*

The Scope of Jewish Occultism

A widespread occult revival took place across Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁸ Countless individuals joined existing esoteric organizations, established new occult societies, or grew interested in non-Western religious and mystical practices. Notable movements that became broadly established in the latter half of the nineteenth century include spiritualism and the Theosophical Society, both of which attracted many Jewish followers and remained highly influential up to the Second World War. Occultism was absorbed into popular culture, and countless periodicals espoused esoteric doctrines and instructed readers on the latest occult fashions.²⁹ Occult movements and practices were frequently criticized and rejected by scientific and religious establishments, yet they had a major impact on nearly every aspect of modern culture from religion, literature, art, and philosophy

Study of Esotericism 2, no. 1 (2014): 3–33; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 3, no. 1 (2015): 55–91; Aren Roukema and Allan Kilner-Johnson, “Time to Drop the ‘Western’,” *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 6, no. 2 (2018): 109–15; Julian Strube, “Towards the Study of Esotericism without the ‘Western’: Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History,” in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 45–66.

²⁸ For a sample of studies that capture the geographic spread of the occult revival, see Maria Carlson, “No Religion Higher than Truth:” *A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875–1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994); Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007); John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008); Julia Mannherz, *Modern Occultism in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012).

²⁹ Mark S. Morrison, “The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival: Esoteric Wisdom, Modernity and Counter-Public Spheres,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 31, no. 2 (2008): 1–22. Over one thousand nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century occult periodicals have been digitized and made freely available online by the International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals, <http://iapsop.com/> (accessed March 21, 2022).

to psychology, politics, and science.³⁰ Transmitted by the Western imperial powers and the global communication networks that sprang up in the nineteenth century, late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century occultism spread across the globe. Esoteric and occult movements were active not only in Europe and North America, but also in South America, South and East Asia, the Middle East, Northern and South Africa, as well as in Australia and New Zealand.³¹ Jewish occultism, too, was a global phenomenon found in Jewish communities across the world.

Small numbers of Jews had taken interest in certain esoteric practices and movements, most notably mesmerism and Freemasonry, prior to the late nineteenth century.³² With the occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, considerably more Jews, from diverse communities across Western and Eastern Europe, North and South America, Australia, South Africa, North Africa, South and East Asia, and the Middle East, began to engage with occult ideas and practices. Some took part in newly established occult groups and movements, such as spiritualism, theosophy, anthroposophy, the Traditionalist and Fourth Way schools, the Quest Society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and its offshoots, and others. In other cases, most apparent in the Yiddish-speaking environs of Eastern Europe and North America, occultism was integrated into Jewish popular culture, yielding a new Jewish occulture.³³ Here fortune tellers, mediums, and other occult

³⁰ See, *inter alia*, Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Julian Strube, *Sozialismus, Katholizismus und Okkultismus im Frankreich des 19. Jahrhunderts: Die Genealogie der Schriften von Eliphas Lévi* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016); Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani (eds.), *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Richard Noakes, *Physics and Psychics: The Occult and the Sciences in Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³¹ Nile Green, "The Global Occult: An Introduction," *History of Religions* 54 (2015): 383–93.

³² Katz, *Jews and Freemasons*; Brach and Mollier, "Franc-maçonnerie et Kabbale"; Lanchidi, "Between Judaism and Freemasonry"; idem, "A Kabbalistic Lithograph as a Populariser of Judaism in America"; idem, "A Kabbalistic Lithograph in Australia"; idem, "The Masonic Career of a Kabbalistic Lithograph"; Meir, "Haskalah, Kabbalah and Mesmerism."

³³ The use of "occulture" as a research paradigm for the study of occultism in popular culture has recently been put forward by Christopher Partridge. See Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, 2 vols. (London: T&T

professionals advertised their services widely in the Jewish press and performed on the stage, while occult terminology began to enter the religious vernacular of rabbinic literature.³⁴ In what follows, we present a preliminary survey of Jewish involvement in occult movements, manifestations of occultism in Jewish popular culture, Jewish occult publications, and the relationship of Jewish occultists to Judaism.

Jews in Occult Movements

Considerable numbers of Jews joined modern occult movements, and many assumed leadership roles in these groups. One of the founding members of the Theosophical Society, for example, was the Jewish scholar David E. de Lara (1796–1879).³⁵ Indeed, Jews were numbered among the founding members and officers of theosophical lodges and branches across the globe. Friedrich Eckstein (1861–1939), a central figure in literary, philosophic, and occult circles in fin-de-siècle Vienna, was among the founders of the first lodge of the Theosophical Society in Vienna. The German speaking theosophical circle in Prague met at the literary salon of the Jewish intellectual Berta Fanta (1866–1917), who later became a follower of Rudolf Steiner. One of the founding members of the theosophical lodge in Wellington, New Zealand, established in the late nineteenth century, was Rabbi Herman van Staveren (1849–1930). In 1917, Gaston Polak (1874–1970), who later served as the president of the Association of Jewish Theosophists, was appointed the general secretary of the Belgian section of the Theosophical Society. Several pioneering members of the Theosophical Society in South Africa, such as Lewis Walter Ritch (1868–1952), Henry Salomon Leon Polak (1882–1959) and Herman Kallenbach (1871–1945) were Jewish.³⁶ One of the founding members

Clark, 2004–2005); idem, “Occulture and Everyday Enchantment,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, 2 vols., eds. James R. Lewis and Inga B. Tøllefsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2:315–32.

³⁴ The term “religious vernacular” is taken from Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 9.

³⁵ John Patrick Deveny, “D. E. de Lara, John Storer Cobb, and The New Era,” *Theosophical History* 15, no. 4 (2011): 27–33.

³⁶ Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends* (London: Macmillan, 1992); Shimon Lev, *Soulmates: The Story of Mahatma Gandhi and Hermann Kallenbach* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012); idem, “Gandhi and his Jewish Theosophist

and leaders of the Anthroposophical Society, Carl Unger (1878–1929), was Jewish, and other leading Jewish followers of Rudolf Steiner included Fanta, the scholar Müller, and Karl König (1902–1966), the founder of the Camphill Movement. Moses Gaster (1856–1939), an eminent scholar of Jewish folklore, former *Hakham* (chief rabbi) of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation of London, and a leading Zionist activist, was the vice president of the Quest Society, founded by the scholar and former theosophist G.R.S. Mead (1863–1933). The inner circle of the Agni Yoga Society, a large offshoot of the Theosophical Society established in New York in the early 1920s by the Russian theosophist and artist Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947) was entirely Jewish.³⁷ Moina Bergson (1865–1928), the sister of the French Jewish philosopher and Nobel laureate Henri Bergson (1859–1941), was a prominent member of the Hermetic Brotherhood of the Golden Dawn and married to one of its founders, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918). She later headed a successor to the Golden Dawn, the Rosicrucian Order of the Alpha and Omega. Another notable Jewish occultist active in early-twentieth-century England and North America was Israel Regardie (1907–1985), a follower of the Golden Dawn who served as the secretary of the notorious occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), joined the ceremonial magic order Stella Matutina, and authored several popular books on esotericism.³⁸ Several highly influential promoters of spiritualism, such as the renowned Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) and the British medium Maurice Barbanell (1902–1981), were Jewish.³⁹ The Yiddish journalist Isaac Ewen (1861–1925), a Jewish spiritualist,

Supporters in South Africa,” in *Theosophical Appropriations*, eds. Chajes and Huss, 245–71.

³⁷ Members of the circle included the journalist Frances Ruth Grant (1896–1993), the musicians Zina (Zinaida) Lichtman (1889–1983) and her husband, Maurice Lichtman (1887–1948), and the wealthy Wall Street exchange broker Louis Levi Horch (1889–1979), and his wife, Nettie Horch (1896–1991). See Alexandre Andreyev, *The Myth of the Masters Revived: The Occult Lives of Nikolai and Elena Roerich* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 80–85, 121–23.

³⁸ See, *inter alia*, Israel Regardie, *The Golden Dawn: The Original Account of the Teachings, Rites, and Ceremonies of the Hermetic Order* (Chicago: Aries Press, 1937–1940).

³⁹ For a sample of their writings on spiritualism, see Cesara Lombroso, *After Death – What? Researches into Hypnotic and Spiritualistic Phenomena*, trans. William Sloane Kennedy (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1909); Maurice Barbanell, *This is Spiritualism* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1959).

publicized his spiritualist experiences in a memoir published in the New York Yiddish press.⁴⁰ Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974), the noted Italian psychoanalyst and esotericist, was born into a Venetian Jewish family. Assagioli, who developed the Psychosynthesis method, a combination of theosophic ideas and humanistic psychology, was active in the Italian section of the Theosophical Society and was the Italian representative of the Arcane school of the former theosophist Alice Bailey (1880–1949).⁴¹ John Levy (1910–1976), Leo Schaya (1916–1985) and several other Jewish esotericists were followers of René Guénon's (1886–1951) Traditionalism and active in the traditionalist Sufi circle of Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998).⁴²

A number of occult circles were established by Jewish esotericists. In 1900, the mysterious Jewish esotericist Max Théon, also known as Aia Aziz, established the Cosmic Movement. Théon, who was born in Warsaw as Eliezer Bimstein, emigrated to London, where he was active in the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, before relocating to Tlemcen, Algeria.⁴³ Many of the leaders and officers of the movement, headquartered in Paris, were Jewish. Among these was Mirra Alfassa (also known as the Mother, 1878–1973), who later travelled to India and cooperated with the Indian political and spiritual leader Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950).⁴⁴ Another predominantly Jewish esoteric group with a Jewish leader was the Philosophical Group, founded in Berlin in 1925 by the German Jewish esotericist Oskar Goldberg.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Isaac Ewen, "Mayne Erfarungen Mit Di Spiritualisten," *Der morgen zshurnal*, May–June 1922. For a partial English translation, see idem, "A Séance in the Shtetl, translated and introduced by Sam Glauber-Zimra," *The Barnacle Goose 2* (2021): 30–33.

⁴¹ Pasi, "Theosophy and Anthroposophy in Italy," 116 n79; Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 29–30. We are grateful to Marco Pasi for bringing Assagioli to our attention.

⁴² Fenton, "Les judéo-soufis de Lausanne."

⁴³ Christian Chanel, "De la 'Fraternité hermétique de Louxor' au 'Mouvement Cosmique': l'oeuvre de Max Théon," PhD diss., L'École pratique des hautes études, 1993; Joscelyn Godwin, Christian Chanel, and John P. Deveney, *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor: Initiatic and Historical Documents of an Order of Practical Occultism* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1995); Chajes and Huss, *The Cosmic Movement*.

⁴⁴ Peter Heehs, "The Kabbalah, the Philosophie Cosmique, and the Integral Yoga: A Study in Cross-Cultural Influence," *Aries* 11, no. 2 (2011): 219–247.

⁴⁵ Rosenstock, *Transfinite Life*.

In some cases, special Jewish sections and associations were established, at times under the aegis of larger Western esoteric and occult movements. Several Jewish spiritualist organizations were founded in the early twentieth century. These included the Jewish Spiritualist Society, founded in London in 1919; the Jewish Society for Psychic Research, established in London in 1929; and the Annette Levy Memorial Spiritualist Centre, active in the early 1930s in Brooklyn, New York.⁴⁶ A spiritualist circle of messianic Jews operated in South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s under the leadership of Reginald Hegy, who combined Judaism with spiritualism and a heterodox belief in the messiahship of Jesus.⁴⁷ A number of Jewish spiritualist circles were active in Mandate Palestine and the State of Israel between the 1940s and 1960s, including in Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem.⁴⁸ A Jewish theosophical group was established Livorno in 1906 by admirers of the Kabbalist and philosopher R. Elia Benamozegh (1823–1900); the lodge was headed by Benamozegh's student R. Arrigo Lates (1879–1918).⁴⁹ In 1925, Jewish members of the Theosophical Society founded the Association of Hebrew Theosophists in Adyar, India, and sections of the Jewish Theosophical Association were established in India, Iraq, Poland, England, the Netherlands, and the United States.⁵⁰ In addition, a Jewish lodge of the Martinist Order was active in early-twentieth-century Salonica.⁵¹ Following the establishment of the British Mandate

⁴⁶ Glauber-Zimra and Huss, “No Religion Could be More Spiritual than Ours”; Louis Minsky, “American Jewish Mystics,” *B'nai B'rith Magazine* 45, no. 10 (July 1931): 341–42.

⁴⁷ Reginald Hegy, *A Witness Through the Centuries* (London: Rider & Co, 1934); idem, *The Hour Approaches* ([Cape Town]: Cape Times Ltd, 1941). On this group, see Shlomo Steyn, *Spiritualism: The Only Way of Life* (London: Regency Press, [1959]), 101–07.

⁴⁸ For rudimentary information on these groups, see *ibid.*; idem, *Le-Yad ha-Pargod ha-Mufshal: Masah Sipurit Ruhit* (Tel Aviv: Negohot, 1955).

⁴⁹ Marco Pasi, “Theosophy and Anthroposophy in Italy during The First Half of The Twentieth Century,” *Theosophical History* 15, no. 2 (2012): 81–119.

⁵⁰ Huss, “To Study Judaism in Light of Theosophy and Theosophy in the Light of Judaism”; Menashe Anzi, “Theosophy and Anti-Theosophy in Basra: Jews, the Indian Ocean and the British Empire,” *History: Journal of the Historical Society of Israel* 46–47 (2021): 123–66 [Hebrew]; S. R. Goldstein-Sabbah, *Baghdadi Jewish Networks in the Age of Nationalism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 174–84.

⁵¹ We are grateful to Henrik Bogdan, who shared with us a certificate of initiation that was issued by the Bnei Brith lodge of the Martinist Order in Salonica, dated August 1906. We have not been able to find any more information about this lodge.

in Palestine, and especially in the wake of the Nazi rise to power in Germany, a number of Jewish followers of occult movements arrived in Mandate Palestine, where they set up theosophical, anthroposophical and spiritualist circles. With the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, several lodges, branches, and associations were established in Israel. These included theosophical lodges founded in the 1950s in Tel Aviv, Safed, Jerusalem, and Haifa. The Israeli Spiritualist Association was founded in 1953, and the Israel Parapsychological Society, Jerusalem, followed suit in 1958, followed by the Elijah branch of the Anthroposophical society, established in Jerusalem in 1965. Later, Israeli followers of occult currents founded several villages and kibbutzim, such as Amirim, Yodfat, Kibbutz Harduf, and Kibbutz Neot Smadar, which were inspired by the teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, theosophy, anthroposophy, and other esoteric schools. Margot Klausner (1905–1975), the Jewish author and filmmaker, who immigrated from Berlin to Palestine in 1926 and went on to establish the Israeli Film industry, was interested in esotericism and founded the Israel Society for Parapsychology, Tel Aviv, in 1968. This big tent esoteric organization, which achieved great popularity in late-1960s- and early-1970s Israel, lay the roots for the Israeli New Age movement that continues to flourish to this day.

Jews who joined occult movements, or interacted with occultists, included leading authors, scholars, and political activists. Aside from Gaster, mentioned above, Adolphe Franck (1810–1893), a prominent early scholar of Kabbalah, was deeply interested in Western esoteric currents, praised the revival of interest in Kabbalah propagated by the Theosophical Society, and befriended the outstanding late-nineteenth-century French occultist Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865–1916).⁵² Hillel Zeitlin, a widely-read journalist, scholar and neo-Hasidic thinker from Warsaw, was interested in esoteric currents, such as New Thought and Theosophy, which had a considerable impact on his conception of prophecy, as well as his mystical messianism.⁵³ Notably, Zeitlin briefly studied Kabbalah with the circle of Kazimierz Stabrowski (1869–1929), a Polish painter who founded

⁵² Wouter J. Hanegraaff “The Beginnings of Occultist Kabbalah: Adolphe Franck and Eliphas Lévi.” In *Kabbalah and Modernity*, eds. Huss, Pasi, and von Stuckrad, 107–27; Boaz Huss, “Academic Study of Kabbalah and Occultist Kabbalah,” in *Occult Roots of Religious Studies*, eds. Mühlematter and Zander, 110–13.

⁵³ Bluman, “The Moment of Worldwide Renewal”; Glauber-Zimra, “From Time to Time I Dream Wondrous Dreams.”

the first lodges of the Theosophical Society in Poland.⁵⁴ Joshua Abelson (1873–1940), a British rabbi and scholar of Jewish mysticism who wrote the introduction to the first English translation of the *Zohar*, was a member of the Theosophical Society and published several articles in theosophical journals.⁵⁵ Shmuel Hugo Bergmann (1883–1975), a Zionist activist, philosopher, and the first rector of the Hebrew University, was an admirer of Rudolf Steiner (although he never joined the Anthroposophical Society) and took an interest in other esoteric and alternative spiritual thinkers, including Guénon, Ouspensky, Schuon and Sri Aurobindo, with whom he corresponded. Bergmann was also deeply interested in psychical research and was a founding member of the Israeli Society for Parapsychology. The founder of the modern academic study of Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), was also interested in various occult currents, and met and corresponded with several modern esotericists, including Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932), Robert Eisler (1882–1949), Samuel Lewis (a.k.a Sufi Sam, 1896–1971), and Israel Regardie.⁵⁶ Although Scholem disparaged contemporary occultists and ridiculed their appropriations of Kabbalah, some forms of Western esotericism influenced his scholarly work.⁵⁷

A number of Jewish authors, poets, artists, and producers maintained personal connections with occultists or were affiliated with occult movements. Naftali Herz Imber (1856–1909), the Hebrew poet who wrote “Hatikvah,” the national anthem of the State of Israel, was a disciple of the English occultist Laurence Oliphant (1829–1888). Imber was also affiliated with the Theosophical Society, as well as

⁵⁴ Aaron Zeitlin, “Mayn foter,” in Hillel Zeitlin, *R. Nakhmen Bratslaver: der zeeer fun Polodye* (New York: Farlag matones, 1952), 38. On Stabrowski, see Karolina Maria Hess and Małgorzata Alicja Dulska, “Kazimierz Stabrowski’s Esoteric Dimensions: Theosophy, Art, and the Vision of Femininity,” *La Rosa di Paracelso* 1 (2017): 41–65.

⁵⁵ Joshua Abelson, “Introduction,” in Maurice Simon and Harry Sperling, *The Zohar*, vol. 1 (London: Soncino Press, 1921), ix–xxx; Huss, “Academic Study of Kabbalah and Occultist Kabbalah,” 116–18.

⁵⁶ Boaz Huss and Jonatan Meir, “‘The Light is Burning Pretty Low’: The 1948 Correspondence between Samuel Lewis and Gershom Scholem,” *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 8 no. 1 (2020): 45–72; Huss, “Academic Study of Kabbalah and Occultist Kabbalah,” 108–09, 121–24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 121–28.

other esoteric movements.⁵⁸ The Anglo-Jewish author and playwright Samuel Levy Bensusan (1872–1958) was a member of the Theosophical Society and an editor of its journal, the *Theosophical Review*. The author and poet Regina Miriam Bloch (1889–1938), who was born in Germany and settled in England after WWI, was involved in the foundation of the Jewish theosophical lodge in London. Bloch was also a founding member of the Jewish Society for Psychical Research and served as its first president.⁵⁹ Franz Kafka (1883–1924) participated in meetings of the Berta Fanta circle in Prague and met with Rudolf Steiner. He was also interested in theosophy and other forms of occultism, all of which had an influence on his writings.⁶⁰ The painter and decorative artist Zeev Raban (born Wolf Ravitzki; 1890–1970), who taught at the Bezalel School of Arts in Jerusalem and had a major impact on Israeli art, was interested in anthroposophy and spiritualism, and practiced mediumship.⁶¹ The renowned Jewish dancer and choreographer, Gertrud Bodenwieser (born Gertrud Bondi; 1890–1959), was inspired by theosophy, and based her dance drama *O World* on the song “Search” by the spiritual teacher and former theosophist Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986).⁶² The founder of the Cosmic Movement, Max Theon, and many of its members were deeply interested in various art forms and made a significant impact on artistic circles in early-twentieth-century Paris.⁶³

Occultism and Jewish Popular Culture

Apart from the many Jews who were affiliated with occult organizations, a far greater number engaged with occult and esoteric currents without officially joining any movement. This was most evident among East European Jewry and its diaspora, whose members

⁵⁸ Boaz Huss, “‘Forward to the East:’ Naphtali Herz Imber’s Perception of Kabbalah,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 12 (2013): 398–418; Eddy Portnoy, *Bad Rabbi: And Other Strange but True Stories from the Yiddish Press* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 58–66.

⁵⁹ Glauber-Zimra and Huss, “No Religion Could be More Spiritual than Ours.”

⁶⁰ June O. Leavitt, *The Mystical Life of Franz Kafka: Theosophy, Cabala, and the Modern Spiritual Revival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶¹ Batsheva Goldman-Ida, *Ze`ev Raban: A Hebrew Symbolist*, (Jerusalem: Tel Aviv Museum of Art and Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 2001) [Hebrew].

⁶² Jan Poddebsky, “A Jewish Dancer, Krishnamurti and India,” *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 16 (2018): 31–40.

⁶³ Huss, “Cosmic Philosophy and the Arts,” 102–18.

underwent accelerated processes of modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The gradual breakdown of traditional modes of behavior and belief in Eastern Europe, along with the physical dislocation engendered by urbanization and global migration, led to the reconsideration of long-held cultural norms and beliefs. Amidst these churning tides, occult beliefs and practices appealed as a solution to the problems of modern life and a source of assurance in a rapidly changing world. In contradistinction to their coreligionists in Western Europe and elsewhere, Yiddish-speaking Jews in Eastern Europe and North America generally did not partake in organized occult activity. Jewish occultism here took the form of informal engagement with popular occult teachings and practices, most prominent among them hypnosis, spiritualism, and various forms of fortune-telling and character analysis. Religious taboos against necromancy notwithstanding, spiritualist séances were commonplace wherever Yiddish-speaking Jews settled, from the *shtetlekh* of Galicia to the bungalow colonies of the Catskills.⁶⁴ Occult stage acts and wonder shows often appeared on the playbills of Yiddish theaters and a cadre of Jewish occult professionals surfaced in Warsaw, the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City, and other turn-of-the-century urban Jewish centers.⁶⁵ Fortune tellers blended contemporary occult practices with the folkways of traditional Jewish magic. Jewish psychic mediums, hypnotists, and fortune-tellers advertised their services in the Jewish press; the most successful, men such as Osip Feldman (1862–1912), Khaym Szyller-Szkolnik (1870–1937), and Abraham Hochman, achieved a significant degree of celebrity in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles alike.⁶⁶

A key channel for the promulgation of occult currents among East European Jews was the daily Yiddish press that flourished in the United States beginning in the 1880s and in Eastern Europe from 1903.⁶⁷ The Yiddish press served as a space for occult professionals,

⁶⁴ Ewen, “A Séance in the Shtetl”; Vivian Gornick, *Fierce Attachments: A Memoir* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), 86; Glauber-Zimra, “Summoning Spirits in Egypt.”

⁶⁵ Jewish popular entertainment in Warsaw, including wonder shows, are discussed in Edward A. Portnoy, “Freaks, Geeks, and Strongmen: Warsaw Jews and Popular Performance, 1912–1930,” *The Drama Review* 50, no. 2 (2006): 117–35.

⁶⁶ On Hochman, see idem, *Bad Rabbi*: 73–82.

⁶⁷ For the history of the Yiddish press in North America and Eastern Europe, respectively, see Jacob Glatstein, Shmuel Niger, and Hillel Rogoff (eds.), *Finfun*

both Jewish and non-Jewish, to attract Jewish customers and market themselves to a broader public. Theater promoters announced shows in the press featuring occult performances, various organizations invited the public to lectures on occult topics, and authors and booksellers advertised occult literature. Writers such as Avner Tanenboym (1848–1913), Elazar David Finkel (1862–1918), and the Yiddish literary critic B. Rivkin (Borukh Avrom Weinrebe, 1883–1945), published hundreds of popular articles on spiritualism, parapsychology, and other occult topics in the Yiddish press; other journalists debated the merits of occultism and reported on the exploits of famous mediums. An important occult popularizer, Finkel published the first Hebrew book on telepathy, *Ha-Hargashah me-Rahok*, itself an abridged translation of the classic work of psychical research *Phantasms of the Living*.⁶⁸

The Jewish occulture of Eastern Europe and North America was preserved in the literary works of the Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902–1991). Many of the characters who populate Singer's novels and short stories attend séances and consult psychics, with occasional reference made to the above-mentioned Feldman and other real-life occult figures from Eastern Europe.⁶⁹ Singer's colleague, the Yiddish writer Shloyme Gilbert (1885–1942), himself an occultist and student of Kabbalah, penned an autobiographical short-story, "Oyf zumer-voynung," centered around a series of séances held

zibetsik yor yidishe prese in amerike, 1870-1945 (New York: I. L. Peretz shrayber fareyn, 1945); David Flinker, Shalom Rosenfeld, and Mordechai Tsanin (eds.), *The Jewish Press That Was: Accounts, Evaluations and Memories of Jewish Papers in Pre-Holocaust Europe*, trans. Haim Shachter (Tel-Aviv: World Federation of Jewish Journalists, 1980).

⁶⁸ Elazar David Finkel, *Ha-Hargashah me-Rahok: Telepatyah* (Warsaw: Ha-Tsefirah, 1904). Part of this work first appeared as idem, "Ha-Teva veba-Hayyim: Ha-Hargashah me-Rahok (Telepathie)," *Ha-Tsefirah* no. 175, 12 August 1904, 458–60. A partial Yiddish translation of *Phantasms of the Living* by Finkel was subsequently serialized in the newspaper *Haynt* in August and September 1908 under the title "Tsi lebt der mensch nokh'n toydt?" The book first appeared as Edward Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living*, 2 vols. (London: The Society for Psychical Research, 1886).

⁶⁹ See, e.g., Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Magician of Lublin*, trans. Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer (New York: Noonday Press, 1961), 90–91; idem, *The Estate* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 77; idem, *A Crown of Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1974); idem, *Love and Exile* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 24.

in the Polish countryside.⁷⁰ Both Gilbert and Singer, as well as the Jewish spiritualist A. Almi (Eliyahu Khaym Sheps, 1892–1963), were at times part of the Warsaw literary salon of Hillel Zeitlin, which attracted many heterodox religious seekers. Zeitlin's son, the Hebrew and Yiddish poet Aaron Zeitlin (1898–1973), was himself deeply interested in telepathy and authored one of the first books in Hebrew on parapsychology (to which Singer, his close friend, contributed the forward).⁷¹

Occult Jewish Publications

Jewish occultists produced hundreds of lectures, articles, and books, as well as literary and artistic works, that presented Jewish perspectives on occultism and sought to integrate Jewish and occult themes, beliefs, and practices. Jewish occultists authored several books on spiritualism and parapsychology. One early such work was Heinrich Ellenberger's *Offenbarung, Kabbala, Magnetismus und Spiritismus: eine zusammenhängende Kette* (*Revelation, Kabbalah, Magnetism and Spiritism: An Interlinked Chain*), published in Budapest in 1880.⁷² Later examples include A. Almi's *Di tsveyte ekzistents* (*The Second Existence*, 1921), Tobias Blaustein's *Spiritualizm* (1925), A.E. Silverstone's *The Great Beyond and Other Essays on Resurrection, Immortality, Spiritualism, and Cognate Matters* (1932), Moses Hirschkopf's *Is Revelation Possible?* (1936), Shlomo Steyn's *Le-Yad ha-Pargod ha-Mufshal: Masah Sipurit Ruhit* (*Alongside the Unfurled Curtain: A Literary Spiritual Account*, 1955) and *Spiritualism: The Only Way of Life* (1959), and Aaron Zeitlin's *Ha-Metsi'ut ha-Aheret* (*The Other Reality*, 1967).⁷³ Jewish

⁷⁰ Shloyme Gilbert, "Oyf zumer-voynung," *Varshaver shriften* (1926–1927): 1–29 (separate pagination); republished as "Oyf a zumer-voynung" in idem, *Dertseylungen un drames* (London, Ont.: Meylekh Grafshṭayn, 1954), 126–154.

⁷¹ Aaron Zeitlin, *Ha-Metsi'ut ha-Aheret* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1967); idem, *Parapsikhologia Murḥevet: Ha-Metsi'ut ha-Aheret*, v. 2 (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1973).

⁷² Heinrich Ellenberger, *Offenbarung, Kabbala, Magnetismus und Spiritismus: eine zusammenhängende Kette* (Budapest: Pester Buchdruckerei-Actien-Gesellschaft, 1880). An expanded French edition appeared a year later as *Révélation. Cabale, magnétisme et spiritisme: chaîne une et continue avec supplément* (Paris: Impr. de Moquet, 1881).

⁷³ A. Almi, *Di tsveyte ekzistents* (New York and Montreal: Kosmos, 1921); Tobias Blaustein, *Spiritualizm: meynungen, fakten un erklerungen* (London: Fraynd, 1925); A. E. Silverstone, *The Great Beyond and Other Essays on Resurrection, Immortality, Spiritualism, and Cognate Matters* (London: A. H. Stockwell, [1932]); M. Hirschkopf,

theosophists and anthroposophists presented esoteric-inspired conceptions of Judaism — together with suggestions for reforming Judaism in accordance with theosophical and anthroposophical principles — in many of their publications, such as Leonard Bosman's *A Plea for Judaism* (1926), Alex Horne's *An Introduction to Esoteric Judaism* (1928), and Walter Herz's *Unbekanntes Judentum: Israels Öffnung zur Welt* (*Unknown Judaism: Israel's Opening to the World*, 1983).⁷⁴ B. Rivkin, in addition to his articles on occult topics in the American Yiddish press, edited a short-lived Yiddish occult journal, *Natur un vunder* (*Nature and Miracle*, 1922), that drew inspiration from the theosophical teachings of Nicholas Roerich. The Hebrew writer Avraham Mordechai Harizman (1884–1978) published an anthology, *Pa'amei ha-Ge'ulah* (*Footsteps of the Redemption*, 1938) that includes Hebrew translations of passages from Krishnamurti and the German occult writers Bô Yin Râ (Joseph Anton Schneiderfranken, 1876–1943) and Karl Otto Schmidt (1904–1977), alongside writings from Jewish thinkers such as Martin Buber and R. Abraham Isaac Kook.⁷⁵ Another book, *Sefer ha-Ahavah* (*The Book of Love*, 1940), contains partial translations of *Der Magie der Liebe*, (*The Magic of Love*), a guide to sex magic by the German occultist Georg Lomer (1877–1957) and the seminal work *Cosmic Consciousness*, by R. M. Bucke (1837–1902).⁷⁶ Harizman left behind numerous esoteric manuscripts, both original works and translations, all of which remain unpublished to this day.

In other cases Jews who were affiliated with occult movements published book and articles about Kabbalah and Jewish esotericism in which they presented Jewish occult understandings of Kabbalah. A.D. Ezekiel, a Jewish theosophist from Pune, India, published an

Is Revelation Possible? (London: Rider, 1936); Steyn, *Le-Yad ha-Pargod ha-Mufshal*; idem, *Spiritualism*; Zeitlin, *Ha-Metsi'ut ha-Aheret*.

⁷⁴ L. A. Bosman *A Plea for Judaism* (Adyar: Association of Hebrew Theosophists, 1926); Alex Horne, *An Introduction to Esoteric Judaism* (Wheaton: Theosophical Press, 1928); Walter Herz, *Unbekanntes Judentum: Israels Öffnung zur Welt* (Munich: Thomas Verlag, 1983).

⁷⁵ Avraham Mordechai Harizman, *Pa'amei ha-Ge'ulah: Sefer ha-Hithadshut* (Jerusalem: Hithadshut, 1938).

⁷⁶ D. Ernst-Helzeher [Avraham Mordechai Harizman], *Sefer ha-Ahavah: (A) Laylah. (B) Dimdumei-Zerihah. (C) Ha-Shemesh* (Jerusalem: Or, 1940). Cf. R. M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia: Innes & Sons, 1901); Georg Lomer, *Die Magie der Liebe: Ein Ausflug ins Geheimgebiet der Liebe* (Pfullingen in Württ: J. Baum, 1922).

introduction to Kabbalah.⁷⁷ The Anglo-Jewish theosophists Leonard Bosman and Elias Gewurtz published a series of booklets on Kabbalah from a Jewish-theosophical perspective.⁷⁸ Another Anglo-Jewish scholar and theosophist, Joshua Abelson, who as mentioned above wrote the introduction to the first comprehensive English translation of the *Zohar*, published several theosophically-inspired scholarly books on Jewish mysticism.⁷⁹ Ernst Müller, the Jewish anthroposophist from Vienna, published a German translation of segments from the *Zohar* as well as a book on the *Zohar* and a history of Jewish mysticism that incorporated anthroposophical perspectives.⁸⁰ Israel Regardie, the Jewish follower of the Golden Dawn and its offshoots, published two books in which he presented his Western esoteric inspired perception of Kabbalah.⁸¹ Max Theon, the Jewish founder of the Cosmic Movement, and his Jewish followers, most notably Louis Themanlys and Pascal Themanlys, integrated kabbalistic ideas in their publications.⁸² Leo Schaya, the Jewish follower of Guénon and Schuon, presented his traditionalist-inspired perspective on Kabbalah in his French book, *L'Homme et l'Absolu selon la Kabbale*, which was translated into many languages, as well as a traditionalist-inspired view of Judaism in his essay "Some Universal Aspects of Judaism."⁸³

A number of rabbinic works from the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries engaged positively with modern occult concepts. Oftentimes occult ideas were employed as didactic tools to

⁷⁷ A.D. Ezekiel, *Introduction to the Kabbalah* (Poona: A. D. Ezekiel's Press, 1888).

⁷⁸ L.A. Bosman, *The Mysteries of the Qabbalah* (London: Dharma Press, 1913); Elias Gewurtz and L. A. Bosman, *The Cosmic Wisdom as Embodied in the Qabbalah and in the Symbolical Hebrew Alphabet* (London: Dharma Press, 1914); Elias Gewurtz, *The Hidden Treasures of Ancient Qabalah* (Chicago: Yogi Publication Society, 1918).

⁷⁹ Joshua Abelson, *The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1912); idem, *Jewish Mysticism: An Introduction to the Kabbalah* (London: G. Bell & Son, 1913).

⁸⁰ Ernst Müller, *Der Sohar und Seine Lehre: Einleitung in die Gedankenwelt der Kabbalah* (Wein and Berlin: R. Löwit Verlag, 1920); idem, *Der Sohar: Das Heilige Buch der Kabbalah, Nach dem Urtext* (Wien: Glanz, 1932); idem, *History of Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford: East and West Library, 1946).

⁸¹ Israel Regardie, *A Garden of Pomegranates: An Outline of the Qabalah* (London: Rider, 1932); idem, *The Tree of Life* (London: Rider, 1932).

⁸² Boaz Huss, "Cosmic Philosophy and the Kabbalah," in *The Cosmic Movement*, eds. Huss and Chajes, 199–231.

⁸³ Leo Schaya, *L'Homme et l'Absolu selon la Kabbale* (Paris: Correa, 1958); idem, *Universal Aspects of the Kabbalah & Judaism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2014), 1-26.

demonstrate the truth of traditional religious beliefs to their readers, who were presumed to be well aware of contemporary occult trends. R. Aaron Mendel Hakohen (1866–1927), rabbi of the Ashkenazic community of Cairo, cited an account of spiritualism practiced by two women from his community to argue for the immortality of the soul.⁸⁴ R. Moshe Zalman Ahrenzohn (1858–1908) pointed to hypnotism and spiritualism as irrefutable proofs for the existence of the soul.⁸⁵ R. Mordechai Aryeh Nissenbaum (1870–1951) published an apologetic work, *Mosdot ha-Emunah* (The Foundations of Faith) that presents reports of clairvoyance and telepathy as proof of the existence of miracles, and compiled a voluminous paranormal compendium, *Siḥu be-Khol Niflo'atav*, which was never published.⁸⁶ R. Avraham Duber Kahana-Shapira (1870–1943), the last chief rabbi of Lithuania, argued that the findings of parapsychology gave the lie to presumptions of scientific omniscience.⁸⁷

Other rabbis sought to relate contemporary occult trends to traditional Jewish concepts. Aaron Marcus (1843–1916) discussed spiritualism, mesmerism, and telepathy in light of Judaism in his thick tome *Der Chassidismus* (1901).⁸⁸ R. Shlomo Schück (1844–1916), rabbi of Karcag in Hungary, argued that the *urim ve-tumim*, a component of the biblical high priest's breastplate traditionally understood to have divinatory qualities, operated through mesmerism.⁸⁹ R. Menahem Mendel Ekstein (1884–1942) referenced concepts originating in mesmerism in his hasidic primer *Tena'ei ha-Nefesh le-Hasagat ha-Ḥasidut*.⁹⁰ Ekstein's friend, the Galician rabbi Yekutiel Aryeh Kamelhar (1871–1937), cited both Marcus and Schick in his history of Hasidism

⁸⁴ Aaron Mendel Hakohen, *Ha-Neshamah veha-Kadish* (Jerusalem: Levi & Partners, 1921), ff. 45b–47a; Glauber-Zimra, “Summoning Spirits in Egypt.”

⁸⁵ Moses Zalman Ahrenzohn, *Moreh Nevukhei ha-Dor* (Vilna: The Widow and Brothers Romm, 1908)

⁸⁶ Mordecai Aryeh Nissenbaum, *Sefer Mosdot ha-Emunah* (Warsaw: Binyamin Lifshitz, 1910). A second edition with a new introduction appeared in New York City in 1924. For information on *Siḥu be-Khol Niflo'atav*, see Borukh Rivkin Papers, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, RG 476, Folder 21.

⁸⁷ Avraham Duber Kahana-Shapira, *Fortrog iber taares-hamishpokhe*, 2nd ed. (Kédainiai: S. Movšovičiaus, 1938).

⁸⁸ Verus [Ahron Marcus], *Der Chassidismus: Eine kulturgeschichtliche Studie* (Pleschen: Jeschurun, 1901).

⁸⁹ Solomon Schück, *Mi-Moshe 'ad-Moshe* (Munkacs: Kahn & Fried, 1903).

⁹⁰ Menahem Ekstein, *Tena'ei ha-Nefesh le-Hasagat ha-Ḥasidut* (Vienna: Union Press-Appel Brothers, 1921); Reiser, “The Encounter in Vienna.”

to conclude that the Baal Shem Tov, the legendary founder of the hasidic movement, employed mesmerism to ascend to heaven.⁹¹ R. Eliyahu Mordekhai Wolkowsky (1873–1962), a Russian-born rabbi who served on the high rabbinic court of Jerusalem, incorporated spiritualist literature into his own scientific-kabbalistic writings on creation.⁹² Lastly, R. Léon Ashkenazi (1922–1996), an influential twentieth-century French-Jewish theologian, was influenced to some degree by the traditionalist teaching of Guénon.⁹³

Between Judaism and Occultism

It is often difficult to assess the nature of the Jewish identity of modern Jewish occultists, the extent of their knowledge of and connection to Jewish traditions, and the impact, if any, of Jewish perspectives on their esoteric doctrines and practices. While some Jewish occultists maintained a religious, ethnic, or national Jewish identity, others were estranged from their Jewish roots, with some even hostile to Judaism (or at least Orthodox Judaism). With that, many Jewish occultists argued for the compatibility of Judaism and Western esoteric doctrines. Integrating Jewish themes into their occult teaching and practices, they interpreted esoteric doctrines from an explicitly Jewish perspective. The Anglo-Jewish spiritualists of the Jewish Society for Psychical Research, for instance, argued that spiritualism was compatible with Judaism, incorporated Jewish themes into their writings and activities, and declared that “no religion could be more spiritual than ours.”⁹⁴ In similar fashion, Jewish theosophists identified theosophical doctrines with Jewish (especially kabbalistic) teachings, integrated Jewish and theosophical sources in their writings, and even planned to build a Jewish synagogue at the headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, India.⁹⁵

The various social positions of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Jewry determined to a considerable degree the

⁹¹ Yekutiel Aryeh Kamelhar, *Sefer Dor De 'ah: Arba ' Tekufot Ḥasidut Beshtit* (Bilgoraj: N. Kronenberg, 1933).

⁹² Glauber-Zimra, “Writings on Spiritualism from the Archive of R. Eliyahu Mordekhai Wolkowsky.”

⁹³ Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 195–96.

⁹⁴ Glauber-Zimra and Huss, “No Religion Could be More Spiritual than Ours.”

⁹⁵ Huss, “Qabbalah, the Theos-Sophia of the Jews,”; idem, “‘To Study Judaism in Light of Theosophy and Theosophy in the Light of Judaism’.”

involvement of Jews in occult movements, as well as broader Jewish engagement with esoteric teachings and practices. As Jews in Western Europe integrated en masse into the middle class, many became estranged from Jewish orthodoxy yet remained concerned with religious questions. Occult groups, most of whom were willing to accept Jews in their ranks, held significant appeal both as an expression of embourgeoisement and a potential source of higher meaning. With that, many Jews encountered antisemitism within occult movements, circumstances that prompted the formation of particular Jewish groups and associations within the larger currents. Jewish occultists often responded to anti-Jewish biases — in particular, accusations that Judaism was materialistic and unspiritual — by drawing attention to Jewish spiritual and esoteric traditions, such as Kabbalah. In Eastern Europe, the breakdown of traditional life at the turn of the century sparked a search for assurance which many found in occult practices such as spiritualist séances and various modes of fortune-telling. In particular, the weakening of traditional religious belief prompted many ostensibly secularized Jews to engage with occult currents. Oftentimes, spiritualism or parapsychology served as a surrogate metaphysics that replaced the lost faith of their youth.⁹⁶ Indeed, in both its Eastern and Western European Jewish contexts, occultism appealed as a worldview that countenanced metaphysics unencumbered by the obligatory framework of Jewish law, even as many rabbinic writers cited occult phenomena in their apologetic works authored in defense of traditional Jewish beliefs. In this regard, Jewish occultism, with its pursuit of spiritual concerns outside of traditional religious frameworks, complicates conventional modern Jewish historiographical distinctions between religion and secularism.

Jewish occultists frequently engaged with Jewish issues, and many integrated Jewish doctrines and themes with Western esoteric topics. Jewish members of occult movements, such as the Theosophical Society, were particularly interested in Kabbalah and offered occult-inspired interpretations of kabbalistic teachings. While

⁹⁶ This standpoint was epitomized Isaac Bashevis Singer, who wrote that “[s]ince my religion consists of seeking God, rather than serving one already found, I am an adherent of what is called psychological research.” Isaac Bashevis Singer, *New Truths and Old Clichés: Essays by Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. David Stromberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 175.

some Jewish occultists had sufficient knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic to read Jewish kabbalistic sources in their original form, most of those raised in acculturated Jewish families derived their knowledge of Kabbalah from Christian, occult, and scholarly sources, as well as translations of kabbalistic texts into European languages; few Jewish members of occult movements were connected with traditional Jewish Kabbalists.⁹⁷ With that, Jewish occultists generally engaged with kabbalistic ideas from a Jewish perspective, even if their knowledge of Kabbalah was primarily derived from Western esoteric sources. In contradistinction to the Jewish members of occult movements, many of whom came from acculturated bourgeoisie families, quite a few rabbis and Kabbalists engaged in their writings with occult concepts, which they typically cited as affirmations of traditional Jewish metaphysical doctrines. The latter generally did not identify with any occult movements, nor interact personally with occultists, but rather were exposed to occult currents that had become part of the Jewish popular culture in Eastern Europe. They tended to relate to occult currents in the same manner they related to scientific knowledge — i.e., as an order of knowledge subordinate to the Torah, yet worth investigating with the aim of bolstering traditional religious belief.

As mentioned above, scholars of Western esotericism, first and foremost Wouter J. Hanegraaff, have defined the field as encompassing rejected knowledge. Like non-Jewish esotericists, Jewish occultists were frequently scorned by their coreligionists. The participation of Jews in occult movements engendered much criticism, particularly, but not exclusively, from traditional circles. Jewish occultists were at times criticized and disparaged in the Jewish press, and pamphlets, articles and public denunciations were issued against them. In the late nineteenth century, a partial translation of the *Zohar* into Judeo-Arabic by A. D. Ezekiel, a Jewish theosophist, was banned by rabbinic authorities; in the 1920s, the Jewish theosophists

⁹⁷ On the 1932 meeting between the New York Jewish theosophists and R. Yehuda Hayyim Auerbach, the head of one of the leading kabbalistic *yeshivot* in Jerusalem, see Huss, “Qabbalah, the Theos-sophia of the Jews,” 152. In the early 1930s, the Chortkov Hasidim of Vienna alleged that the anthroposophist and scholar of Jewish mysticism, Ernst Müller, clandestinely studied Kabbalah with their rebbe, R. Yisroel Friedman (1854–1934). S. Perlzohn, “Notitsen, mekubolim, mistiker, un zohar-forsher in Vien,” *Lemberger togblat*, 9 January 1932, 4.

in Basra, Iraq were excommunicated by various rabbinic authorities.⁹⁸ In the interwar period, Jewish spiritualists in England were frequently assailed by local rabbis, who published sermons asserting that spiritualism was unfit for Jews.⁹⁹ Within the realm of academic scholarship, the interest of some Jewish scholars in occult currents was ignored, and at times belittled, by other scholars. Gershom Scholem criticized Ernst Müller's interest in Anthroposophy, and disparaged Oskar Goldberg. Müller's writings have only in recent years been subject to scholarly attention, and Moses Gaster's interest in occultism and spiritualism was likewise ignored by scholars until recently. Other Jewish authors, scholars, and rabbis who engaged with occultism have not yet received any scholarly attention. In light of all this, Jewish occultism may be aptly characterized as "rejected knowledge."

Apart from the interest of Jewish occultists in Kabbalah, many were also interested in other religious traditions, especially those identified at the turn of the century as spiritual or mystical. Bloch, the Anglo-Jewish spiritualist and theosophist, was interested in Sufism and published a book on the teaching of the India Sufi teacher Inayat Khan. Other Jewish occultists, such as Alfassa, S. S. Cohen (1895-1980), Paul Brenton (1898-1981), Almi, Lewis, Schaya, John Levy, and Bergmann were also interested in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufism, and some of them played leading roles in the formation and propagation of modern Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi movements.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion: The Significance of Jewish Occultism

This preliminary survey of modern Jewish occultism reveals the great breadth of Jewish engagement with occult currents during the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. Across the world, Jews from a range of communities and denominations became interested in esoteric doctrines and practices; many joined occult

⁹⁸ Huss, "To Study Judaism in Light of Theosophy," 263-265.

⁹⁹ Glauber-Zimra and Huss, "No Religion Could be More Spiritual than Ours."

¹⁰⁰ Fenton, "Les judéo-soufis de Lausanne," 283-313; Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 225-31; Boaz Huss, "'A Jew Living in an Ashram': The Spiritual Itinerary of S.S. Cohen," *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 15 (2017): 21-29; Emily Sigalow, *American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

movements, sometimes playing leading roles in them. Apart from those Jews who actively joined occult organizations, a far greater number of Jews were exposed to occult ideas and practices through lectures, books, and articles published in both the general and Jewish press. Future studies will no doubt reveal further evidence of Jewish involvement in occult movements and broader engagement with occult ideas and practices. Additional research will enable us to map the transnational networks of modern Jewish occultists, better comprehend the unique characteristics of Jewish occultism, and deepen our understanding of the social and cultural contexts that spurred Jewish involvement in occult and alternative spiritual movements.

Jewish occultism had a considerable impact on both modern occult and Western esoteric currents and Jewish thought and culture. As we have seen, leading occultists, such as Max Theon, Mira Alfassa, Paul Brunton, Leo Schaya, and Roberto Assagioli, were of Jewish origins, and many other Jews active in occult movements wrote and spoke on esoteric topics. In certain cases, Jewish occultists introduced Jewish sources to other members of occult movements; integrating Jewish themes with esoteric doctrines, they offered Jewish perspectives on occult topics. Few studies thus far have studied the contribution of Jews to modern occultism, and further research is required to fully assess the impact of Jewish occultists on modern esoteric and alternative spiritual currents.

Jewish occultism also had a significant, albeit understudied, influence on modern Jewish thought and culture. Leading Jewish thinkers and writers such as Hillel Zeitlin, Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, Franz Kafka, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and many others engaged with occult ideas and practices. Occult currents became integrated within Jewish popular culture in Eastern Europe, yielding a new Jewish occulture enmeshed in the folkways of modern Jewish culture. Jewish occultism also had a considerable impact on the academic study of Kabbalah and Hasidism. Scholars of Jewish studies such as Adolf Frank, Moses Gaster, Joshua Abelson, and Ernst Müller were affiliated with occult movements, and their engagement with occult currents influenced their scholarly investigations of Kabbalah. Although Gershom Scholem, the founder of the academic study of Jewish mysticism, largely disparaged modern occult movements, his understanding of Kabbalah was considerably influenced by early modern forms of Western esotericism and he shared fundamental

assumptions with many contemporary Jewish occultists.¹⁰¹ Lastly, traces of occultism are found throughout turn of the century rabbinic literature. Occult phenomena were frequently cited by rabbinic writers who viewed them as empirical proofs of traditional Jewish religious truth claims, even if they did not always condone engagement with occult practices. With that said, future studies promise to shed further light on the place of occultism in modern Jewish thought and culture.

Finally, it should be noted that many Jewish occultists were politically engaged and integrated social and political concerns within their esoteric activities. Many of the Jewish theosophists in South Africa supported Gandhi and his political activities there as well as subsequently in India.¹⁰² The Jewish theosophist Salvatore Attal (a.k.a Soter, 1877–1967), the secretary of the Jewish Theosophical lodge in Livorno, was among the Jewish supporters of the Italian Fascist party.¹⁰³ Other Jewish occultists, including Imber, Gaster, Bergmann, and others, were involved in Zionist activities, and the Association of Hebrew Theosophists endorsed the Zionist cause. Both Jewish theosophists and anthroposophists who immigrated to Mandate Palestine were involved in Jewish-Arab reconciliation projects, and several Jewish occultists were noted pacifists. Many Jewish occultists were involved in other social movements, as well, including the fight for women's rights, vegetarianism, and various other social justice movements. More research is required to reveal the full impact of occultism on Jewish social and political activism.

In conclusion, the framework of Jewish occultism challenges several conventions of modern Jewish historiography. First, Jewish occultism introduces a new subject of study within the academic study of Jewish thought, and the subfield commonly designated as Jewish mysticism. The study of Jewish occultism enlarges the scope of research of modern Jewish thought, and at the same time challenges assumptions embedded in the category of Jewish mysticism that prevented the study of Jewish occultism and occultist forms of modern Kabbalah.¹⁰⁴ Second, Jewish life at the turn of the century is

¹⁰¹ Huss, "Academic Study of Kabbalah and Occultist Kabbalah," 121–27.

¹⁰² Chatterjee, *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends*; Lev, *Soulmates*; idem, "Gandhi and his Jewish Theosophist Supporters."

¹⁰³ Anne-Marie Baron, *Salvatore Attal, Ésotérisme Biblique* (Paris: L'Âge d'homme, 2015), 11–34.

¹⁰⁴ Boaz Huss, *Mystifying Kabbalah*, 102–23.

often viewed through the binary lens of religion and secularism. Jewish occultism, with its pursuit of metaphysics unencumbered by the obligatory framework of Jewish law, complicates prevalent notions of a sharp binary between traditional religious belief and secularism. Third, the history of Jewish occultism uncovers the prewar roots of the Jewish New Age revival that has flourished in the State of Israel and the diaspora from the 1960s to our day. The study of modern Jewish occultism stands to challenge prevailing conceptions of Jewish modernity and secularization, while offering new research paradigms for the historical study of Judaism and Western esotericism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.