Perceptions of Kabbalah in the second half of the 18th century

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The second half of the 18th century was the arena of bitter controversies between various Jewish groups in eastern and central Europe. The battle against the Sabbatean movement and its later metamorphosis into Frankism became famous through the polemics between R. Jacob Emden and R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz; the emergence of Hasidism in several centers of Polish Jewry prompted the reaction of famous Rabbis in Vilna and Brody. Towards the end of the century, the first representatives of Jewish Enlightenment were bitterly combatted by the Rabbinic establishments of central and eastern Europe.

The first two controversies focused upon two differing versions of Kabbalah: the Sabbatean version, based upon further complications of the Lurianic theosophy, which was mainly interested in the various manoeuvres of the pretended Messiah – Shabbetai Zevi – in his eschatological fight with the evil side, and upon the Hasidic version of Kabbalah, dealing with pointing the way to a new mystical *modus vivendi* to achieve, through enthusiastic prayer, various types of mystical union and communion with God. The great opponents of these two brands of Kabbalah like R. Jacob Emden and R. Eliyahu, the Gaon of Vilna, were themselves well-known Kabbalists. Therefore, Kabbalah itself was never the subject of a comprehensive criticism, but rather its "heretical" interpretations which had dangerous theological and social implications. As

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regards the third important controversy, over the Enlightenment, Kabbalah was never a main issue: the majority of the opponents to the Enlightenment were either Kabbalists or figures whose attitude towards Kabbalah was positive or reserved, though not totally critical.¹

In this tense atmosphere, where each group was critical, or at least suspicious of the other, Kabbalah enjoyed a peculiar status; it was almost unanimously accepted as the sacrosanct Jewish esoteric theology. Despite this almost idyllic situation concerning Kabbalah, we can also discern casual critical remarks regarding the nature of this lore, which stem from unequivocal Kabbalistic authorities.² The best known phenomenon is the incisive re-examination of the zoharic texts by R. Jacob Emden; the centrality of the Zohar for both Sabbateans and Frankists pushed their fervent adversary to a new and close perusal of this pivotal Kabbalistic text. His conclusions were far from strict orthodoxy; according to the findings of his erudite inquiries, the Zohar is formed of at least three layers: an ancient one, authored by R. Shimeon bar Yohai; another layer, including Ra'aya Meheimna and Tiqqunei Zohar, and an even later part, the Midrash ha-Ne'elam.³ Moreover, later glosses were incorporated into the original zoharic text. Even though some of Emden’s conclusions concerning the layers of the Zohar were not accepted by modern scholarship of Kabbalah⁴, some of his textual analyses are interesting achievements of literary criticism of the Zohar. However, in Emden’s view, the problems Kabbalah posed went much further than the quandaries connected with some parts of the Zohar or a certain amount of glosses, misused or abused by heretical Jewish “sectarians”. In Emden’s period, the whole Kabbalistic body of literature became problematic and a highly


² Some important reports of criticism against the widespread study of Kabbalah in the 18th century were collected and discussed by M. Pickartz, The Beginning of Hasidism – Ideological Trends in Dersch and Musar Literature (Jerusalem, 1962), pp. 320-338 (Hebrew). In the following discussion we shall be concerned with other sources than those quoted by Pickartz. The main interest will be the criticism regarding the very nature of Kabbalah.
