

## REVERBERATIONS OF THE KABBALAH IN MODERN FRENCH THOUGHT

by

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The Kabbalah has been a subject of interest to French thinkers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, for different reasons in the course of the twentieth century. By "thinkers," I mean not only professional philosophers, historians of philosophy, teachers, and researchers. I also include the grey area made up of authors whose knowledge has been acquired either inside or outside the university, and who offer a vision of the world either personal in nature or inspired by an authoritative tradition. While it is true that the French university throughout the twentieth century has been reluctant to teach Jewish thought in any form whatsoever, the subject has nonetheless been transmitted, studied, and researched in settings outside the university, such as community institutions and private classes. The Kabbalah is no exception to this rule. But no doubt because of the impact it had in certain sectors of society in earlier centuries, it has awakened more curiosity and interest than other aspects of Judaism.

The following pages sketch an overview of the approaches to this particular corpus of Jewish doctrine, which from the Renaissance onwards has elicited not only the curiosity but at times the sustained attention of Western intellectuals. I shall limit my inquiry to France, or rather, to the French-speaking sphere, since the language in which an

author expresses him- or herself can be more important than national boundaries.

We must immediately distinguish between two different approaches to the Kabbalah. The first is characteristic of a set of intellectuals who are Jews in the full sense of the term, who intend their work for a Jewish audience. Their relationship to the Kabbalah is bound up with their general view of Judaism, the tendency within Judaism to which they subscribe, and their most fundamental training. A second set of thinkers consists of Jews as well as non-Jews, who encountered the Kabbalah somewhat accidentally, who approached it through secondary sources, and whose interest in it often concerns no more than marginal aspects. Sometimes, the distinction is hard to establish: certain French thinkers whose work bore mainly upon philosophy, who were read and appreciated mostly for their philosophical writings and ideas, were themselves Jews involved in the interpretation and study of Judaism. They were able to accord a more or less central place to the Kabbalah in their twin capacities as philosophers interested in the metaphysics and mysticism of the Kabbalah, and as Jews eager to promote their more or less formal theology of Judaism. As Frenchmen and as Jews, they had a dual relationship to the Kabbalah, which sometimes became a means of connecting their Frenchness and their Jewishness, a space where their attachment to French thought could be expressed through their identity as Jews.

Before considering the present century, it is essential to recall a few figures who played an important role in the introduction of the Kabbalah as an intellectual concern in France. Without going back to those who championed a Christian Kabbalah during the Renaissance, the views that French intellectuals held about the Kabbalah are well illustrated, in the Enlightenment, by the article devoted to it in the *Encyclopedie* of d'Alembert and Diderot. This groundbreaking work represented the sum of knowledge that men of breeding were expected to possess. The opinions expressed in it formed a kind of substratum for the ideas of the several generations that would be influenced by it. The authors' intentions were to approach all subjects in a critical fashion and thereby counter obscure beliefs and dubious information. Thus it is of interest for us to see in what form and from what point of view the Kabbalah was presented in the long article devoted to it.

For the author of the entry on the subject, the Kabbalah is of very remote origin, with roots in the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel. He claims that although it has not remained pure and throughout its history has undergone diverse influences, such as that of Platonism, it bears

signs of the hoariest antiquity. But what interests the encyclopedist most of all is what he calls “Kabbalistic philosophy,”

which does not emerge in Palestine until the Essenes, imitating the customs of the Syrians and Egyptians and even borrowing some of their dogmas and their institutions, had formed a philosophical sect. . . . One cannot doubt that Egypt is the homeland of *Kabbalistic philosophy*.<sup>1</sup>

A division is proposed between the “contemplative Kabbalah” and the “practical Kabbalah.” The first is defined as

the science of explaining holy Scripture according to the secret tradition and of discovering by this means sublime truths about God, the spirits, and the various worlds: it teaches a mystical Metaphysics and a purified Physics. The second teaches how one can work wonders by artificially applying words and maxims from holy Scripture and by combining them in diverse ways.<sup>2</sup>

After a succinct exposition of the “practical Kabbalah,” which consists of a presentation of the system of correspondences among letters, the divine names, and the emanations,<sup>3</sup> the author details the “principles and foundations of the philosophical Kabbalah.” Among these, the first that attracts our attention is the idea that “nothing is made from nothing.” It is obvious that the encyclopedist draws heavily upon the Kabbalistic critique of creationism, in order to articulate his own objections to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. The long explanation of “Kabbalistic philosophy”—a term he himself uses, which shows what kind of perspective a French thinker of the mid-eighteenth century would have on the Kabbalah or on certain of its aspects—is motivated by two objectives: to invalidate the claims of the Christian Kabbalah, which uncovered within the conceptions of the Kabbalists references to the Trinity and to Jesus; and to draw as faithful a picture as possible of the general

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<sup>1</sup>Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 2 (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton, Durand, 1751), p. 477 (emphasis in the original). [Throughout this article, titles and quotations are translated by me, unless an English version is cited. —Trans.]

<sup>2</sup>Diderot and d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie*, p. 477.

<sup>3</sup>According to the Kabbalistic doctrine of the “emanations” [*sephirot*, Hebrew], the creation of the universe did not occur *ex nihilo* but was a spiritual emission from God's being. See “The Theory of Emanations in Hebraism” in Elijah [Élie] Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, trans. Maxwell Luria (New York: Paulist, 1995 [orig. French ed. 1914]), pp. 69–71. [Translator's note.]

principles of the Kabbalah, which the author asserts having “tried to explain with clarity, although we do not flatter ourselves with the belief we have succeeded.”<sup>4</sup> He avows:

there is often so profound an obscurity in the writings of the Kabbalists that it becomes impenetrable; reason dictates nothing that corresponds to the terms that fill their writings.<sup>5</sup>

On the whole, the encyclopedist’s hostility towards the Kabbalah is of a piece with his general hostility towards what he calls “philosophy.” For him, “the history of philosophy” is the history “of the absurdities of a great number of scholars.”<sup>6</sup> Despite his mockery, his attempt, critical in nature, to look closely into the principles of “Kabbalistic philosophy” and to offer a “plausible” history of the Kabbalah devoid of received ideas, is one of the first of its kind. It shows the great interest that the encyclopedist’s contemporaries at the eve of French revolution had in this corpus of religious and philosophical doctrine.

What appears with great clarity in the article in the *Encyclopedia* is an emphasis on the “philosophical” character of the Kabbalah, whereas its mythical aspects are downplayed as insignificant and uninteresting. This tendency marks generally the perspectives French authors have adopted on the Kabbalah. We see it in the writings of Adolphe Franck, a French philosopher of the nineteenth century and a pioneer in the historical and critical study of this corpus of doctrine. To his celebrated work that would be translated into several languages, Franck gave a title that reflected this emphasis: *The Kabbalah, or the Religious Philosophy of the Hebrews*.<sup>7</sup>

In his time, Franck was a very visible figure within French intellectual life. The first French Jew to obtain the degree of *agrégé* in philosophy, he was named professor in the philosophy of law at the prestigious

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<sup>4</sup>Diderot and d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie*, p. 485.

<sup>5</sup>Diderot and d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie*, p. 485.

<sup>6</sup>Diderot and d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie*, p. 486.

<sup>7</sup>Adolphe Franck, *The Kabbalah, or the Religious Philosophy of the Hebrews*, rev. and enl. trans. by I. Sossnitz (orig. ed. 1926; reprint. New York: Arno, 1973 [orig. French ed. 1843]).

Collège de France. A student of Victor Cousin's, of spiritualist<sup>8</sup> tendency, he was known best of all as editor of the 1885 *Dictionary of the Philosophical Sciences*.<sup>9</sup> In this monumental work, he himself wrote the article on the Kabbalah, where he defended its antiquity and emphasized its metaphysical system.

One example will allow us to appreciate the difference between Franck's approach and that of the encyclopedist of the previous century. One motif, which we may call "mythical," is given opposite meanings by them. This motif, which often shocked those who approached the Kabbalah for the first time, concerns the depiction of couplings between the masculine and feminine principles in the divine world. These figures are particularly abundant in the Zohar—*The Book of Splendor*, composed towards the end of the thirteenth century—and in works based on Rabbi Isaac Luria's teachings in the fifteenth.

In the Enlightenment *Encyclopedia*, this motif is treated with severity:

The mingling of men and women that one finds in the *Book of Splendor*, their conjugal union and the way it is performed, are emblems far too puerile and ridiculous to represent the operations of God and His fecundity.<sup>10</sup>

The tone is radically changed in Franck's book:

How inferior to the Kabbalists did the Greek philosopher [Plato] remain on this point! We may be permitted to remark that the question under consideration here, and even the principle by which it is solved, are not unworthy of a great metaphysical system. For if man and woman are two equal beings by their spiritual nature and by the absolute laws of morality, they are far from being alike in the natural direction of their faculties, and we have reason to agree with the Zohar that sexual distinction exists for the body as well as for the soul.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>As used here, "spiritualist" refers to the doctrine, rooted in Descartes, which holds that the spirit exists as distinct from matter. It was a mainstay of the thought of French philosopher Victor Cousin (1792–1867). [Translator's note.]

<sup>9</sup>Franck, ed., *Dictionnaire des sciences philosophiques* (Paris, 1885).

<sup>10</sup>Diderot and d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie*, p. 485.

<sup>11</sup>Franck, *The Kabbalah, or the Religious Philosophy of the Hebrews*, pp. 197–98.

Henri Sérouya, a Jewish philosopher of the mid-twentieth century to whom we shall return, wrote these words with respect to what he called "sexual law in the Zohar," following Franck:

Let us note that this purely mystical symbolism, transported onto metaphysical terrain, especially concerning the grand conception of cosmic procreation, has nothing shocking about it. Modesty has no place here.<sup>12</sup>

And he adds in a footnote: "The Zohar rises above all conventions. It acknowledges in an abstract sense that high above there is union between members of the same family." In a 1901 *Study on the Origins of the Zohar*, Salomon Karppe, another philosophy professor, had already proposed a similar point of view. Instead of excoriating the Kabbalists for their audacious sexual symbolism, Karppe considered it a sublime expression of their metaphysics.<sup>13</sup> Thus, one of the most mythical formulations of the theosophical Kabbalah is viewed as an exemplary type of metaphysical discourse and, according to Franck, of a kind superior to what is found in Platonic philosophy.

This very brief overview of some major works from earlier centuries indicates from what angle the Kabbalah had been apprehended. Let us now see whether the propensity to consider the Kabbalah as a philosophy and a metaphysics rather than as religious discourse or mythical exegesis has continued into the twentieth century, and if it has obtained among Jewish as well as among non-Jewish thinkers.

At the very beginning of this century, Élie Benamozegh, an Italian rabbi of Moroccan origin, writing in French, emerged in France as what we may call a "universalistic Kabbalist." He too emphasized the metaphysical profundity of the Kabbalah. His fundamental thesis is that through the Kabbalah, biblical thought can be reconciled with pagan thought in general, and particularly with Greek and Hindu thought:

We can now see how those who reject the Kabbalah as a foreign importation, under the pretext of defending pure Jewish doctrine, do ill service to their own cause. For ultimately, the Kabbalah alone is capable of restoring harmony between Hebraism and the Gentile world. It is particularly noteworthy that on their common ground, what is everyday doctrine among the Gentiles is esoteric to Jews, while what for them is

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<sup>12</sup>Henri Sérouya, *La kabbale* (Paris: Grasset, 1947), p. 265.

<sup>13</sup>Salomon Karppe, *Étude sur les origines et la nature du Zohar* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1901), p. 428.

popular and commonplace is secret instruction for the pagans. For these last, truth has been a thing of mystery, as for Christians it is a matter of faith, and for Jews the subject of learning.<sup>14</sup>

Instead of being a cause of radical separation between Israel and the nations, the Kabbalah, partaking of the very substance of universal religion, is the link between them. This defense is quite audacious, for at the time the Kabbalah was rejected by modernizing and reformist currents within Judaism, which saw in it the most shocking traces of Jewish obscurantism. For Benamozegh, the Kabbalah constituted the true Jewish theology, and its system of interpretation permitted a doctrine of a metaphysical type to be gleaned from the Bible:

despite denials from all sides, Kabbalism has the merit of being the first school to declare that the theory of emanation can be found in the Bible.<sup>15</sup>

In a preface to this work by the rabbi from Livorno, Aimé Pallière spoke of the "philosophical Kabbalah of Benamozegh."<sup>16</sup> Returning to the theurgical conception of the commandments, Benamozegh posited that observance in Judaism has an "ontological" value, for through it man collaborates with God in the continuous movement of creation.

Benamozegh's thought had no more than minimal influence on French Jewry, although his work was well received. However, in recent years, many French authors have taken an interest in his work. Psychoanalyst and writer Gérard Haddad professes veneration for Benamozegh and considers that *Israel and Humanity* permitted Jacques Lacan, the foremost French exegete of Freud, to develop his notion of "true religion."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Rabbi Léon Achkénazi—a master teacher who published little but whose impact has been profound on generations of Jewish and non-Jewish students since the war—accorded an eminent place to Benamozegh's thought. Likewise, French-speaking members of Rabbi Éliehou Zini's circle in Haifa have undertaken a complete, revised

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<sup>14</sup>Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup>Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, p. 69.

<sup>16</sup>Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, p. 34, modified as per the original: *Israël et l'Humanité* (Paris: Leroux, 1914), p. xv. [Former Catholic theology student Aimé Pallière (1875–1949) achieved some notoriety when he published the account of his near conversion to Judaism: *The Unknown Sanctuary* (New York: Bloch, 1928 [orig. French ed. 1926]). —Trans.]

<sup>17</sup>See Gérard Haddad, *Les biblioclastes* (Paris: Grasset, 1990).

edition of Benamozegh's works, using heretofore unexploited sources. Thus far from being some relic of the past, Benamozegh's theology is still a source of inspiration.

Though Kabbalistic rabbis who have produced written works are rare, we may also cite case of the recently deceased Rabbi Emmanuel Léwyne, who founded a small publishing house dedicated to the Kabbalah. In addition, books by Alexandre Safran, Chief Rabbi of Geneva and a widely esteemed authority, have aided in presenting the Kabbalah to a vast readership and especially to observant Jews, not necessarily well-disposed to the Kabbalah at the outset.<sup>18</sup>

Remaining within the context of theologians and thinkers whose writing and teaching are intended for a Jewish audience, we may also mention Jacob Gordin, a Jewish philosopher of Russian origin, who completed part of his studies in Germany. After World War II, he exerted great influence on a group of Jewish intellectuals formed at the École des Cadres des Éclaireurs Israélites Français [Leadership School of the French Jewish Scouts], also called the École Gilbert Bloch [Gilbert Bloch School], located at Orsay, in the Paris suburbs. Although Gordin wrote little, his teaching was, according to the accounts of his former students, chock-full of quotations from the Zohar and references to Jewish mysticism.<sup>19</sup> There is no doubt that his teaching aided in forging a positive view of the Kabbalah among Jewish intellectuals in post-war France.

Not only Léon Achkénazi but also Henri Atlan, Roland Goetschel, Armand Abécassis, and Jean Zacklad benefited from Gordin's tutelage. Atlan, who became a well-known doctor and biologist, accorded a place of honor to Kabbalistic systems of thought in several of his works on epistemology and the notion of complexity.<sup>20</sup> Goetschel authored a thesis on a fifteenth-century Kabbalist<sup>21</sup> and was appointed to a professorship at the University of Strasbourg. Abécassis wrote both introductory and specialized works on Judaism, in which the Kabbalah occupies a

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<sup>18</sup>See, e.g., Alexandre Safran, *La cabale* (Paris: Payot, 1960).

<sup>19</sup>See the preface by Léon Achkénazi in Jacob Gordin, *Le renouveau de la pensée juive française* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), p. 13.

<sup>20</sup>See, e.g., Henri Atlan, *À tort et à raison: intercritique de la science et du mythe* (Paris: Fayard, 1986).

<sup>21</sup>Roland Goetschel, *Meir ibn Gabbay: le discours de la Kabbale espagnole* (Louvain: Peeters, 1981).



significant place.<sup>22</sup> Zacklad, the author of several books in which the Kabbalah stands in the foreground,<sup>23</sup> drew around himself a study group that considered the Kabbalah the true interpretation of Scripture. He had several disciples, such as philosophy professor Claude Birman, who continued along the path traced out by the master.<sup>24</sup> Thus many of the philosophers who had trained at the Leadership School at Orsay, including (besides those cited) Gérard Israël and Georges Hansel,<sup>25</sup> helped spread a positive view of the Kabbalah and (in certain cases) became teachers of the subject. Gordin also influenced the eminent philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. Although the role to Jewish mysticism in the latter's work is slight,<sup>26</sup> his student, Catherine Chalié, has incorporated multiple references to the Kabbalah in her numerous works.<sup>27</sup>

A generation earlier, French Jewish philosopher Henri Sérouya had devoted several books to the Kabbalah, including the lengthy volume by him from which we have already quoted: *La kabbale*, written in large part during the Nazi occupation and published in 1947. In Sérouya's view, "the interest of the Kabbalah resides most of all, for the metaphysician, in an all-encompassing speculation, understood in its most profound conception."<sup>28</sup> Unlike the authors cited earlier, Sérouya's only access to the Kabbalah was through French translations and secondary sources. Though he was a unique figure in that his relationship to the Kabbalah was nourished solely through his readings, Sérouya's works were well disseminated and continue to be republished regularly. His interest in the Kabbalah was in large part motivated by the influence

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<sup>22</sup>E.g., Armand Abécassis, *La lumière dans la pensée juive* (Paris: Berg International, 1988).

<sup>23</sup>E.g., Jean Zacklad, *Pour une éthique: l'Être au féminin* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1981).

<sup>24</sup>See, e.g., Claude Birman, Jean Zacklad, and Charles Mopsik, *Cain et Abel: aux origines de la violence* (Paris: Grasset, 1980).

<sup>25</sup>See, e.g., Georges Hansel, "Et vous craindrez mon sanctuaire," in Jean Halpérin and Georges Lévitte, ed., *Idoles: données et débats: Actes du XXIVe Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française* (Paris: Denoël, 1985). Gérard Israël is preparing a work in which the Kabbalah will occupy a significant place.

<sup>26</sup>See my article, "La pensée d'Emmanuel Lévinas et la Cabale," in Catherine Chalié and Miguel Abensour, ed., *Cahiers de l'Herne: Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: L'Herne, 1991), pp. 378-86.

<sup>27</sup>See, e.g., Catherine Chalié, *La persévérance du mal* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1987).

<sup>28</sup>Sérouya, *La kabbale*, p. 510.

exerted on him by Henri Bergson's philosophy and interpretation of mysticism.<sup>29</sup> As might be expected, Sérouya did his utmost to show that Bergson had been inspired by Kabbalistic mysticism. According to him, Bergson's philosophy

has many points of contact with the Kabbalah. Nonetheless, in the course of a long conversation, Bergson declared to me his ignorance of the Kabbalah, although he had read the works of the Fathers of the Church, especially Saint Augustine. Whatever particular influences the Parisian philosopher underwent, those works reflected the eternal thought of the Hebrews, his ancestors. . . . Moreover, certain essential elements of Bergsonism could well fit into the metaphysics of the Kabbalah.<sup>30</sup>

Another figure who stands out in the crowd of Kabbalizing thinkers is Carlo Suarès. Completely detached from the Judaism of his forbears, this intellectual of Egyptian origin who settled in France was one of the first translators of Indian spiritual leader Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986). Suarès devoted several works to the Kabbalah, including an annotated translation of the *Sepher Yetsirab* [*Book of Creation*] and a volume where he sought to uncover the authentic Kabbalah, which he maintained had been deformed by rabbinic ideology.<sup>31</sup> Suarès' very original thought had little influence either on French Jewry or in any other quarter.

In this century, some Christian writers have produced significant works on the Kabbalah. Let us cite Paul Vulliaud, whose writings include a monumental volume entitled *The Jewish Kabbalah*, in which he defended the antiquity of the Zohar.<sup>32</sup> Lamenting that "the Kabbalah is not yet part of the heritage common to all intellectuals,"<sup>33</sup> Vulliaud strove to foreground the metaphysical aspect of the Kabbalah, at the expense of its "mythical" elements, which he saw as symbolic or allegorical representations of profoundly abstract concepts.

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<sup>29</sup>Henri Bergson (1859–1941), French philosopher of Jewish origin. [Translator's note.]

<sup>30</sup>Sérouya, *La kabbale*, pp. 490–91.

<sup>31</sup>Carlo Suarès, trans., *Le Sepher Yetsira, Le livre de la structuration* (Geneva: Mont-Blanc, 1968), and *The Qabala Trilogy* (Boston: Shambhala, 1985).

<sup>32</sup>Paul Vulliaud, *La kabbale juive* (Paris: É. Nourry, 1923).

<sup>33</sup>Vulliaud, *Traduction intégrale du Siphra di-Tzeniutha, Le livre du secret* (Paris: Éditions Orientales, 1977 [orig. ed. 1930]), p. 11.

The Christian readership's interest in the Kabbalah had been whetted by the French translation of the Zohar by Jean de Pauly.<sup>34</sup> In his notes and in his translation proper, Pauly attempted to show the Christian and Christological character of the exegesis and doctrine contained in the Zohar. Despite its numerous imperfections and tendentiousness, this translation was a significant event in the introduction of the Kabbalah into French thought.

Also worthy of mention is an admirer of Vulliaud, Jean de Menasce, a Jew of Egyptian background who became a Dominican priest. Menasce—who developed an ardent interest in mystical Christianity and gained world-wide renown as a specialist in Indo-European languages—published in 1931 *When Israel Loves God*.<sup>35</sup> This work on Kabbalah and Hasidism viewed Jewish mysticism as the truly spiritual teaching of Judaism, capable of wresting Jewry from “the chaos of the world” and counteracting “the apathy and political nationalism that at present share the loyalties of Israel.”<sup>36</sup> This vehement plea in favor of the Kabbalah and of Hasidism—which for Menasce constitute the true soul of Judaism though they be denigrated by “modernist Jews”—is an atypical book in more ways than one. To this day, it remains the most brilliant and sensitive exposition in French of Jewish spirituality. Nonetheless, its impact has been rather limited, among Jews as well as Christians, reluctant as they both are to give credit to a Jew who after becoming a Catholic priest undertook a passionate defense of the Jewish spirit.

Another current of thought—René Guénon's school—has been profoundly marked by the Kabbalah. A prolific author and a trendsetter among French esoterists, Guénon considered the classical writings of the Kabbalah, including the Zohar, as part of the “primordial tradition” he saw at the origin of all religions.<sup>37</sup> His disciple, Léo Schaya, enlarged upon this aspect of his thought in three works on the Kabbalah.<sup>38</sup> Schaya's writings tend towards a syncretism among the three monotheistic religions and a synthesis between Sufism and Kabbalah. In a similar vein, a synthesis between Kabbalah and Hinduism is proposed

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<sup>34</sup>Jean de Pauly, trans., *Le Livre du Zohar* (Paris: Rieder, 1925).

<sup>35</sup>Jean de Menasce, *Quand Israël aime Dieu* (orig. ed. 1931; Paris: Cerf, 1992).

<sup>36</sup>Menasce, *Quand Israël aime Dieu*, p. 178.

<sup>37</sup>See, for example, René Guénon, *Le roi du monde*, 3d ed. (Paris: Les Éditions Traditionnelles, 1950).

<sup>38</sup>E.g., Léo Schaya, *L'homme et l'absolu selon la kabbale* (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 1977).

by Georges Lahy and his disciples.<sup>39</sup> We should also mention the influence, still being felt today, which the theosophic movement of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91) exerted on a diverse constellation of French intellectuals towards the end of the last century.

French philosophers with no links at all to Judaism have also manifested interest in the Kabbalah. In this group, we may mention Étienne Souriau,<sup>40</sup> Henri Corbin,<sup>41</sup> and Jean-Paul Sartre in the last years of his life. According to a member of his intimate circle,<sup>42</sup> Sartre was particularly impressed by speculations in *The Book of Creation* portraying the creation of the world by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Some best-selling writers have claimed to find within the Kabbalah the key to all the mysteries of the universe. Raymond Abellio, Charles Hirsch, Francis Warrin, and A. D. Grad wrote works that offer Kabbalistic explanations of both the physical world in its entirety and all of history.<sup>43</sup>

As Gershom Scholem's writings have become available in French, the influence of that great expert on the Kabbalah has grown, especially among historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. Unlike the case in the English-speaking world and in Germany, Scholem's impact in France on philosophers, general thinkers, and Jewish intellectuals has been slight. How may we explain this situation that would surely seem strange to an Israeli or an American? As early as 1957, Sérouya defined the perspective French philosophers would adopt on Scholem:

Certainly, one notices here and there subtle insights of a historical type, which square nicely with gnostic and neo-Platonic conceptions. Yet one

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<sup>39</sup>E.g., Georges Lahy [Vinya], *Vie mystique et kabbale pratique* (Paris: G. Lahy-Roquevaire, 1995).

<sup>40</sup>E.g., Étienne Souriau, *L'ombre de Dieu* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955).

<sup>41</sup>E.g., Henri Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris: L'Herne, 1981).

<sup>42</sup>Personal conversation with philosopher Benny Lévy, Sartre's last secretary.

<sup>43</sup>E.g., Raymond Abellio, *La structure absolue: essai de phénoménologie génétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965); Charles Hirsch, *La symbolique numérologique de la Bible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985); Warrin Francis, *La théodicée de la kabbale* (Paris: Véga, 1949); Adolphe D. Grad, *Pour comprendre la kabbale*, rev. ed. (Paris: Dervy, 1979). See as well Jean-Charles Baryosher, *Premiers pas vers la kabbale* (Paris: Lanore, 1995).

would search in vain throughout his works for profound, original thought, such as one finds in Martin Buber.<sup>44</sup>

In a similar vein, Sérouya maintained that Scholem—"of great worth as a conscientious, methodical historian"—devoted too much attention to myths, folk beliefs, and the practical Kabbalah; likewise, he detected little appreciation by Scholem of the speculative profundities and metaphysical dimension of the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. This severe judgment by Sérouya, reacting to the French publication of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, has been shared by nearly all French Jewish thinkers interested in the Kabbalah.<sup>45</sup> I include in this group even Georges Vajda, an historian of ideas close to Scholem in other respects.<sup>46</sup>

This attitude is explained in large part by the real and symbolic importance enjoyed by philosophy in France as an academic discipline and as a secular substitute for religious dogmas. The dismissal of religion from modern education and scholarship has no doubt been instrumental in establishing philosophy as the authoritative body of knowledge. The Kabbalah, in order for its value to be acknowledged, must be presented as part of philosophy rather than of religious thought. One example: Jean Zacklad gave to his dissertation, *Essay on Biblical Ontology*, the subtitle, *A Review of the Philosophical Implication of Rabbinical, Legislative and Mystical Theses*—even though he freely admits that his work focuses on the Kabbalah as the esoteric doctrine of Judaism.<sup>47</sup>

The majority of French-speaking intellectuals, whether Jewish or not, who have written from any point of view on the Kabbalah, have thus proclaimed interest in "Kabbalistic philosophy" or at least in the "philosophical implications" of Kabbalistic conceptions. The essentially religious aspects of the Kabbalah, its ideas concerning ritual, prayer, eschatology and concrete morality, have been almost totally disregarded,

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<sup>44</sup>Sérouya, preface to *La kabbale*, 2d ed. (Paris: Grasset, 1957), p. x.

<sup>45</sup>Gershom Scholem, *Les grands courants de la mystique juive*, trans. M.-M. Davy (Paris: Payot, 1950); English version: *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (orig. ed. 1941; New York: Schocken, 1995).

<sup>46</sup>See in this regard Maurice-Ruben Hayoun's introduction to his translation of Scholem, *La kabbale: les thèmes fondamentaux* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1985).

<sup>47</sup>Zacklad, *Essai d'ontologie biblique: mise à jour des implications philosophiques des thèses rabbiniques, législatives et mystiques* (Paris/The Hague: Mouton, 1967).

though some recent signs of curiosity about these matters have timidly emerged within both Jewish and Christian circles.

Current writers—such as Betty Rojtman, Marc-Alain Ouaknin, David Banon, and Laurent Cohen—mingle the Kabbalah with Hasidic thought in efforts to promote a modern or even post-modern approach to Judaism.<sup>48</sup> In these attempts at synthesis, the Kabbalah figures as just one element, sometimes minor but always evident. Other authors of whom the Jewish readers of the French language are particularly fond—Amado Lévy-Valensi, Shmuel Trigano, and Raphaël Draï—accord a significant place to the Kabbalah as a profound and enlightening interpretation of Scripture.<sup>49</sup>

Though the Kabbalah has become a common or even obligatory reference for those who write in French on Judaism, it does not follow that such authors necessarily have an interest in Kabbalistic doctrine per se or even in its most basic views on being, the soul, or good and evil. It is now de rigueur to extract from the mass of Kabbalistic writings maxims and images in order to illustrate some idea or develop an argument. Nonetheless, ignorance of the Kabbalah as an consistently organized body of doctrine can often be encountered among those who draw from it. The state of affairs that obtained in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—when thinkers avoided quoting from the Kabbalah, lest they be considered regressive or superstitious—has radically reversed itself. Yet this change in no way guarantees that the Kabbalah is itself viewed as a system of thought or a theology. Either the Kabbalah is deemed to be just one element in a cultivated reader's library, or it is invoked opportunistically—as a traditional source or an exotic reference—by writers who reflect on Judaism or offer vibrant defenses of it.

There is no way to be sure that the growing mass of academic research on the Kabbalah will bring in its wake deeper examination of its fundamental concepts. At present, the dominant tendencies in France—in no way limited to Jewish intellectuals—are an unwillingness

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<sup>48</sup>See Betty Rojtman, *Feu noir sur feu blanc* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1988); Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Concerto pour quatre consonnes sans voyelles: au-delà du principe d'identité* (Paris: Balland, 1991); David Banon, *La lecture infinie* (Paris: Seuil, 1987); Laurent Cohen, *Le maître des frontières incertaines* (Paris: Seuil, 1994).

<sup>49</sup>See Éliane Amado Lévy-Valensi, *La poétique du Zohar* (Paris: L'Éclat, 1996); Shmuel Trigano, *Le récit de la disparue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977); Raphaël Draï, *La vocation prophétique* (Paris: Fayard, 1990).

to take ideological stands, eclecticism in the choice of sources of inspiration, indifference to doctrinal content, and preference for superficial associations of ideas. The palpable lack of rigor in the current output of French-speaking Jewish intellectuals is a weighty historical and sociological burden. Against such a cultural landscape, the Kabbalah stands out as an element particularly susceptible to interminglings and manipulations, in accordance with the long history of varied and unrelated interpretations and approaches to which it has been subjected. The future will tell whether this tendency is simply transitory, or if it represents a permanent trend.

—Translated by Alan Astro