

Kabbalistic Circles in Jerusalem (1896–1948)

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Preface

Both in Israel and beyond, it is difficult to ignore the diversity of the present-day kabbalah and the modest if rowdy revelations of this body of knowledge. While this phenomenon has indeed attracted substantial research attention in recent years, the literature has yet to take stock of the historical background behind these developments. First and foremost, the world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century kabbalists still awaits a full accounting. The hagiography that has been crafted by the progeny and admirers of these figures consists of dozens of books that paint a romantic picture of a glorious past. More specifically, the beginning of the twentieth century is depicted as a kabbalah renaissance unequalled since the halcyon days of R. Isaac Luria (HaARI) in Safad. Surprising as it may be, that same period's Hebrew and Yiddish *belle lettres* and, under their influence, the scholarly literature give the impression that by the early 1900s, the kabbalah deteriorated to the brink of extinction. According to this Zionist narrative, the flame was barely being preserved by a handful of survivors – a sort of dying kabbalah elite. Perhaps the boldest brushstrokes of this portrait were reserved for the contemporaneous kabbalah circles in Jerusalem, as Zionist writers portrayed a great awakening, on the one hand, and a steep decline, on the other. The desire to understand this contradiction is one of the main catalysts behind the present book, which focuses on the growth of the city's kabbalah seminaries from 1896 to 1948. An understanding of these institutions also opens a window onto various Jewish mystical streams throughout the rest of the Middle East and Eastern Europe, which still await comprehensive accounts of their own.

During these same years, Jerusalem became a cynosure for a host of kabbalists from around the globe, largely owing to the establishment of new yeshivot that were entirely dedicated to studying and disseminating the concealed Torah. Some of these institutions even devised systematic approaches to and curriculums for learning this wisdom. Seminaries of this sort practically did not exist in other communities, where kabbalists tended to study alone or in diminutive groups, on the margins of synagogues, Talmudic study halls, and Hasidic courts. For instance, we do not find so much as a single kabbalah yeshiva in Eastern Europe during this period. However, quite a few books on this topic were printed throughout the region, so that there was evidently a local readership. The various waves of *aliyah* (Jewish immigration to Palestine) at the outset of the twentieth century included seasoned kabbalists who sought an umbrella organization that would provide both financial support and a group framework in which to study. Moreover, young Torah scholars that displayed

an interest in kabbalah and sought a nurturing environment to pursue this calling also turned to such institutions. Established in 1737, the renowned Beit El Yeshiva, which concentrated a small handful of experienced kabbalists, was no longer the only “game in town.”

In 1896, Jerusalem’s kabbalah landscape began to diversify. A few institutions, most notably Rehovot haNahar and Sha’ar haShamayim, branched out of the aforementioned yeshiva or saw themselves as “the New Beit El,” while developing a unique character of their own. Among the resident scholars of these emergent seminaries were both Ashkenazim and Sephardim who energetically advanced their institutions, formulated curriculums, coined techniques, printed kabbalah material, and reached out to the traditional Jewish public, both in Palestine and abroad. Most of Jerusalem’s yeshivot championed the Sharabian way (discussed at length further on), but also had regulars with different leanings, such as devotees of the Vilna Gaon’s approach to Jewish mysticism. Be that as it may, the RaShaSh’s way was presented as the only legitimate interpretation of Lurianic kabbalah – a consensus view that indeed spawned indignation and resistance. The majority of the kabbalists, though, adopted one of the offshoots of the Sharabian school of thought or integrated elements of this gospel into other traditions, which they had brought from their places of origin.

In recent years, Menachem Kallus, Moshe Hallamish, Joseph Avivi, Pinchas Giller, and other researchers have expanded on the RaShaSh’s mysticism and theology. Moreover, they have presented his image against the backdrop of earlier kabbalah literature, analyzed *tikkunim* and *kavanot*, and conducted a typological comparison between Sharabian and other kabbalah streams that emerged in the nineteenth century. In fact, Giller’s monograph on the Beit El Yeshiva offers the most in-depth look at the RaShaSh’s thought and prayer intentions. Furthermore, he meticulously compares the Sharabian way with those of different Hasids and with the Vilna Gaon’s school of thought. That said, the literature has yet to describe the yeshivot themselves, their resident scholars, and wide-ranging enterprise from a broad historical context. Kabbalistic Circles in Jerusalem comes to fill this void. Put differently, this book adds a historical-cultural dimension to the literature on the early twentieth-century kabbalah world. The events of the Holocaust, the subsequent waves of immigration, the major socio-political transformations that Jerusalem underwent in 1948, and the diversification of the local kabbalah scene constitute the logical borders of this work. From this point forward, the picture indeed changed in many respects.

Apropos to its title, the book opens with a chapter on the kabbalah’s “imagined decline” in the eyes of Zionist novelists, poets, and researchers. A special emphasis is placed on the nostalgic writing of Ariel Bension, the

fiction of Haim Hazaz, and various accounts by Gershom Scholem, who began his research enterprise on Jewish mysticism during those same years. Chapter two begins with a quick survey of the RaShaSh's way and the criticism of this approach's exclusivity among kabbalah circles in Jerusalem. That said, the nub of this and the following chapter (2 and 3) is an exposition on the kabbalah seminaries in Jerusalem, particularly Beit El, Rehovot haNahar, and Sha'ar haShamayim. This account draws heavily on the abundance of material that was written by the habitués of these same institutions as well as an array of manuscripts that pertain to their activities: public notices, private correspondences, official letters, financial statements, and the dossiers of rabbinical emissaries. In the process, the chapter discusses the relations between kabbalists from different ethnic backgrounds. The fourth chapter expands on the efforts of R. Shimon Zvi Horowitz, a founder of Sha'ar haShamayim, to find the Lost Tribes. This undertaking is strongly linked to the rabbi's kabbalistic approach and his own vision of the emergent national redemption. Likewise, we unveil two harrowing epistles that Horowitz addressed to the Sons of Moses. In the hopes of advancing their exoteric goals, Jerusalem's kabbalists turned to the printing press. This enterprise constitutes the topic of the fifth chapter, which focuses on two major collaborations: new and improved editions of HaARI's works, which were predicated on manuscripts that the publishers happened to come across; and the first print version of the RaShaSh's siddur. The latter stirred up a heated debate within the community under review. All the more so, it intensified the dynamic between revelation and concealment – a balance that was espoused by kabbalah insiders. For the most part, these publications catered to the initiated—both veteran and novice practitioners of the Jewish mysticism—in the Land of Israel. Within this context, we introduce several unknown kabbalists whose printing initiatives rendered them cultural agents. The sixth chapter assays the “policy” of the Jerusalem seminaries toward the greater public. Embracing the hoi polloi, the yeshivot's resident scholars could no longer be viewed as an insular elite that strove to preserve the kabbalah's esoteric nature. Instead, they exhorted traditional Jews to expose themselves to a deeper stratum of their religion and culture. To this end, kabbalists disseminated prayers that were compiled for “lay” audiences. Additionally, the general public was encouraged to perform a variety of Lurianic and Sharabian kabbalah rituals and to learn the Zohar. In the seventh and final chapter, we examine the immediate reaction to this outreach in Jewish *belle lettres* and the local daily press. The resistance to, parody of, and disagreement with Horowitz and his cohorts in these works attest to the fact that Maskilic elements were apprised of what was going on in Jerusalem's kabbalah circles.



No single library encompasses all the material that I consulted in researching Kabbalistic Circles in Jerusalem. That said, it would have been impossible to complete this project *sans* the treasures housed in the Gershom Scholem Collection at the Israel National Library in Jerusalem. I would like to thank the librarians of the “Scholem room” from the bottom of my heart for maintaining such a tranquil, productive atmosphere and for the unfettered access to each of those sources. Furthermore, important archival material was discovered in the National Library’s Manuscripts Department, the Central Zionist Archive in Jerusalem, the Israel State Archives in Jerusalem, and the Yeshiva University Archive in New York. I am indebted to the directors and staff at all these institutions for helping me find the relevant documents. Rare notices and manuscripts also turned up at other libraries in Israel and the United States as well as private collections, whose owners were gracious enough to place these items at my disposal. In this respect, the book’s thick bibliographical list, which nearly constitutes a full inventory of the Jerusalem kabbalah seminaries’ publications and many other related manuscripts, promises to facilitate new studies in the field.

This short preface cannot possibly hold the names of all those people who helped bring the Hebrew and expanded English version of Kabbalistic Circles in Jerusalem to fruition. That said, my long conversations with and sage advice from Prof. Daniel Abrams, Prof. Zeev Gries, and Prof. Boaz Huss left an indelible mark on this book. I am also indebted to the fine craftsmanship of the translator Avi Aronsky, who proved equal to the task of transforming obscure and flowery kabbalistic rhetoric into flowing and comprehensible passages. May this book constitute a stepping stone to further research on twentieth-century kabbalah, not least its expansion beyond the formidable borders of the Jewish faith. The removal of the old barriers—the irrevocable shift in the balance between revelation and concealment in favor of openness—has also had a decisive impact on how traditional Jews approach this wisdom, to the point where the history of kabbalah, as it was hitherto understood, is in the midst of a veritable metamorphosis.

The Last Kabbalists

Ariel Bension and the Imagined Decline

In 1925, Ariel Bension (1880–1932), a staunch Zionist activist, came out with a small booklet titled *Hilula* (Anniversary of a Passing) – a quasi-introduction to a more comprehensive book. The latter, *Sefer Rafael*, was slated to be a biography of “the last kabbalist.” Or as the author put it, the book is about “the last Sephardic mystic-cum-hero of the moribund Sephardic Hasidism in the Beit El Yeshiva.”¹ He was essentially describing the lifestyle of his father, R. Yehoshua Ben-Zion of Morocco (ob. 1897), who was among the *habitué* of that same, venerable kabbalistic seminary in Jerusalem.² Needless to say, Beit El has been in the Jewish public’s consciousness since its halcyon days in the eighteenth century, under the leadership of Gedaliah Chayun (ob. 1750) and his successor Shalom Sharabi – none other than the RaShaSh (1720–1777). The yeshiva was best known for the “writs of allegiance” (or “contracts of unity”) that its kabbalists composed and for the depths of their asceticism and immersion into Lurianic kabbalah. Beit El disseminated redacted versions of HaARI’s writings and copied manuscripts of parts of a siddur bearing the RaShaSh’s *kavvanot*

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- 1 Bension, *Hilula*. An earlier, German version of this work places less of an emphasis on the yeshiva’s decline; idem “Die Hochzeit des Todes,” 956–972; idem, *Die Hochzeit des Todes*. In the introduction to the latter, Richard Beer-Hofmann wrote: “Die Hochzeit des Todes soll nur Einleitung einem grösseren Werke, dem Buch Raphael sein, und Sie sagten mir, dass Sie darin versuchen, Wesen und Art einer kabbalistischen Gemeinschaft festzuhalten, die, unter Spaniolen in Jerusalemstanden, Jahrhunderte wuchs und lebte, und nunmehe ihren Ende nahe ist.” Portions of the non-Hebrew edition remain in manuscript form to this day, along with various drafts by Bension on the Jewish mystical literature and its annals; see Grubel, *Catalog*, 4. For more on Bension, see Aranov, *A Descriptive Catalogue*, xiii–xv; Katz, *A Guide to the Archival Holdings*, 5–6; Levy, *Un diamante en el camino*; Gaon, *Oriental Jews*, vol. 2, 318–319; Low, “Dr. A. Bension,” 11–12; Ben-Yaakov, *A History of the Jews of Iraq*, 32, 66–67; Yatsiv, *Between Eye and Soul*, 215–216; R. Binyamin, *Family of Scribes*, 314–316; Kressel, *Encyclopedia of Modern Hebrew Literature*, vol. 1, 292; Tidhar, *Encyclopedia of the Pioneers*, vol. 4, 1626.
 - 2 Bension, “The Interpreter of the Zohar,” 14: “I was born into a Cabbalistic circle in Jerusalem, and I absorbed Cabbala almost with my mother’s milk. I was brought up surrounded by scholars who carried on daily discussions on the Zohar, and my father was the spiritual head of this group of learned Chassidim.” Also see the notes that Scholem added on the margins of his personal copy of Ariel Bension, *The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain* at the Gershom Scholem Library, Jerusalem.

(kabbalistic prayer intentions that were integrated into the traditional liturgy). The kabbalists of Beit El devoted themselves to these silent meditative prayers, which last for hours (a practice that Pinchas Giller expounds upon in his groundbreaking book on the Sharabian kabbalah).³

In *Sefer Rafael*, Bension endeavored to describe the yeshiva and its lifestyle up to the early 1900s. That said, only the aforementioned introduction to the full-scale book came out during his lifetime. As evidenced from his correspondence, Gershom Scholem was quite familiar with the author and his books, and even kept in touch with his widow.⁴ In any event, attempts to locate the rest of Bension's shelved work on the Beit El Yeshiva have come to naught.⁵

The famed seminary is also discussed in a few of Bension's other works, in Hebrew, Spanish, English, and German. All these works portray Beit El as an institution that had lost its ardor and is thus mired in a state of atrophy. Examples include a booklet on Sharabi, a short article on the yeshiva and its evolution, a piece in the Viennese journal *Menorah* revolving around a couple of the writer's memories, and an appendix on the seminary in his comprehensive book about the Zohar.⁶ In all these publications, Bension waxed poetic about the yeshiva's way of life and its past leaders, but the present did not merit a faithful representation. Of course, he had nothing positive to say on Beit El's continued existence or any living kabbalists. At the end of one article, Bension gave a particularly far-fetched account:

That same star, Beit El, which rose upon Sharabi's arrival to Jerusalem, began to set at the end of the previous century and a period of internal disintegration commenced. The outer shell of Beit El was consumed over the years and the rot is crumbling those walls, which long ago were a stronghold of the sacred fire, which was borne hither from the mountains of the Galilee. The storms and rain completely destroyed the roof's dome,

3 There is a wide-ranging literature on the Beit El Yeshiva. See Frumkin, *Toldot Hakhmei Yerushalayim*, vol. 3, 46–54, 107–121; Gaon, *Oriental Jews*, vol. 1, 138–143; idem, “Beit El;” Gepner, *Midrasho shel Shem*; Moskowitz, *Sefer Hayei haRashash*, 90–94; Bar-Osher, “Foreword,” iii–xiii; Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, 156–169; Giller, “Between Poland and Jerusalem,” 237–238; ibid, *Shalom Sharabi and the Kabbalists of Beit El*. For a description of the yeshiva's daily schedule and customs, see the introduction of Yeshayah Asher Zelig Margaliot, *Sefer Sevi laSadiq*, 35–36; Hakohen, *Sefer Minhagei Beit-El*; Afg'in, *Sefer Divrei Shalom*, vols. 1–12.

4 Scholem, *Devarim b'Go*, 43–44. See Ida Bension, Letter to Scholem, 1932 (MS).

5 On the manuscript of the shelved book that was in the family's possession, see Gaon, *Oriental Jews*, 319.

6 Bension, *Shalom Sharabi*, 13–42, 48–49; idem, “Beth-El: Die Synagogue,” 678–681; idem, *The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain*, 242–246; *Retrievements*, 105–107.

this palanquin, which canopied those same “bridegrooms” adorned in white vestment, and lusterless silver candelabras spread their pale light on the faces of stooped and decrepit figures. The spirit, which hovered long ago over Beit El; the prayers, which ended with yearnings for the redemption; the *kavvanot*, the struggle for *tikkun* [rectification]; the melodies that engendered the unity of the hearts; the silence, which the holy fire whispered in it – all this slipped away and vanished, as though they were concealed by the meteors, which suddenly glow with their light over the mountains belonging to Jerusalem, the holy town.⁷

Advocating a revival of the East in the spirit of cultural Zionism, Bension perceived the kabbalah as a glorious movement that harbored sparks of the national redemption. That said, he also believed that it was a theological system that was no longer relevant to the “New Jew” in the Land of Israel. For this reason, kabbalah is destined to “vanish.”⁸

Critique of the Decline Theory

According to a 1931 review of Bension's *Master Shalom Sharabi* in the newspaper *HaOlam*, “this book, is the first attempt to present the life of Sephardic Hasidism in a new style and a modern lyrical-literary form, like that of Martin Buber with respect to Ashkenazic Hasidism.”⁹ R. Binyamin (the pseudonym of Yehoshua Radler Feldman) gushed that “With this precious book a gate has been opened for us to the world of mystery.” However, he also stressed that *Master Shalom Sharabi* is not “a historical research, but impressions and memories possessing the dew of childhood and pure excitement.”¹⁰ In an obituary on Bension, R. Binyamin added that “It was my privilege in my capacity as the editor of *Moznaim* to publish one of your most beautiful articles in this

7 Bension, “Beth-El: Die Synagogue,” 11; idem, *Shalom Sharabi*, 49.

8 For an in-depth look at Bension's thoughts on cultural Zionism and his vision of the East in his own words, see Bension, “El Neviei haSheker,” 1; idem, “The Jewish Renaissance in Eretz Israel,” 5–6. As a delegate of the Keren Hayesod in the 1920s, the author travelled throughout the Jewish world, including communities in India, Iraq, Egypt, Spain, Portugal, China, Mexico, Yemen, and Australia.

9 Yigal, “The Sephardic Hasidism,” 227–228. Bension himself mentioned the influence of Buber on his writings. In fact, he declared that Buber's books on East European Hasidism led him back to the study of Jewish mysticism. See Ida Bension, *Letters to Martin Buber*, 1932 (MS).

10 R. Binyamin, “*Master Shalom Sharabi* by Bension,” 21.

profession. From Beit El you hailed, from the tribe of ‘intenter’ [*mekhavvim*]. And you too were an ‘intenter’ your entire life, a dreamer-intenter, a poet-intenter, a laborer-intenter. And you labored not with the passions of rhetoric, which was repugnant to you, not with clamor; I’ll say it candidly, not with the ‘revealed’ in you, but with the ‘concealed’ in you, in the undertones of the esoteric, the religious undertones in you.”¹¹ What is more, foreign translations of Bension’s books and articles also received positive feedback, especially from the German reading audience.¹²

As opposed to these adulatory pieces, Moshe David Gaon’s 1931 review of *Hilula* excoriates Bension for “the dissembled wonderment and the radical emotionalism” that “are alien to the spirit of Jerusalemite Sephardic Hasidism.” The reviewer was intimately familiar with the Beit El Yeshiva, as his father was a regular at the institution for several years. On the basis of this knowledge, Gaon described many of its figures in *The Oriental Jews in the Land of Israel* (1938).¹³ At any rate, he doubted whether Bension’s planned sequel would provide a faithful account of Jerusalem’s kabbalists:

For this reason [i.e., the author’s sentimentality] I will allow myself to be removed if the body of the forthcoming book will be able to be accepted in the literature in a bond of trust, which depicts and establishes the image and lives of the Sephardic Hasids in Jerusalem. And there is no difference in my opinion, who is “the last hero,” the Sephardic mystic of the moribund Hasidism in the Beit El Yeshiva in Jerusalem, whose life will be described and illuminated in *Sefer Rafael*. Only it bears emphasis, for the sake of historical truth, that he was not the last and that Sephardic Hasidism is not dying as per the account of the distinguished writer; that

¹¹ Idem, “Following the Loss of Bension,” 16.

¹² See, for example, the review of Eugen Hoeflich (Moshe Ya’akov Ben-Gavriel) on *Die Hochzeit des Todes*: idem, “Neue östliche literatur,” 32; idem, *Tagebücher*, 346; and Themanly, “The Beth El Kabbalist,” 22–24. Some reviewers compared Bension’s works to those of Dante and Novalis. In 1921–1922, Bension was interested in commissioning the well-known Jewish ethnologist, musicologist, and composer Abraham Zevi Idelson to compose “Oriental music” for a proposed film adaptation of *Die Hochzeit des Todes* – his book on the last kabbalist. See Bension, Letters to Idelson (MS); Cohen, “The Opera,” 130–131.

¹³ According to Gaon, his father was a foreign emissary of Beit El; in this capacity, he was responsible for the yeshiva’s collections (i.e., charity boxes) overseas. Upon immigrating to Jerusalem in 1919, the fund raiser joined the ranks of the seminary’s habitués; Gaon, *Oriental Jews*, vol. 2, 189–191.

said, there is no denying that it has declined a great deal from its import, from its grandeur, and its vitality in the past.¹⁴

Gaon also hints that Bension's father is the protagonist of *Hilula*. Moreover, he discusses the reception of the book's German edition. In Gaon's estimation, it was feted in the German press due to many odd Romantic inclinations in that country. However, in the Land of Israel, he claimed, this topic cannot be digested in such a manner:

In place of the act in which Hasidism is revealed with all its flaws through the lens of reality and actuality – one must not ignore the deficiencies that are attributed to it, lest naïve people believe that this is the color of the standard that Rabbi Gedaliah Chayun, and Shalom Mizrachi Sharabi (the Sun) of blessed memory raised in their time, and under it [i.e., this misperception] their progeny and admirers will today be deceived and misconstrue it [the kabbalah].¹⁵

Although Gaon believed that the kabbalists had regressed, he merely saw this as a passing phase. The intellectual then concluded his review with the following hopes:

The Hasidic movement and the pathways of its development among the Sephardim in Jerusalem – still awaits its describer and appraiser. It is still too early to speak of “the last Sephardic mystic and of the dying Hasidism in Beit El in Jerusalem.” Unlike the Baal-Shem-Tov Ashkenazic Hasidism, which is boisterous and mirthful, this mystical movement that abounds in tranquility and eternal suffering – awaits a craftsman, who will reveal the source of light that is concealed therein, and who will draw out something of its delightful virtues, not one who will, God forbid, place a heavy stone over its ruins, but will spread out before the Hebrew audience with great love and pity its radiance in the past and its diminished standing in the present. Even in times of decline we shall not tremble; it is a step down for the sake of ascending; the light and the shadow will stand out... I pray that our modest aspiration will come to pass, neither more... nor less...¹⁶

14 Gaon, “Review of New Books,” 76–77.

15 Ibid, 77.

16 Ibid.

While the savior that Gaon longed for never materialized, numerous observers wrote about the ostensibly moribund state of the kabbalah world. On occasion, the Pollyannas grounded themselves on the work of Gaon himself, who penned a few surveys on the Beit El Yeshiva that objectively reported on the thinning of its ranks and other formidable hardships since the First World War.¹⁷

Until recently, Bension's accounts were to a large extent the only comprehensive descriptions of the Beit El Yeshiva. As such, they nourished early twentieth-century scholars, novelists, and even kabbalists who, for the most part, gleaned his myths about the RaShaSh.¹⁸

Reports of Decline and the Kabbalah-Socialism Myth

Riveting as they may be, Bension's accounts of the kabbalists' supposed fall from grace evidently attest to a heartfelt wish or the Romantic proclivities of an author who was reared in and subsequently distanced himself from their world. In any event, a similar picture of the Beit El Yeshiva emerges from the period's Hebrew and Yiddish literature and even from its scholarly writing, to the point where the Jerusalem institution became a symbol of "the sinking kabbalah."¹⁹ Descriptions of living kabbalists or other seminaries were eschewed in favor of that same comforting picture of Beit El's dissipation and the consequent birth or rejuvenation of something else. Even an objective historian like Eliezer Raphael Malachi, who grew up in and was intimately familiar with

17 Gaon, *Oriental Jews*, vol. 1, 138–143; idem, "The Holy Community," 117–120, 236–241; idem, *The Sages of Jerusalem*, 14–18. A substantial amount of the material that Gaon collected on Jerusalem's kabbalah seminaries, including original documents, have been preserved in his personal archive; see Gaon, Notes and Documents on the Annals of the Kabbalistic Yeshivot in Jerusalem (MS). While Gaon was working on *Oriental Jews*, the kabbalist Ovdia Hedaya sent him material on Beit El; Hedaya, Two letters to Gaon on the Sages of the Beit El (MS).

18 See, for example, the generous use of Bension's observations in the literature: Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 328–329, 422; Themanlys, *The History of Beit El* (MS); idem, "Bethel Foyer du Hassidisme Sefardi," xxii–xxiii; Heschel, "Rabbi Gershon Kutover," 52; idem, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, 84; and the reprinting of several pages in Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, 156–161; idem, "The Uplifting of Sparks," 112–113; Hoffman, *The Kabbalah Reader*, 104–107. The kabbalist Jacob S. Kassin also drew on one of Bension's books for his own account of the RaShaSh; Kassin, *Sefer Pri Esh haGan*, 7–15.

19 Among the fanciful accounts of Beit El's demise are Frumkin, *Toldot Hakhmei Yerushalayim*, vol. 3, 46–56, 107–121; Freiman, *Sefer haZikharon haYerushalmi*, 10, 50, 81.

turn-of-the-century Jerusalem, wrote in 1931 that Beit El's decline began back in the 1870s. Moreover, he described the head of the seminary, Yedidyah Raphael Chai Abulafia (the YaREh), as "the last of the kabbalists' lions and with his death [in 1869] the candle, which was kindled by Rabi Gedaliah Chayun, began to wither until it completely expired." Malachi also contended that Abulafia vehemently opposed the opening of modern Jewish schools, namely those integrating general and religious studies, in Jerusalem, but "history avenged him." Abulafia's grandson, Nissim Behar, "established the first standardized school in Jerusalem," thereby laying "the foundation for Hebrew education, from whose roots we are imbibing to this very day."²⁰ Succinctly put, besides offering an account of destruction, the researcher claimed that a profoundly different enterprise had sprung forth from these ashes. Like all his contemporaries, Malachi failed to describe the living kabbalists who indeed perpetuated the allegedly wilting traditions of Sharabi and his ilk; and the same can be said for all the researcher's contemporaries.²¹

A similar fate was shared by the period's Hasids. Evocative descriptions of Hasidism's atrophy and decline were penned by those same writers who lauded the Hasidic literature and its resplendent past, including those who

20 Malachi, "Nissim Behar," 158–160. Behar discussed his efforts on behalf of "standardized education" in a newspaper article; Nissim Behar, "Paris," 364–367.

21 Malachi also brought up this topic in 1928; idem, *Mekubalim in Eretz Yisroel*, Introduction: "This work interested me from as far back as my youth. When I was a small boy, before leaving Jerusalem, I would frequently visit the seminaries in which they studied kabbalah, a place where 'the last Mohicans' of the kabbalah world would sit on low stools and learn the Zohar and other kabbalah books in a sad tune. I would sit for hours on end in the yeshiva of someone that recently passed away, the sage Isaac Gagin. Out of compulsion, I would leaf through the dusty old books, and I would listen to the deeds and myths that Gagin would tell me about Shalom Sharabi and the other kabbalists from the Beit El Yeshiva." The work ends with R. Hayyim Vital. The author represented the so-called "end" of those mystics, or the description of their remnants, exclusively through the story of Beit El, as he refrained from mentioning the other kabbalistic seminaries in Jerusalem. In this work, Malachi also touches on the RaShaSh (ibid, 20): "Rabbi Shalom Sharabi was the last of the great kabbalists. He was the true restorer of past glory. He was the one that rekindled the light of the kabbalah. A light that burns to this very day. A small center of Beit El exists to this very day in Jerusalem." A planned sequel to *Mekubalim in Eretz Yisroel* never came to fruition. At any rate, the "first volume" merited positive reviews in the press; Yekuti'el, "Kabbalists," 584. Malachi did eventually devote an article to his contemporary Jewish kabbalists. Among the featured figures in this piece were the Jerusalemites Shimon Zvi Horowitz, Menahem Menkhin Halperin, and Rahamim ben David Shrem. See Malachi, "R. Shimon Zvi Horowitz," 330–331.

spurred on a renewed interest in this corpus, albeit in the new Romantic spirit of the time.²²

These same, Zionist writers raised the banner of the “writs of allegiance,” which had epitomized the fellowship between Beit El’s kabbalists. Most of these compacts were later published on various stages between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as part of the efforts to construct a model for the idea of the emergent Land-of-Israel communes. All that the authors had to say about living kabbalists was that they were “final remnants” or a minor phenomenon unworthy of serious attention.²³ A case in point is Alexander Ziskind Rabinowitz’s article “The Commune among the Kabbalists of Jerusalem” from 1923. Besides providing the text of one of the said compacts, Rabinowitz argued that “The commune, qua idea, was discovered among the kabbalists of Eretz Yisrael 166 years ago. The kabbalah, which strives for absolute unity and equality, is what paved the way for the rise of the commune.”²⁴ Thereafter, other writers followed Rabinowitz’s lead, such as Eliezer Rivlin (in his notes to Aryeh Leib Frumkin’s book), and Eliyahu Tsherikover, who stressed the socialist dimension of the writs.²⁵

The observer who put the lie to the analogy between the writs of allegiance and the modern communes in Palestine was Shaul Hana Kook (the brother of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook – the Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Mandatory Palestine). “In our days,” he wrote, “before our eyes, a” completely baseless “myth has taken form as to the commune of the RaShaSh.”²⁶ Moreover, Kook identified Rabinowitz as the one who had disseminated the misinformation

22 For more on this phenomenon, see Ross, *Beloved-Despised Tradition*; Meir, *Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*, 10–39.

23 The writs of allegiance have merited considerable attention. See Gepner, *Midrasho shel Shem*, 40–51; Benayahu, “The Writs of Allegiance of Jerusalem’s Kabbalists,” 14–18; Liebes, “The Messiah of the Zohar,” 157–158; Morgenstern, *Mysticism and Messianism*, 94–103; Fine, “A Mystical Fellowship in Jerusalem,” 210–214; idem, “Spiritual Friendship,” 61–75. Benayahu provides the exact wording of these compacts. On the assorted versions and content of these documents, see Kook, “On the Association of Jerusalem’s Kabbalists,” 84–85. On earlier fellowships and the origins of these sort of mystical groups see Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 300–314; Weinstein, *Kabbalah and Jewish Modernity*, 261–324.

24 Rabinowitz, “The Commune,” 469–471; idem, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 141–144.

25 Frumkin, *Toldot Hakhmei Yerushalayim*, vol. 3, 47–48, note 3; Tsherikover, “Die Komune,” 115–139. Moreover, similar accounts were destined to rear up, such as the following article in an organ of the kibbutz movement: Nini, “The Writs of Allegiance,” 12–13.

26 Kook, “The Myth surrounding the Commune in Jerusalem Kabbalistic Circles,” 128–130; idem, “The Annals of the Kabbalist Society in Jerusalem,” 134–137; idem, “The First Writ of Allegiance of the Jerusalem Kabbalists,” 221–225; idem, *Studies*, vol. 2, 153–159.

that the kabbalists shared their property. Kook concluded that this theory is a “flight of fancy.” However, at the time, the myth was stronger than reality.

Gershom Scholem and Coeval Kabbalists

In the same 1943 edition of the journal *Moznaim* as an article by Bension on the Beit El Yeshiva, one S. Adaya contributed a short story titled *Nehora Kadisha* (Holy Light), which she dedicated to Gershom Scholem. The work describes a kabbalist in Jerusalem’s Old City who manages to calculate the end of the days. However, the protagonist winds up taking the secret with him to the grave. When other kabbalists realize what had happened, they set out to salvage his findings; but they are scalded in the process and ultimately abandon the quest. Over the course of the story, the gap between the old-school mystic and the next generation comes into focus.²⁷ *Nehora Kadisha* not only reflected the prevailing attitude toward the putative decline of the kabbalah circles, but also the outlooks concerning the secrets that they harbored – esoteric knowledge that kabbalists, researchers, and novelists sought to embrace or debunk.

As adduced from his writings, Scholem’s approach is nearly the same as Bension’s and the rest of the decline camp, as he too employed terms and descriptions like “the remnants,” “the last of the kabbalists,” and “the survivors, the surviving residue who watch over the dim flame of the kabbalah and the gospel of *kavvanot* in a few of Jerusalem’s yeshivot.”²⁸ The scholar primarily referred to Beit El’s habitués, some of whom he met during his first years in Jerusalem.²⁹ On this particular topic, his accounts were predicated on and expansively cited from Bension’s work.³⁰ The crux of Scholem’s theory was that in response to the Sabbatai Zvi affair, Sharabi’s acolytes had basically withdrawn from public life. In *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, he claimed that the fellowship of Beit El decided to completely “forego” the creation of “a mass movement, in order to avoid a repetition of the disastrous consequences which had followed the most recent of these attempts.” As a group, these kabbalists “entirely renounced the more popular aspects of Lurianism [Lurianic mysticism] and

27 Adaya, “Nehora Kadisha,” 160–164. This same tension is described in a short story by Naftali Ben Menachem (who subsequently became a kabbalah scholar); idem, “The Kabbalist,” 3.

28 Scholem, *Devarim b’Go*, 225.

29 Boaz Huss elaborated on the genesis of this approach in several articles, including idem, “Ask No Questions,” 141–158; idem, “Authorized Guardians,” 104–126.

30 E.g., Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 328–329, 422.

tried to lead the kabbalah back from the market place to the solitude of the mystic's semi-monastic cell." Moreover, Scholem viewed Sharabi as "the classic representative of this tendency"³¹ In this context, he described the contemporaneous Beit El Yeshiva as "a forlorn spot in the Old City of Jerusalem." That said, Scholem noticed that the institution continued to resonate in the public consciousness:

Even today as I write these lines, men who are thoroughly "modern" in their thought may draw inspiration from contemplating what Jewish prayer can be in its sublimest form. For here the emphasis was again, and more than ever, laid on the practice of mystical prayer, the mystical contemplation of the select. "Beth El," says Ariel Bension, the son of one of its members, "was a community resolved to live in unity and sanctity. Of those who thought to enter its portals it demanded the attainment of the scholar and the self-abnegation of the ascetic. Thus it missed the masses." [...] Kabbalism becomes at the end of its way what it was at the beginning; a genuine esoterism. A kind of mystery-religion which tries to keep *profanum vulgus* at arm's length. Among the writings of the Sephardic Kabbalists of this school, which has exercised a considerable influence on Oriental Jewry, it would be difficult to find a single one capable of being understood by the laity.³²

These observations notwithstanding, Scholem refrained from expanding on the multifaceted world of Sharabi's followers. For instance, he made no mention of the various kabbalistic practices that they sought to promote as general religious duties for the community at large. On the face of things, Scholem described these mystics as aloof – shut off and secluded – and as individuals guarding the palace gates. He preferred the topic of East European Hasidism. At the time of its founding, he averred (in the spirit of Martin Buber), Hasidism was a vital movement that turned to the masses and transformed the kabbalah in various ways. As demonstrated in the next few chapters, though, these kabbalists straddled the fence between the revealed and the concealed and between populism and seclusion.

In his memoirs, Scholem reflected on the yeshivot under review in a similar fashion. However, the discussion is rather terse and is nestled into the author's description of his relentless hunt for Hasidic and kabbalah books:

31 Ibid, 328.

32 Ibid, 328–329.

In Jerusalem, the last of the kabbalists of Beit El and other yeshivot like Sha'ar haShamayim and Porat Yosef were still active. Beit El was a center with an uninterrupted tradition of approximately two hundred years entirely devoted to immersion into Lurianic kabbalah and praying with *kavvanot* – an introspective (meditative) practice that was designed down to the last detail by R. Shalom Sharabi, the rosh yeshiva [seminary head] in the mid-eighteenth century. All the *mekhavnim* followed in his footsteps. However, they did not recognize any stream outside of Lurianic kabbalah, and every other form of kabbalah was neither genuine in their eyes nor worthy of serious study. As such, they had no interest whatsoever in books of kabbalah that did not accord with their view, and certainly not in works of Hasidic literature that they deemed a sort of kabbalah for the masses that was incompatible with their spirit.³³

Scholem's research enterprise on Jewish mysticism coincided with a major resurgence of its use in the Land of Israel and an influx of Sharabian kabbalists to Jerusalem. Against this backdrop, it comes as no surprise that he tried to distinguish between kabbalah scholars and the contemporary kabbalists. This vantage point comes across in an observation that Scholem made in a 1935 article titled "Kabbalah at The Hebrew University:"

The kabbalist places himself within the long chain of the kabbalah's tradition and views it from the inside. He lives in the world of kabbalah and forgoes broaching questions that scientific-minded people must raise. And if I say that he dwells in this world, it means that he is living in that same curtailed part in adherence to that same approach that still exists and is persevering in recent generations too. He does not see the expansion in methods or the many and manifold variations of kabbalistic thought and he does not see the progression of things over the generations. [...] The last remnants of Lurianic kabbalists are still to be found in several yeshivot in Eretz Yisrael. These men are the last sentries at the palace door [i.e., authorized guardians]; from all the spiritual richness

33 Scholem, *MiBerlin leYerushalayim*, 206 (also see the shorter and heavily revised versions of this book in English and German; idem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 169–170). Thereupon, Scholem admitted that the kabbalists' horizons were broader than he had originally thought: "Only years later did I discover that a few of them also furtively occupied themselves with the writings of Abraham Abulafia and copied them for themselves, but these books did not come out in print." These activities at the Beit El Yeshiva will be discussed in the next chapter; *ibid* (missing in the English version).

and refinement in the kabbalah world, all that remains for them is that same psychological education and system of mystical training that goes by the name of “praying with intention.” They live in the world of “intention” [*kavvana*] and it is this method that they still teach; however, in all that concerns researching the entire range and depth of the kabbalah world there is no savior amongst them.³⁴

Scholem made similar comments in an English article from around 1938, titled “The Research of the Kabbalah at The Hebrew University:”

In Jerusalem there are, at the present day, certain Yeshivas where groups of Kabbalists can be found who are maintaining the chain of Kabbalist tradition, and safeguarding its spiritual heritage and treasures. Kabbalists in the Diaspora regard them as those most authorized and best fitted to expound their lore. But the great majority of these latter-day kabbalists have completely forgotten the historic elements of their movement. The only kabbalists [*sic*] system among them which still maintains a measure of vitality is that of Rabbi Shalom Sharabi of Yemen, who lived in Jerusalem during the Eighteenth Century. In this tradition the lore of the Kabbalists is based on the sacred forces of prayer, on prayer with devotions [*kavvanot*], absorption, and assimilation in the mysteries of Divinity and worship, down to details so minute as to border on excess. There are still, at the present day, followers of this lore of mystical devotion by means of prayer, who live their lives in accordance with it during long years of study and preparation. To them all other branches and sections of Kabbalistic lore have become closed and obsolete except insofar as they serve for the theoretical confirmation of the principles of devotion and meditation. If ever they do trouble to read one of the earlier Kabbalist’s works, it is only in order to discover therein the secrets of their own system.³⁵

Scholem occasionally depicted the “Sharabian kabbalists” as a monolithic group. Put differently, they all marched to the beat of the same drum and were devoid of true innovation. Therefore, he did not publically express his views on their sundry books, even though he was quite familiar with them. More specifically, the vast majority of these works reached Scholem’s personal library, and he even added comments on their margins. In an interview almost forty

34 Scholem, “HaKabbalah baUniversita haIvrit,” 14.

35 Scholem, “The Research of the Kabbalah at The Hebrew University,” 9–10 (also see the Hebrew version; idem, “Hakirat haKabbalah baUniversita haIvrit,” 9).

years later, Scholem described the regression of the Jerusalem kabbalah center *vis-à-vis* previous generations: “What remains from the kabbalah in Beit El was something akin to yoga. I got the impression that I was dealing with a group of people practicing yoga according to a Jewish formula in the Land of Israel.”³⁶ This contention resurfaces in a number of his later works, some of which also portrayed “the last survivor.” The common denominator between all these accounts was their brevity and lack of detail.

Scholem reprised the theme of the kabbalah world’s “decline,” especially with respect to the Beit El Yeshiva, in “On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in our Time.” He claimed that there is no “original mysticism” in his generation, save for a couple of exceptional phenomena.³⁷ Likewise, a “renaissance” was not to be found in Jerusalem’s kabbalah seminaries or in the practices of Sharabian mystics.³⁸ Rehashing earlier insights, Scholem noted that the writing of these same figures had transformed the kabbalah back into an esoteric field that is closed off to outsiders and difficult to penetrate. “Had I behaved like an Orthodox person,” Scholem contended, he would have acquired more knowledge about their enterprise.³⁹ As evidenced from his correspondence with one Samuel L. Lewis in 1948, Scholem displayed little interest in fathoming these realms. His *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* had sparked a fire in Lewis’ heart. Owing to the book’s descriptions of the Jerusalem kabbalists, the Jewish Sufi from California wanted to meet these same “survivors” for the sake of a spiritual unification. Scholem’s response to the new-age leader’s letter is compelling in several respects. Laced with derision, it nevertheless touches on the author’s link to, or more precisely, detachment from Jerusalem’s kabbalists. “I must confess,” Scholem wrote, “that I have never been initiated into any esoteric circle, and in interpreting Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism at all, I have been relying on my own intuition and that measure of understanding which a careful analysis of difficult texts on a philological basis may afford.”⁴⁰

Scholem indeed encountered quite a few kabbalists during his years in Jerusalem. These meetings are documented by an assortment of papers in his literary estate, notes written on the margins of books in his personal library,

36 Scholem, *Devarim b’Go*, 44.

37 Ibid, 71–83; Scholem, *On the Possibility*, 6–19. See Huss, “Ask No Questions,” 141–158; Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism*, vol. 11, 19–20.

38 Scholem, *Devarim b’Go*, 44.

39 Ibid.

40 Scholem and Lewis, Correspondence (MS). Scholem’s answer was published in Scholem, *Briefe*, vol. 2, 5–6. However, his reply cannot be understood without reading Lewis’ letter, which has remained solely in manuscript form.

and more explicitly in anecdotes and recollections gleaned from his memoirs. Among the Jewish mystics that he spoke with are R. Gershon Chaim Vilner, who attended Beit El and the Sha'ar haShamayim Yeshiva (Vilner agreed to teach his interlocutor kabbalah under one condition: *Keine Fragen zu stellen* – no questions allowed);⁴¹ R. Makhluף Amsalem, an alchemist and kabbalist who he visited together with Simcha Assaf;⁴² R. Eliyahu Avraham Mizrachi Dahuki, a mystic from Kurdistan who was apparently interested in teaching him practical kabbalah;⁴³ a face-to-face encounter with R. Yehuda Fetayah towards the end of the rabbi's life;⁴⁴ and he had a conversation about Abraham Abulafia with R. David Cohen the "Nazirite." Upon first hearing about the latter, Scholem was reportedly astonished: "I thought that the kabbalists had come to an end, yet here in Jerusalem wanders a living kabbalist and produces words of kabbalah in this day and age – a living kabbalist!"⁴⁵ In any event, Scholem concluded his own impressions of Cohen thus: "All my efforts to get to the bottom of his thought came to naught."⁴⁶ In 1938, Scholem received an invitation to Rehovot haNahar Yeshiva (discussed at length below) from R. Eliyahu Dweck-HaKohen, the head of the seminary. "It is our privilege," Dweck-HaKohen wrote, "to invite you to visit our institution, for we have heard that his honor is interested in the wisdom of the kabbalah; on our premises, he will find a library rich in this knowledge."⁴⁷ There are doubts as to whether Scholem took advantage of this

41 Scholem, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, 117; idem, *Devarim b'Go*, 43–45. See Huss, "Ask No Questions," 141, 155. Sha'ar haShamayim's records suggest that Vilner was among the yeshiva's regulars; Sha'ar haShamayim, *Account Books* (MS), 1908–1922.

42 Scholem refers to this encounter on the margins of his personal copy of *Tapukhei Zahav B'maskiot Kesef* (1926–7). Also see Fenton, "Rabbi Makhluף Amsalem," 92–123.

43 Scholem, *Notes on Contemporary Kabbalists* (MS). Mizrachi copied various manuscripts, including the book of magic *Harvah deMoshe*. In 1931, he printed *Refuah veHayyim meYerushalyim* (Medicine and Life from Jerusalem), which includes remedies and amulets from various manuscripts.

44 Scholem makes note of this in his personal copy of Fetayah, *Sefer Beit Lehem Yehuda* (vol. 1, 1936). This book is currently in the possession of The Hebrew University's Bloomfield Library.

45 This anecdote was related by Zalman Shazar, the third president of Israel. See Cohen (haNazir), *Kol haNevua*, page 9 of the appendix "Praise Be the Voice of the Prophecy." This section consists of adulatory speeches about the said book that were given at the President's Residence in the summer of 1970.

46 Scholem, *MiBerlin leYerushalayim*, 204. For Cohen's impressions of Scholem after giving the latter a manuscript by Abulafia, see Cohen, *Mishnat haNazir*, 819–834. For a discussion on this encounter, see Idel, "Abraham Abulafia," 819–834; Bitty, *Philosophy and Kabbalah*, 250–252; Huss, "The Formation of Jewish Mysticism," 142–162.

47 Eliyahu Dweck-HaKohen, Letter to Gershom Scholem, 1938 (MS).

opportunity; and if so, how the tour went. Despite these encounters and the wide-ranging literature that these figures penned, Scholem was not motivated to write about what was transpiring in their circles. That said, he did make an effort to secure all of their publications for his collection.

In light of the above, Scholem's attitude towards these kabbalists and every other manifestation of Jewish mysticism in early twentieth-century Palestine must be understood within the broad context of the prevailing mindset at the time among Jewish novelists, especially in the Yishuv (the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel). These intellectuals were wont to understate the value of their contemporaneous kabbalists' enterprise or to ignore it altogether. At one and the same time, though, these writers, as well as academic scholars, burrowed through the Jewish mystical literature in the hopes of igniting other sparks with which to construct a new literary, research, and/or interpretive edifice.

Haim Hazaz's Vision of Decline

The sources under review not only depict a world that is slowly ebbing or has already vanished, but were part of a trend to assert that the kabbalah's decline in the Land of Israel was a *fait accompli*. Historic events, foremost among them the ingathering of the exiles in the Zionist spirit, had sealed the fate of Jewish mysticism. This position was radically evinced in a handful of belletristic works by Haim Hazaz, an East European Jewish writer who immigrated to Palestine in 1931. During these years, there were also novelists, like Israel Zarchi and Ezra Hamenahem, who had a different take of the local kabbalah scene, casting some of its practitioners in a positive light. However, these viewpoints were exceptions to the rule. Over the next few pages, we will examine several of Hazaz's works that comport with the "decline theory."

In the novel *Ya'ish* (1947–1952), Hazaz portrayed a Yemenite kabbalist who undergoes a metamorphosis amid a series of trials and tribulations.⁴⁸ Given the background, it is only natural for the reader to conjure up images of other mystics, not least Shalom Sharabi. While in Yemen, the protagonist, Ya'ish, is occupied with mystical practices, such as *yihudim* and *kavvanot*. He merits dreams, visions, and ascents of the soul and regularly merges with the upper

48 Hazaz, *Ya'ish*, parts 1–4. He published the first chapters of this novel under the pseudonym Zecharya Uzali (a moniker for a native of Sana'a), before issuing a revised edition, under his own name, circa 1968. For a disquisition on Hazaz and his major works, see Bargad, *Ideas in Fiction*; Kressel, *Encyclopedia of Modern Hebrew Literature*, vol. 1, 595–597.

spheres by feverishly dancing at ritualistic celebrations to musical renderings of poetry by the kabbalist and Torah scholar Shalom Shabazi (1619–1720).⁴⁹ These scenes are comprised of fragments of kabbalistic texts that Hazaz interspersed, to distinctive emotional and prosodic effect.⁵⁰

Towards the end of Hazaz's circuitous plot, Ya'ish immigrates to Palestine, where the revelations that he often had in Sana'a come to a grinding halt. As one of the book's characters puts it, "the Land of Israel is the end of all the miracles."⁵¹ The novel concludes with the protagonist deeply regretting this loss: "Indeed, he was not answered – not in word and not in action, not with a vision nor a dream. Every travail he travailed and every exertion he exerted did not help. The heavens were sealed before him and would not be opened for the rest of his days, forever."⁵² Although Hazaz's description of this stage in Ya'ish's life is threadbare, the hero undergoes a transmigration and redeems himself via deeds, rather than visions. Upon encountering the temporal realm of Palestine, his religious-cum-mystical life changes so drastically that the "old

49 Ya'ish's visions are concentrated in the third part of the book, but a few turn up in the fourth as well. The first two sections cover the hero's youth, the early years of his marriage, and a litany of struggles. According to Halevy, these visions are a satire or parody of the mystics' "fall;" Halevy, *Image and Self-Portrait*, 76–78, 87–93. In a few of Ya'ish's ascents, the import of the kabbalistic world actually rises, even surpassing the heavenly realms. For instance, the angels that he encounters are not impressed with his stories of redemption. It is "doubtful," Hazaz wrote, "that they hear and they certainly do not understand." See Rabinovitz, "Between Supremacy and Inferiority," 251–254; Bargad, *Ideas in Fiction*, 105. The satirical conversation with the angels was translated into English by Ezra Spicehandler: Hazaz, "Yaish Meets the Angels," 51–57 [idem, *Stories*, 251–261].

50 That said, it is worth remembering Abramson's words on this topic: "The novel *Ya'ish* was influenced by the kabbalah, of course. And there is no need to go into detail and extrapolate, only that when you check you find that not all the words of the kabbalah therein derive from the kabbalah's sources, and some of them are nothing but the fruit of Hazaz's ingenuity, who suited his language to the language of the kabbalah. There are those who sought to draw insights from this on the language of the Jewish ethnicities, such as the natives of Yemen, but this warrants extreme caution, two- and fourfold. In my estimation, whoever comes and says: such is the Yemenites' speech – it is incumbent upon him to bring evidence that this is indeed the case, and that it is not the creation of Hazaz." Abramson, "The Language of Haim Hazaz," 72.

51 Hazaz, *Ya'ish*, part 4, 139. Be that as it may, the novelist recounts an episode in which Beit El's kabbalists put forth a "dream question;" *ibid*, 144.

52 *Ibid*, 231. Also see Kurzweil, *Our New Literature*, 265; Halevy, *Image and Self-Portrait*, 24; Elhanani, *Four Authors and Their Narratives*, 163.

ways” lose their significance or, more precisely, are no longer accessible.⁵³ Between the lines, the novelist criticized those who wished to adhere to the Diasporic lifestyle Palestine. What is more, he alluded to the ideological revolution that was ushered in by the Jewish people’s new, profane historical reality. In a certain sense, then, Ya’ish’s *aliyah* (literally ascent), namely his immigration to Palestine, was his *yeridah* (descent).

Similar to a handful of earlier writers from the First Aliyah (a wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine between 1882 and 1903), Hazaz enlisted “Yemenite mysticism” to the service of “the ideological story.” More specifically, he presented images of Yemenite kabbalists that embody not only an ethnic way of life, but a “vision of the earthly redemption.” The shift from *aliyah* (ascension) to lofty spheres to *aliyah* (immigration) to the material Land of Israel became a basic template for some of Hazaz and his above-mentioned predecessors’ works.⁵⁴

Hazaz expanded on this theme in the novel *HaYoshevet ba’Ganim* (She Dwelleth in the Gardens, 1944). To some extent, this novel picks up where *Ya’ish* left off. Once again, the narrative revolves around the figure of a seer – a dreamer who calculates the end of the days – by the name of Mori Said, whose mystical world is vanishing before his very eyes. In contrast to Ya’ish, this protagonist does not experience ascensions of the soul. His world is comprised of dreams that he interprets by connecting a myriad of gematrias and acronyms. As per the mystic’s understanding of his own dreams, the Exile has been abrogated; the messiah has already taken up residence in Jerusalem; and is on the verge of revealing himself. As Hazaz puts it, “all his dreams were really identical,

53 For a full analysis of this story, see Miron, *Haim Hazaz*, 47–111; Michali, *By the Potter’s Wheel*, 165–181; Bargad, “Hazaz’s Yemenite Works,” 232–250; idem, *Ideas in Fiction*, 101–109; Goitein, “Hazaz’s Yemenite Enterprise,” 232–244; Drori, *Yemenite Redemption and New Hebraism*. Also see Michal Oron, “Mystical Elements in the Novel *Ya’ish*,” 162–170. Oron provides a different interpretation of the closing scene, as he views the shuttering of heavens’ gates in a positive light. Alternatively, Ratzaby wrote that “Ya’ish, who in the Diaspora was the son of the kingdom of heaven, with his *aliyah* to the Land of Israel the gates of heaven were shut before him. This contains a hint of the lowering in the status of the religious and spiritual figure in the Yishuv [Jewish settlement] in the Land of Israel, which is causing the removal of the *shkkinah* [divine presence],” Ratzaby, “Hebrew Dialects,” 75, note 3. For more on Ratzaby’s interpretation, see Barzel, “Introduction,” 13–15. This reading appears to deviate widely from Hazaz’s own words, but the gates of interpretation have yet to be sealed.

54 For more on this paradigm, see Berlovits, *Inventing a Land, Inventing a People*, 98–102; Gerber, *Ourselves or Our Holy Books*, 85–116.

variations on one central theme: the hour of redemption was near. And this was actually the cause of his *aliya* to Palestine... Mori Said had prophesied that hard times would come, that they would pave the way for the Messiah's advent. In his interpretation every event, whether petty or significant, took on apocalyptic meaning and was crucial to Israel's redemption."⁵⁵ Whereas Mori Said delves into the kabbalah, his progeny discover other worlds. The hero's son, Şiyon (Zion), straddles the fence between two realms. At times, he boasts about the sanctity that he is engaged in; at other times, despair thrusts him into a life of sin. Alternatively, Şiyon's daughter, Rummyeh (or Miriam), severs herself from the Orthodox community and runs away to a kibbutz. In parallel, Mori Said's dreams turn from good to bad. Horrified, the protagonist searches for another path to the same destination, for he is certain that his revelations concerning the end of the days will come to pass. His solution is to convince people to cede their part in the afterworld to the messiah. If everyone did so, Mori Said assumes, the savior would certainly deign to expedite his arrival. However, the kabbalist's appeal falls on deaf ears and his life falls apart. The protagonist ends up among the destitute panhandlers at the Western Wall, which he vows not to leave until the scion of David assumes the throne. The story ends with the hero's tumultuous and painful death in a ruin adjacent to the Western Wall. In sum, Mori Said clings to a fading world and desperately awaits a tarrying messiah at an hour in which the redemption is being advanced by a competing ideological camp – the builders of the temporal Land, who count his own children among their ranks.⁵⁶

Hazaz's plot thus unveils the revolution that was triggered by the severance of the pioneers from the Diaspora. It was Berl Katznelson, a leading advocate of Labor Zionism, who remarked that Mori Said "is our Don Quixote."⁵⁷ In an interview conducted by Galia Yardeni in 1968, Hazaz explained his outlook: "At first, I assumed that kabbalah, kabbalists seeking to bring about the redemption – all this is ancient history, not a living reality. And lo and behold, amongst the Yemenites I found kabbalists who are preoccupied with

55 Cited in Bargad, *Ideas in Fiction*, 94.

56 Hazaz, *HaYoshevet baGanim* [also see the English translation by Ben Halper: idem, *Mori Sa'id*]. For more on this story, see Kurzweil, "Haim Hazaz's *HaYoshevet baGanim*," 225–231; idem, *Our New Literature*, 265–266; Kariv, *Discernments*, 284–294; Michali, *By the Potter's Wheel*, 181–187; Bargad, "Hazaz's Yemenite Works," 235–244; Avishay, "Delusions of Redemption," 254–257. For a discussion on the connection between *Ya'ish* and *haYoshevet baGanim*, see Miron, *Haim Hazaz*, 89–102. In Halevy's estimation, the entire work is a satire on the Yemenite-Jewish notion of the messiah; Halevy, *Image and Self-Portrait*, 23–25, 87–89.

57 Elhanani, *Four Authors and Their Narratives*, 161.

calculations of the end and are attempting to hasten it; to them, it is a living and vibrant reality.”⁵⁸ Be that as it may, Hazaz chose to portray this state of affairs as a last hurrah.

As in some of Hazaz’s other works, Mori Said’s heart-wrenching end must be understood in the context of the author’s negation of the Exile and the champions of the Diasporic way of life. This outlook comes across in, among other places, the writer’s short story “*HaDrasha*” (The Sermon, 1943),⁵⁹ and his controversial play, *BeKeş haYamim* (The End of Days, 1934), on the Sabbatai Zvi era.⁶⁰ In the latter, Hazaz described how Jews thirsted for liberation from the diaspora, as well as the accusations thrust by the false messiah’s acolytes at co-religionists who refused to see the light. Sabbatianism is portrayed as a movement that aroused national yearnings, to the point where Sabbatai Zvi is cast in the role of political savior.⁶¹ The play ends with Yuzpa, a character with apocalyptic leanings, calling for the Exile to be incinerated. Years later, Hazaz clarified this position, linking it to Zionism and the Holocaust:

Yuzpa burns down the Exile, but we [i.e., Zionists] also incinerated the dispersions [that we left] behind us. All the polemicizing against the book [i.e., the play *BeKeş haYamim*] is a waste of time, for we did so ourselves. The Jews of Yemen and Iraq also incinerated the Diaspora. If only we really had burnt down the Exile, the people would have been saved. By burning down houses, by burning down property, the people would have been saved.... Instead, they sat carefree while calamity dangled over

58 Yardeni, “No Limits to Perfection,” 261–262.

59 Hazaz, “*HaDrasha*,” in *Avanim Rothot*, 219–237 [idem, *Stories*, 231–249]. Another facet of this outlook turns up in “*Drabkin*,” *ibid*, 163–187 [idem, *Stories*, 203–230], which was written that same year. The story’s protagonist takes the opposite view of the sermon giver in “*HaDrasha*,” yet preserves the dichotomy between Judaism and Zionism. Similar developments inform “*Mar’ot Yerushalayim*,” one of the author’s stories from the 1930s; idem, *BeŞilan shel Malḥuyot*, 169–297. At any rate, it bears noting that in Hazaz’s works, the Exile’s negation does not come at the expense of a full description of the vitality of Diaspora life. This balancing act is discussed in Kurzweil, *Our New Literature*, 39–40, 260–266; idem, *Facing the Spiritual Perplexity of Our Time*, 120; Laor, *The Struggle for Memory*, 165.

60 Hazaz, *BeKeş haYamim*. For more on the play, its sources, and reception, see Barzel, “The Play *The End of Days* for All its Versions,” 203–215; Shaked, “The End of Days,” 272–302; idem, *Hebrew Historical Drama*, 95–102, 199–204, 250–253, 309–315; Bargad, *Ideas in Fiction*, 59–60; Werses, “Sabbatai Zvi and Sabbatianism in Modern Hebrew Literature,” 122–132.

61 Hazaz had similar things to say in a conversation with Elhanani, *Four Authors and Their Narratives*, 165.

their heads. There was no one to force them to be saved. If they had burnt down their houses, they would have been rescued.⁶²

In a conversation with Hayim Elhanani, the novelist took a similar stance:

One of our comrades intimated that he was hurt by the lethal line on the Diaspora in *The End of Days*. Many got caught up in this matter. Yiddishists in America fought against *The End of Days*, claiming that 'Hazaz is burning the Diaspora.' It is true; it contains the incineration of the Exile; what is Zionism if not the burning of the Exile? From its inception, Zionism has always negated the Diaspora. Would that we had burnt down the Exile on our own before it was too late, for then Hitler would not have annihilated six million Jews.⁶³

While Hazaz's oeuvre is not without conflicting trends, it is impossible to ignore the prevailing spirit.⁶⁴

These explicit statements by Hazaz are indeed commensurate with, *inter alia*, the final scenes of *Ya'ish* and *haYoshevet baGanim*. As per this worldview, the Diasporic version of the kabbalah and mysticism in general has no place in the modern Palestine. In fact, the loss of the Exile's spiritual world is also manifest in the novelist's devaluation of its literature as an invigorative enterprise. Moreover, what Hazaz saw as the Exile's religio-centric culture was bound, in his estimation, to be either revamped or annulled by the Zionist redemption. Under these circumstances, there was certainly no place for a positive description of kabbalah-oriented Jews in Palestine at the outset of the twentieth century. It is only logical that these kabbalists were portrayed as heading off a cliff.

Perhaps this outlook does not faithfully express Hazaz's personal views? The novelist is on record as stating that "it is a mistake to ascribe ruminations or opinions of a figure in a book to the author," even if "now and again there is something to it, but not overtly, not all the way."⁶⁵ That said, the stories in

62 Cited from Hazaz's remarks at the press conference on the opening night of the play at Habima Theater in 1950. See David, "The Nation did Not Want a Full Revelation;" Werses, *ibid*, 123–124.

63 Elhanani, *ibid*, 185.

64 For an analysis of the various trends in Hazaz's output, see Miron, *Haim Hazaz*, 11–26; Barzel, "Introduction," 18–21; Megged, "The World of Broken Vessels," 82–86; Shaked, *Hebrew Narrative Fiction*, 48–53; *idem*, "The Cry of the Revolution," 13–14; Gretz, "To Caesar What is Caesar's," 183–196.

65 Yardeni, "No Limits to Perfection," 261; Gilad, "Clear-Sighted," 305; Elhanani, *ibid*, 148. In this context, Megged went so far as to say that "Stories are neither a political program nor

question clearly reach the following conclusions: the Exile's spiritual life is in its death throes; and Zionism is precipitating far-reaching changes in the Land of Israel.⁶⁶ Even if we were to deny that literature is harnessed to simplistic political agendas, given the historical context in which Hazaz operated, it is impossible to ignore the picture that emerges from these works.⁶⁷

In a letter to Gershom Scholem from around 1972, Hazaz distinguished between "That which pertains to history and that which pertains to a play. History's reach is short and is not an artistic creation. For this reason, the poem is charged with repairing history, hastening the belated, detracting and adding, etc."⁶⁸ These themes that the novelist developed were not an island onto themselves and even permeated – albeit in a refined and understated manner – the period's research literature on Jewish mysticism. As a result, scholars presented a distorted picture of their contemporary kabbalists in Palestine. Hazaz's "correction" of the historical image was an ideological outlook that was out of touch with reality.

Decline and Zionist Utopia

A riveting picture of the kabbalistic circles in the Land of Israel can be found in *Anshai Gil'ad* (The Men of Gilead), a Zionist utopia written in 1942 by the future Biblical scholar Haim Gevaryahu. The protagonist, Shlomo, is "the head of a procession of young kabbalists from Jerusalem who moved to the Gilead for the sake of dwelling in the homeland of Elijah the Prophet." To this end,

a philosophical tract. Things that are communicated by the people in his stories – they are voices." Megged, *ibid*, 85.

66 For Hazaz's position on the relation between the Diaspora and the Land of Israel, see his anthology of lectures and articles: Hazaz, *Mishpat haGeula*, 131–132, 139–164. Most astounding is the novelist's determination that not an iota of mysticism has seeped into the New Hebrew literature, which he completely identifies with Zionism; see *ibid*, 114. In another lecture, Hazaz averred that Zionism is the final incarnation of the Jewish belief in the messiah. Furthermore, he stated that this movement will end differently than Sabbatianism; *ibid*, 150. On the importance of these lectures, which bear the same dialectic tensions and irony that characterize his stories, see Schweid, "Between Philosophizing and Narrative Fiction," 20–34.

67 Kabbalistic figures also surface in Hazaz, *BeKolar Echad* (In a Single Collar). In this story, the novelist portrays the father of Moshe Barazani (a member of the Jewish underground against the British Mandate in Palestine) as a kabbalist who studied at the Shoshanim leDavid Yeshiva and was a member of Yehuda Fetayah's inner circle; Hazaz, *BeKolar Echad*, 63, 86, 206–207.

68 Hazaz, Letter to Scholem, 1972 (MS); Cited in a manuscript by Werses, "Sabbatai Zevi and Sabbatianism in Modern Hebrew Literature," 132.

they established a village by the name of Ḥakal Tapukhin (apple field). In “the [settlement’s] athenaeum for the youth of the prophets’ children,” Shlomo finds clay tablets containing the secret for growing cereals on trees. “The words of Elijah the Prophet of Thisbe,” the inscription reads, “where in the upper worlds that were destroyed crops grew on trees, and on account of the sin they have decreased in size and their stems die each and every summer.” The tablet’s next passage declares that the time for the “*tikkun*” has arrived. Towards the end, it notes that the “cereal apples” decisively altered the global economy.⁶⁹ Gevaryahu combined images of husbanding the Land with an old-school kabbalist to form a picture that is a far cry from the contemporaneous reality in Jerusalem. From this standpoint, his utopia is a critique, perhaps even a satire, of the era’s kabbalists.

In a similar fashion, the only contemporary kabbalists that the Second Aliyah poet David Shimoni (1891–1956) depicted in a positive fashion were those advancing the Zionist cause, which he ultimately viewed as an incarnation of “the messianic idea among the Jewish people.”⁷⁰ Throughout his career, Shimoni occasionally referred to kabbalists, but always in the same particular context. A case in point is an earlier play in which a Yemenite Jew integrates the vision of the redemption and *tikkun ḥaṣot* (Midnight Vigil) with toil in the vineyard.⁷¹ In another of the poet’s idylls, there is a short description of “a rich, wondrous kabbalist; by day he labors in his vineyards and by night he ponders the Zohar.”⁷² Shimoni also produced a more complex tableau. He considered the signs of the “land’s redemption” and the pioneers’ yearnings to be a quasi-transformation of the erstwhile longings of kabbalists and prophets. For example, in the idyll *Maṣeva* (A Memorial, 1928–1938), he wrote that “The redemption always appeared before my eyes in the image of an expansive field.”⁷³ Upon describing the pioneers’ zeal, the poet turned his attention to *seuda shlishit* (the third Sabbath meal), which became a central kabbalistic ritual

69 Gevaryahu, *The Men of the Gilead: A Utopian Story of the Life in Eretz Yisrael over the Next Three Generations*, citations from pp. 46, 56–57. Under the editorship of Shalom Schwartz (Ben-Baruch), the weekly *Hed Yerushalayim* put out a different version of this work in serial installments between June 1941 and January 1942. One of the first chapters of the serial version places an emphasis on the “Sons of the Prophets.”

70 Halevy, *Image and Self-Portrait*, 37–56. Halevy’s claim that Shimoni was a sort of mouth-piece for the Kookian school of thought is a tad excessive. Also see Laor, *The Struggle for Memory*, 15–33; Hever, *To Inherit the Land*, 88–130.

71 Shimoni, *Layla baKerem*. See Gerber, *Ourselves or Our Holy Books*, 171–173.

72 Idem, *Yovel haEglonim*, 6.

73 Idem, “Maṣeva,” *Sefer haIdilyot*, 246 [also see the English translation: “A Memorial,” *Idylls*, 23–97].

during the halcyon days of Safad. Shimoni essentially transformed this meal into a poem on nature and the Land of Israel, thereby adding a new wrinkle to this idea which suited the needs of his own generation. More specifically, he converted *seuda shlishit* into a dinner for the poor out in the field. By virtue of this meal, the lips of “Eretz Yisrael on high and the temporal Eretz Yisrael” met, “and the sensual touch,” along with “the mysterious touch of the messiah’s wing, delighted the coveted land, in the unknowns of the quest of the generations [of Jews] who pleaded for the wonder of the redemption.”⁷⁴ Thereafter, “the Torah of Eretz Yisrael” is described as the physical labor of the pioneer.⁷⁵ Like Gevaryahu and others, this sort of utopian writing allowed Shimoni to release himself from and criticize the present, while lionizing the past, of all things. Perhaps the apotheosis of this “sub-genre” is a series of poems that he dedicated to the early kabbalists of Safad. These works draw heavily on the book *Shivḥai HaARI* (Praises of Isaac Luria). Although the series is devoid of hints concerning the present and although Shimoni’s ostensibly limited himself to praising the poetry’s language, the very act of replication gave rise to a utopia that nourished the redemptive pioneering reality of his time.⁷⁶

It stands to reason that the above-mentioned Zionist writers had no desire to fathom their era’s kabbalistic worldview. Instead, they glanced at the mystics from afar and chose to emphasize those elements that suited their accounts of the emergent reality in the Land of Israel. Rather than describing the living spirit of the seminaries under review, they set their sights on the “pure kabbalistic knowledge” of yesteryear, “the last kabbalist” who is slowly going under, and/or “the first kabbalist” to break new ground.

74 Ibid, 270–272.

75 Ibid, 274, 285.

76 Ibid, “Me’Agadot Şfat,” 165–187.