“It Does Not Relate to Me”:

Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Kabbalah

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**1. Introduction: The Scholarly Controversy and Its Significance**

The new flourishing of the kabbalah in recent decades has followed a long dry period that began in the 19th century. During this period, many fewer people, especially among the religious leadership, were involved with kabbalah. There was much less written on kabbalah and what was written was much less innovative. Hasidism, which in its first generations relied on kabbalistic sources, began to turn toward “the heteronomous sources of religion” (to use the terminology of M. Piekarz),[[2]](#footnote-2) and the Lithuanian *Misnagdic* world focused more and more on the study of “legal Torah” (*ha-torah ha-dinit*).[[3]](#footnote-3) Gershom Scholem concluded from this that Hasidism – by which he meant early Hasidism – was “the last stage” of the vibrant creativity of Jewish mysticism,[[4]](#footnote-4) after which began a time of twilight when, at most, it is occasionally possible to find some fragments of creativity. Nor did the students of the Gaon of Vilna escape this serious accusation. The downfall of the kabbalah, after centuries during which it had a profound, all-encompassing influence, was an amazingly quick process. No more than three or four generations after the Baal Shem Tov and the Gaon of Vilna, both of whose intellectual perspectives were profoundly shaped by kabbalah, most of the leaders of ultra-Orthodox Judaism in Eastern Europe, who saw themselves as continuing the paths of the Gaon and the Besht, espoused an ideal of “simple faith,” which replaced the ideal of intellectual, kabbalistic faith.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This is one of the most important transformations in Jewish spirituality of the modern era, and so it is important to clarify the depth and reach of this transformation. It is obviously necessary first to analyze the detailed positions of influential personalities in the Jewish spiritual world in this period in order to reach general conclusions. With this in mind, it is possible to understand the great interest that has arisen in the question of the relationship between R. Israel Lipkin (known as R. Israel Salanter, 1810–1883), and Jewish mysticism. R. Salanter, who is rightly considered the progenitor of the Musar movement, was one of the most influential individuals, and Musar was one of the main movements, in 19th- and 20th-century Eastern European Jewry – a man and a movement in which developed a fascinating new intellectual creativity. A clarification of his stance is therefore critical in order to understand the nature of this process as a whole.

The publications of Yehuda Liebes on Lithuanian kabbalah after the Gaon,[[6]](#footnote-6) as well as other studies of the last few decades,[[7]](#footnote-7) have drawn our attention to the rise of rich mystical thought even in the stronghold of those scholars who were immersed in Talmud and codes. Yet in contrast to the first and second generations of the Gaon’s school, which had a profound attachment to the world of the kabbalah, from the third generation on we find a definite drop in engagement and familiarity with mysticism. To be sure, there were important kabbalistic thinkers, like R. Yitzhak Isaac Haber[[8]](#footnote-8) and R. Shlomo Elyashiv,[[9]](#footnote-9) but they did not go beyond individual isolated glimpses of kabbalistic creativity, which had no widespread influence. In Haredi literature there do appear from time to time assertions that the Lithuanian Torah greats of the last generations secretly occupied themselves with kabbalah, but these assertions are not really supported with convincing evidence, and it would seem possible to dismiss them as baseless.[[10]](#footnote-10) With regard to R. Salanter, however, the picture is somewhat more complicated. On the one hand, there are sources that clearly testify to his disapproval of mysticism, yet on the other hand there are threads that link him to it, and what’s more, in the third and fourth generations of the Musar movement there is a definite willingness to accept kabbalistic texts and terminology, albeit selectively and with significant adaptation.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. My thanks to Prof. Jonathan Garb for many helpful comments. His views on this, which diverge in many respects from my own, assisted me in formulating and sharpening my argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Piekarz, 5750, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, *The Hazon Ish on Faith and Trust* (Tel Aviv: 5744) 3:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Scholem, 1954, 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I have written more extensively on this process in my article “The Comeback of ‘Simple Faith’: The Ultra-Orthodox Concept of Faith and Its Development in the Nineteenth Century” (in *Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Jewish Religious Life*, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Liebes, 5763a, 5763b, 5768. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I note here just a selection of them: Lamm, 5732; Ross, 5742; Avivi, 5753; Brill 1993, Wax, 5755; Nadler, 1997; Morgenstern, 5759; Idel, 5763a; Eisenman, 5763; M. Pachter, 5763; Rivlin, 5763; R. B. Shuchat, 5764; ibid., 5768; and in many more of his articles. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Also known as R. Isaac Eisik Wildmann (1789–1853). The work of this important thinker still awaits serious study. Beside an impressive systematization of the kabbalah and an attempt to resolve some of the differences between the mystical thought of the Gaon and the Ari, R. Wildmann instructively attempts to offer an explanation of historic developments in kabbalistic terminology, some of them quite אקטואליים. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Or Eliashov (1841–1926); see M. Pachter, 5763; Wax, 5755. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The motivation to attribute esoteric knowledge to people whose main strength was in the exoteric – like the Hafetz Haim and the Hazon Ish – generally comes from a desire to glorify these individuals as knowing all the secrets of Torah. Describing such *gedolim* as “walking [Torah] encyclopedias,” not limited to just a single “trade,” demands – as we learn from the stories of the Hasidic *tzaddikim* – that these *gedolim*, on account of their humility, did not put all their wisdom on display. Mysticism in particular lends itself to such an assertion, since the esoteric is to begin with understood as something not performed in public. It is worth noting that such assertions need not necessarily be deliberately fictional; more likely, they are based on genuine belief. There is, as it were, a presumption that these great Torah scholars were indeed so great that no aspect of Torah could be beyond them. On the face of it one might consider this literary phenomenon surprising, since the Haredi *hashkafah* displays some reluctance to engage with kabbalah; but in actuality the attempt to associate great Torah scholars with kabbalah serves (somewhat paradoxically) to distance them from it. The undercurrent of such descriptions implies that the *gedolim* were perfectly capable of dealing with Torah on an esoteric level, but they thereby in large measure release us ordinary people, who do not have that capability, from the obligation to enter such dangerous territory. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. M. Pachter, 234-243 (on R. Joseph Leib Bloch of Telz), and 246 (on R. Elijah Eliezer Dessler); Ross, 5744; Brown, 5769, 263-267 (a general look at the transformation that took place in the Musar movement with regard to this). As I note there, even in the teaching of R. Jeroham Lebovitch of Mir, one of the great Musar thinkers of the third generation, one can recognize trace influences of kabbalistic terminology and a mystical outlook, but these are mainly quite general or even extraneous. This subject still needs comprehensive study. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)