

Philosophy, Heresy, and Kabbalah's Counter-Theology

Sandra Valabregue

Independent Scholar, Jerusalem

The role philosophy played in the rise of new Jewish esoteric traditions in the Middle Ages has always been a critical question for kabbalah scholarship. Many scholars have contributed to our understanding of kabbalah's relationship to Greek, Christian, and Jewish philosophy, Neoplatonic and Neo-Aristotelian traditions alike. In this article I wish to contribute to this vast scholarly discussion by enlightening some aspects of theosophical kabbalah's innovation in light of its dialogue with philosophical ideas. This dialogue is complex, and the extent of kabbalah's interaction with philosophy is difficult to evaluate. My assumption in the following is that such a dialogue is best apprehended where conflict can be detected. Consequently I will study different cases of theological conflict between theosophical and philosophical conceptions—cases of heresy, where a theological tension can be identified.¹ These tensions will help us to evaluate the nature of the theosophical innovation in question. The framework of this article rests on the assumption that theosophical kabbalah shares with different philosophical traditions some important theological structures but also that it maintains important conceptual differences. In order to evaluate the theological tensions involved I will analyze different cases of theological heresies, both philosophical and theosophical. I hope with this analysis to clarify theosophical kabbalah in light of its theological renewal, a renewal that was not merely the result of the acceptance of or resistance to philosophical ideas but also of the emerging of what I propose to call counter-theology.

¹ In the following I will consider theology as a rational and/or esoteric knowledge of the divine. Consequently, theosophy in kabbalah and metaphysics in philosophy will both be considered as theological systems.

The test cases, though all concentrating on heresy, are representative of theosophical kabbalah and deal with general issues such as God's interaction with the world, God's unity, and the creation. Presenting the whole range of textual evidence is beyond the scope of this article. Consequently it is the aim of this research to juggle micro- and macroanalysis; the test cases presented and the textual analysis are not random but are meant to exemplify the larger framework.

I have chosen to explore three different test cases of heresy, all of which demonstrate the ambivalence of kabbalah toward philosophy. In all three cases, philosophy stands as a reference model, while other competitive theological models are presented. The first test case deals with the category of heresy itself—first with the status of philosophical heresy in kabbalah and then with that of faith and heresy in kabbalah and philosophy. It will show that the theosophical structure itself functioned as a counter-theology in response to the perceived dangers of philosophical theological inadequacy. The second case analyzes competing philosophical conceptions deemed heretical. Here, while Maimonides's philosophy and theosophical kabbalah held the same belief regarding the *creatio ex nihilo*, their proponents defended two not merely different but opposing views of creation, both of which were accused of being heretical. The third test case deals with the question of divine unity, with theosophical kabbalah accused of heresy for allowing plurality in the divine simplicity. In their defense against this accusation, advocates of theosophical kabbalah elaborated a category of heresy termed “cutting the plants”: a category that defended and legitimized an alternative, provocative interpretation of divine unity.

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In order better to assess the complexity of the encounter between philosophy and theosophical kabbalah, we should make a distinction between the influence of philosophy on kabbalah—for example, the use of philosophical ideas and structures—and the overt attitude of kabbalah toward philosophy. Regarding the latter, several stances can be detected. Georges Vajda, and later Boaz Huss, have shown three main patterns.² The first considers kabbalah and philosophy as sharing the same body of knowledge and thus their differences are only semantic. The second sees philosophical lore as reliable yet inferior to kabbalistic beliefs. The last is more radical and regards philosophy as a false, even demonic science. Here, philosophy is seen by kabbalists not only as secondary but also as misleading.

With this typology in mind, we must nevertheless remember that, at least during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it was common to find differing attitudes toward philosophy within the same text or within works by the same author. This

² *Mélanges Georges Vajda. Études de pensée, de philosophie et de littérature juives et arabes* (ed. Gérard E. Weil; Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1982) 561–62; Georges Vajda, *Introduction à la pensée juive du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Vrin, 1947) 199–201; and Boaz Huss, “Mysticism versus Philosophy in Kabbalistic Literature,” *Micrologus* 9 (2001) 125–35.

can be said both of the authors most receptive to philosophy and of those most critical,³ which suggests that rather than a clear typology, a far more complex and ambiguous attitude toward philosophy can, on the whole, be identified. A critical approach toward philosophy, however, does not mean that kabbalah was not open to its ideas.⁴ On the contrary, regardless of their disagreements, the crystallization of ontological, hermeneutic, esoteric, and theosophical tools in kabbalah should be understood in tandem with philosophy. Likewise the kabbalists relied on philosophical categories and terminology, a dependence that did not, however, turn them into philosophers; rather, it is not uncommon to see philosophical concepts and ideas transformed and transplanted in kabbalistic discourse, a principle that I hope to show should be seen as both imitative and innovative.

The reception of philosophy by theosophical kabbalah has been the subject of a wide range of studies. The first attempt, by David Neumark, who saw kabbalah as a mystical philosophy,⁵ was challenged by Gershom Scholem, who emphasized the mystical rather than the philosophical aspects of kabbalah. Accordingly, the

³ For example, in spite of Azriel of Gerona's philosophical inclinations, he nonetheless adopts a critical view (Sandra Valabregue-Perry, *Concealed and Revealed: The Concept of Eyn-Sof in Theosophic Kabbalah* [Los Angeles: Cherub, 2010] 66–71). In contrast, Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, who overtly expresses his opposition to philosophy, nevertheless borrows important philosophical ideas (*Mélanges Georges Vajda*, 615, 617). R. Issac ibn Sahula presents a similar case: in his commentary he criticizes the philosophy of Ibn Aknin but evinces nevertheless identical views (Arthur Green, "R. Issac ibn Sahula's Song of the Songs Commentary," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 [1997] 393–491, at 396 [Hebrew]). As a final example, Abraham Abulafia, being a disciple of Maimonides, nonetheless holds kabbalah to be a higher level of interpretation (Abraham Abulafia, *'Imrē Sefer* [Jerusalem: Barazani, 1999] 12–13; Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989] 91–95).

⁴ On the influence of Neoplatonic philosophy on kabbalah, see Gershom Scholem, *Origins of Kabbalah* (ed. Raphael J. Z. Werblowsky; trans. Allan Arkush; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987) 363; idem, *Studies in Kabbalah* (ed. Joseph ben Shalom and Moshe Idel; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1998) 39–66 [Hebrew]; Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, "L'influence de Jean Scot sur la doctrine du kabbaliste Azriel de Gérone," in *Jean Scot Erigène et l'histoire de la philosophie* (ed. René Roques; Colloques internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique 561; Paris: CNRS, 1977) 453–63; Gustavo A. Piemonte, "Jean Scot et un opuscule hébreu pseudépigraphique du XIII^e siècle," in *Eriugena redivivus. Zur Wirkungsgeschichte seines Denkens im Mittelalter und im Übergang zur Neuzeit* (ed. Beierwalters Werner; Vorträge des V. internationalen Eriugena-Colloquiums, Werner-Reimers-Stiftung Bad Homburg, 26–30 August 1985; Heidelberg: 1987) 279–310; Georges Vajda, *Sages et penseurs sépharades de Bagdad à Cordoue* (Paris: Cerf, 1989) 141–78; Moshe Idel, "Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance," in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (ed. Lenn E. Goodman; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 319–51; Mark Brian Sendor, *The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind's "Commentary on Sefer Yeẓirah"* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Sarah Sviri, "Spiritual Trends in Pre-Kabbalistic Judeo-Spanish Literature: The Cases of Bahya ibn Paquda and Judah Halevi," *Donaire* 6 (1996) 73–84; Hava Tirosh-Samuels, "Philosophy and Kabbalah," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 218–57; and Jonathan Dauber, "Pure Thought in R. Abraham bar Hiyya and Early Kabbalah," *JJS* 60 (2009) 185–201.

⁵ David Neumark, *Geschichte der jüdischen Philosophie des Mittelalters* (2 vols.; Berlin: Reimer, 1907) 2:179–209.

influence of philosophy on kabbalah has been understood principally as the impact of philosophical terminology to which new significance was given.⁶ The generation of scholars after Scholem has highlighted new aspects and offered new insights. Moshe Idel has emphasized the continuity of different Jewish ethos, while also considering the impact of Jewish and Christian philosophy.⁷ He has elaborated on the theurgic, prophetic, and magical aspects that came to characterize kabbalistic traditions in contrast to philosophical traditions. Yehuda Liebes has also established a historic model of continuity in Jewish mysticism, with exemplifying mythical elements.⁸ In his account of the complex interactions between mysticism and philosophy, Elliot Wolfson has responded both to this emphasis on theurgy and myth, and to Scholem's sharp distinction between mysticism and rationalism.⁹ By stressing their common ground, he has broken down the paradigmatic opposition between rationalism and mysticism, thus causing a reexamination of our understanding of kabbalah and philosophy. Recently scholars such as Menachem Lorberbaum, Adam Afterman, and Jonathan Dauber have shed new light on philosophy and kabbalah's common intellectual and mystical grounds.¹⁰

Thus the comparison between kabbalah and philosophy has, in general, resulted either in an outline of their common ethos or an emphasis on alternative models, be they theurgic, magic, or mythic. In this article I wish also to discuss the common

⁶ Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (2nd ed.; New York: Dorset, 1987) 44–45; idem, *Origins*, 68–97, 221–22.

⁷ Idel, "Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism," 319–51; idem, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," in *Studies in Maimonides* (ed. Isadore Twersky; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990) 31–54; idem, "Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," *Jewish History* 18 (2004) 197–226; idem, "Mystiques et philosophes. Échanges entre centres du monde juif," in *La société juive à travers l'histoire* (ed. Shmuel Trigano; 4 vols.; Paris: Fayard, 1992–1993) 4:291–309; idem, "Abulafia's Secrets of the Guide: A Linguistic Turn," in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism* (ed. Alfred L. Ivry, Elliot R. Wolfson, and Allan Arkush; Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998) 289–92; and idem, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (London: Continuum, 2007).

⁸ Yehudah Liebes, "Myth vs. Symbol in the Zohar and in Lurianic Kabbalah," in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah* (ed. Lawrence Fine; New York: New York University Press, 1995) 212–42, at 213; idem, "The Influence of Christianity on the Book of the Zohar," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 2 (1983) 43–74 (Hebrew); idem, "A Greek Contribution to the Faith of Abraham: A Response to B. Bar-Kochva [*Tarbiš* 70 [2001] 327–52]," *Tarbiš* 71 (2002) 249–64 (Hebrew); idem, "Zohar and Iamblichus," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6 (2007) 95–100; and idem, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) 4.

⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," in *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204)* (ed. Görgo K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse; Würzburg: Ergon, 2004) 209–37; idem, "Via Negativa in Maimonides and Its Impact on Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008) 293–342; and idem, "Hebraic and Hellenic Conceptions of Wisdom in Sefer ha-Bahir," *Poetics Today* 19 (1998) 147–76.

¹⁰ Menachem Lorberbaum, *Dazzled by Beauty: Theology as Poetics in Hispanic Jewish Culture* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi, 2011) (Hebrew); idem, "Mystique mythique et mystique rationnelle," *Critique* 728–29 (2008) 109–17; Adam Afterman, *Dēvēqut: Mystical Intimacy in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2011) (Hebrew); Jonathan Dauber, *Knowledge of God and the Development of Early Kabbalah* (Boston: Brill, 2012); and see also my work: Valabregue-Perry, *Concealed and Revealed*.

ground between kabbalah and philosophy, but in order to outline some important theological differences that have not yet been properly formulated. This will shed new light on their profound mimesis and equally profound divergence, presenting new ways in which to examine the reception of philosophical conceptions in medieval theosophical kabbalah.

For this purpose I will first clarify what was understood by kabbalists as philosophical heresy. Medieval kabbalists denounced major philosophical views as heretical when they believed those views had deviated from basic Jewish religious precepts. Azriel of Gerona, Jacob ben Sheshet,¹¹ Nachmanides,¹² Joseph Gikatilla,¹³ Joseph Ashkenazi,¹⁴ Isaac ibn Latif,¹⁵ and the anonymous author of *Ma'arekhet hā'elohut*¹⁶ are only some of the main kabbalistic figures of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries who refer to various philosophical views as heretical. At the core of their accusation stands the alleged philosophical denegation of the revelatory character of the Torah, miracles, the creation, or divine providence. The conception of God was not directly at stake, nor was God's existence denied. These heretical views challenge the possibility of God's intervention in the world and by implication in human affairs. In discussing heresy, kabbalists do not deem philosophy itself heretical but rather some of its conceptions. The categories of philosophical heresy are mostly non-Jewish philosophical systems or interpretations of Jewish philosophers that contradict the commandments and question God's intervention in the world. For example, according to Jacob ben Sheshet,¹⁷ Ibn Tibbon misinterprets

¹¹ Jacob ben Sheshet, *Ša'ar haššamayim* (ed. Neora Gabay; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1989) 115–17. See the longer version in Amos Goldreich, “*Sefer mē'irat 'enayim* of R. Isaac of Acre: A Critical Edition” (2 vols.; PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1984) 1:408–10, 2:59 (Hebrew); Georges Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Mouton, 1962) 356–84. Wolfson understands the theurgic dimension of prayer in kabbalah to be in opposition to its rational formulation in philosophy (Elliot Wolfson, “Mystical-Theurgical Dimensions of Prayers in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*,” in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times* (ed. David B. Blumenthal; 3 vols.; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984–1988) 3:41–79, at 41–42 and 45–46.

¹² Moses Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah* (trans. Charles B. Chavel; 2 vols.; New York: Shilo, 1971–1976) at Exod 13:15.

¹³ Joseph Gikatilla, *Ginnat 'egoz* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Hachaim Vehashalom, 1989) 10, 371.

¹⁴ *Sefer yēširah hammēyūhās lē'Avrahām 'āvinu* (Warsaw, 1884; repr., Jerusalem: Yeshivat Qol Yehudah, 1990) 12.

¹⁵ Isaac ibn Latif, *Sefer rav pē'ālim* (ed. Hana Kasher; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1974) 55–56.

¹⁶ *Sefer ma'arekhet hā'elohut* (Mantova, 1558; repr., Jerusalem: Makor Chaim, 1963) ch. 9.

¹⁷ For Jacob ben Sheshet's setting up an opposition between Maimonides and Aristotle, as well as for Shmuel ibn Tibbon on questions of providence and creation, see *Sefer mēšiv dēvārim nēkhoḥim* (ed. Efraim Gottlieb; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1968) 159–62, 167–68, 183–84; Scholem, *Origins*, 378 (Ben Sheshet against Ibn Tibbon); idem, *Studies in Kabbalah*, 1:191; and Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la kabbale*, 105–9. See also Meshulam da Piera's apology at the end of his letter, accusing the translators rather than Maimonides himself: Haim Brody, “Poems of Mesullam ben Selomo da Piera,” in *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry in Jerusalem* (7 vols.; Berlin: Schocken, 1933–1958) 4:1–118, at 100 (Hebrew); Daniel J. Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy: 1180–1240* (Leiden: Brill, 1965) 11–114, 186.

Maimonides¹⁸ and favors Aristotle's beliefs over Maimonides's, although the latter argues, in his view, in favor of individual providence.¹⁹

We will turn now to the implications of such categories of heresy in order better to understand what is at stake for the tenets of theosophical kabbalah. Our understanding of the full meaning of the criticism of those tenets and of the category of heresy is enhanced by appealing to Margalit and Halbertal's work. In their view, in the Middle Ages it was no longer the worship of other gods that preoccupied those identifying heresy but rather differences in practice.²⁰ Interestingly enough, this principle applies to kabbalah's critique of philosophy as well, since the target was not the philosophical conception of God but its implications for religious practices. In our case the difference in their practices lies precisely in the lack of practice in philosophy—what is deemed heretical is the denial of the impact of praxis on God. It is not the philosophical system that is heretical but rather its practical implication: the denial of prayer's efficacy, the Torah's divine origins, and divine providence. Interestingly, philosophical heresy, specifically in our case the lack of praxis, was understood by kabbalists as a threat that lies not in philosophy as a way of thinking but rather as a way of life. To answer the challenge raised by perceived philosophical heresy one needs to ensure a theological system that does

¹⁸ On the question of the relationship between kabbalah and Maimonides's philosophy, see Scholem, *Origins*, 393–414. For a survey of the influence of Maimonides on kabbalah, see Jacob I. Dienstag, "Maimonides and the Kabbalists, Bibliography," *Da'at* 26 (1991) 61–96 (Hebrew); Sarah Heller-Willensky, "Isaac ibn Latif, Philosopher or Kabbalist?," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (ed. Alexander Altmann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967) 185–223; and eadem, "The Guide and the Gate: The Dialectical Influence of Maimonides on Isaac ibn Latif and Early Spanish Kabbalah," in *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture; Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman* (ed. Ruth Link-Salinger; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988) 266–78. According to Idel, kabbalists resisted Maimonides's eradication of esoteric tradition (*ma'aseh merkavah* and *ma'aseh b'ereshit*): see above, n. 7; Shmuel Trigano, "La controverse maimonidienne. Deux figures de l'intellectuel juif," in *La Société juive à travers l'histoire* (ed. idem; 4 vols.; Paris: Fayard, 1992–1993) 1:225–38. For another aspect of kabbalah's "reaction" to Maimonidean philosophy, in which kabbalah was set forth as an alternative for a wider audience, see Harvey J. Hames, *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 31–82. For structural affinities between Maimonides and theosophical kabbalah, see Elliot R. Wolfson's work (above, n. 9); Jonathan Dauber, "Competitive Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah," in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought* (ed. James T. Robinson; Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 9; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 57–88.

¹⁹ Jacob ben Sheshet, *Ša'ar haššamayim*, 184. See also Dov Schwartz, "The Debate over the Maimonidean Theory of Providence in Thirteenth-Century Philosophy," *JSQ* 2 (1995) 188–96; Gad Freudenthal, "The Kabbalist R. Jacob ben Sheshet of Girona: The Ambivalences of a Moderate Critique of Science," in *Temps i espais de la Girona jueva. Actes del simposi internacional celebrat a Girona 23, 24 i 25 de març de 2009* (ed. Silvia P. Marcé; Girona Judaica 5; Girona: Patronat del Call de Girona, 2011) 287–301.

²⁰ For the various changes that the category of idolatry underwent in the Middle Ages, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (trans. Naomi Goldblum; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Moshe Halbertal, *By Way of Truth: Nachmanides and the Creation of Tradition* (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman, 2006) 302 (Hebrew).

not jeopardize the religious life—but even further, such a system must justify the normative religious way of life and even become its *raison d'être*. Such a system would solve the problems raised by the ontological differences between the mundane and the divine. This counter-theology would prevent the denial of the divine origins of the Torah, of divine providence, and of creation and would guarantee the efficacy of prayer by closing the ontological gap between God and humanity by supplanting one epistemological approach with another one.

My claim is that the theosophical system itself should be understood as the main theological answer to the danger of heresy presented by philosophical concepts. The very structure of the sefirotic system indeed offers an alternative to the theological problems caused by the philosophical chasm between the mundane and the divine. Among the many ways in which the theosophical system offers a theological alternative, the most important one is what I propose to call the process of divinization. This scheme can in fact explain each case of kabbalistic attack against philosophical heresy. For example, while in some philosophical formulations the Torah is seen as mundane, theosophical kabbalah responds by emphasizing the Torah's divine status.²¹ The same can be said about the status of the Hebrew language,²² the allegory/symbol,²³ creation,²⁴ and even the providence of the Shekhinah, which is, as is well known, identified with the last *sēfirāh*, *malkhut*. This process can be seen in other aspects of theosophical kabbalah as well, but for now it will suffice to regard theosophical kabbalah as an overall structure that emphasizes the divine in all its aspects. This process—divinization—is not only about the intensification of the divine realm but also about the divinization of the human realm, in contrast to the new philosophical language and its humanization of the divine.

²¹ Gershom Scholem, "The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism," *Diogenes* 14 (1956) 36–47; 15 (1956) 65–69; idem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965) 32–86; Moshe Idel, "Infinites of Torah in Kabbalah," in *Midrash and Literature* (ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 141–57; idem, "Torah: Between Presence and Representation of the Divine in Jewish Mysticism," in *Representation in Religion: Studies in Honor of Moshe Barasch* (ed. Jan Assmann and Albert I. Baumgarten; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 197–235; and idem, *Absorbing Perfections—Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 50–74.

²² Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of Kabbalah," *Diogenes* 79 (1972) 59–80; 80 (1972) 164–94; see also the preceding note.

²³ For the place of the mystical symbol as an alternative to the philosophical allegory see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (3rd rev. ed.; New York: Schocken, 1995) 25–26; idem, *Origins*, 407–8; idem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 88–89; Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* (trans. David Goldstein; 3 vols.; Oxford: Littman, 1989) 1:283–90; Steven Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henri Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 112–22; Roland Goetschel, "Interprétation rationaliste et interprétation mystique du combat de Jacob avec l'ange dans l'exégèse juive du Moyen Âge," in *Lectures bibliques* (ed. Jean G. Heintz; Brussels: Institutum Iudaicum, 1981) 41–54; and Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 272–351.

²⁴ See discussion below.

It should be noted that this process of divinization is reinforced by the emphasis on esotericism, for in kabbalah esotericism permits knowledge of a higher level than rational or logical knowledge. While the context of the switch from epistemology to esotericism in theosophy is beyond the scope of this research, it is important here to understand the divinization process as presenting an inverted mirror image of human rational philosophy. This process is better understood in light of the internalization of the religious discourse of the Middle Ages. While on the one hand, the philosophical internalization of the religious discourse dealing with the correct knowledge of God was adopted by ecstatic and theosophical kabbalah alike, on the other hand, the implications of philosophy for religious life were perceived by the theosophical tradition as a real danger. By “internalization” one should understand the transition from a legalistic discourse to a theoretical one that deals with the reasons for the commandments (*ta’amē mišvot*) rather than with their practice. Interestingly enough kabbalah’s and philosophy’s aspirations were similar, for they both strove to present new religious systems based on a meta-theoretical structure. At the same time—and this is my argument—they should be understood at least partially as competitive systems in the way their theoretical approaches differ. For one thing, where the philosophical approach of God’s essence is epistemological/human, the theosophical approach is ontological/divine. This very process describes kabbalah’s integration of philosophical tools as well as their transformation from rational inquiry to divine emanative world. Each case of theological heresy discussed in this article presents a different type of integration and transformation of philosophical ideas into theosophy.

For now I will return to the analysis of the process of divinization as an answer to the philosophical heresy denounced by kabbalah—within, this time, the category of faith and heresy itself. To understand better the theological shift undertaken by kabbalah, from epistemology to theosophy in reaction to some philosophical challenges, it is important to touch on the changes that the categories of faith and heresy experienced under the influence of philosophy during the Middle Ages.²⁵

The new emphasis given in the Middle Ages to *’emunāh* (faith), a rather amorphous notion in rabbinic literature, signifies a conceptual change in religious categories and values. This new focus was the result of the theological “reform” instigated by Jewish philosophers such as Saadia Gaon²⁶ or, later on, Maimonides, with his thirteen principles of faith.²⁷ Until the Middle Ages, faith was understood

²⁵ For an overall account of different aspects of faith in Jewish traditions, see *On Faith: Studies in the Concept of Faith and Its History in the Jewish Tradition* (ed. Moshe Halbertal, Avi Sagi, and David Kurzweil; Jerusalem: Keter, 2005) (Hebrew).

²⁶ Hagai ben-Shammai, “The Ten Principles of Faith of Saadia Gaon,” *Da’at* 37 (1996) 11–26 (Hebrew); Harry A. Wolfson, “The Double Faith Theory in Clement, Saadia, Averroes and St. Thomas,” *JQR* 33 (1942) 213–64.

²⁷ On the differences between biblical and medieval conceptions of faith, see Menachem Kellner, “Religious Faith in the Middle Ages and Today,” in *On Faith* (ed. Halbertal, Sagi, and Kurzweil), 312–27 (Hebrew); idem, “Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles and the Structure of the *Guide of the*

mostly as a religious state and, for this reason, was not seen as antithetical to heresy: the absence of faith did not necessarily signify heresy and therefore did not belong in the same ontological category. In the reform initiated by Maimonides, heresy, for the first time, came to imply erroneous faith. Faith and heresy were bound into one category; Maimonides not only rationalized the principles of faith but also gave them a legislative status.²⁸ Heresy came to be seen not only as deviance from the religious commandments but also from the principle of faith on which the commandments rested, thus indicating a double shift: the move from viewing faith as a religious state to viewing faith as a rational principle and the development of a new theological statement. Such a shift was novel and was not unequivocally accepted.

The concept of *'emunāh* in kabbalah followed a parallel development and should thus be understood in light of this philosophical reform first as an alignment to the new standard and secondly as a counter-position.²⁹ Advocates of kabbalah reacted by granting faith its own ontological status. In response to the theologization of the principles of faith, which are based on human cognition in philosophy, kabbalists theologized *'emunāh*, now located in the divine. Two different ways of understanding theologization are thus delineated: one outlines the rational aspect of the science of the divine and the other its divine origin and location. For kabbalah, theology is equivalent to the symbolic divine realm, whereas for philosophy, theology is the rational science of predication.³⁰

The typological move into the divine encountered by the concept of faith is one example among many on the theological agenda of theosophical kabbalah. *'Emunāh*, like many other theosophical symbols, is included in the sefirotic tree; here more

Perplexed," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 20 (1982) 76–84; and Joseph Davis, "Drawing the Line: Views of Jewish Heresy and Belief among Medieval and Early Modern Ashkenazic Jews," in *Rabbinic Culture and Its Critics: Jewish Authority, Dissent and Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Times* (ed. Daniel Frank and Matt Goldish; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008) 161–94.

²⁸ For Maimonides's translating idolatry into the category of error, see Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 108–11.

²⁹ This is not to be confused with Funkenstein's and Biale's notions of counter-history: see Amos Funkenstein, "History, Counter-History and Narrative," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (ed. Saul Friedlander; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) 66–81; David Biale, "Counter-History and Jewish Polemics against Christianity: The *Sefer Toldot Yeshu* and the *Sefer Zerubavel*," *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (1999) 130–45.

³⁰ On the relationship between faith and reason in Jewish-Christian dialogue see Harvey J. Hames, "Reason and Faith: Inter-Religious Polemic and Christian Identity in the Thirteenth Century," in *Religious Apologetics—Philosophic Argumentation* (ed. Yossef Schwartz and Volkhard Krech; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 267–84.

specifically 'emunāh is identified variably with *hokhmāh*³¹ or with *malkhut*.³² In this context, it is important to recall that zoharic literature reconnects with biblical and talmudic notions of faith—for example, a qualitative faith that results in an intimate relationship with God.³³ Theosophical kabbalah thus dismissed the philosophical turn toward propositional faith.³⁴ In addition, however, within its dialogue with philosophy a choice was made to adopt the general philosophical approach of the principles of faith, but only after removing its epistemological overtones: faith in God became divine faith by translating the epistemological inquiry into a divine typology that located faith in God. It is interesting to note that in some texts, 'emunāh is not only the highest concealment of the Godhead, but also the power of suction (vital connection) as opposed to intellectual perception. 'Emunāh thus became the living God to which one simply connects.³⁵ Faith in God no longer entailed the true object of faith but became a substantive divine potentiality: as such it clearly moved from rational inquiry to divine ontology. In this system God is not a rational object of inquiry but a divine stance. This shows a clear case of the transformation of metaphysics into theosophy and rational inquiry into substantive ontology, which enables a better understanding of one of the major differences between philosophy and theosophy.

A clear example of the divine origins of faith according to theosophical thought can be found in a treatise written at the beginning of the fourteenth century titled the *Mēgillat 'emet we'emunāh*:

Faith is above apprehension of any creature's mind because it is a concealed knowledge, impossible to portray, inscribe, or imagine . . . and faith is above, beyond any human perception; since it is a concealed knowledge, there is no drawing, impression, or image at all.³⁶

³¹ Azriel of Gerona, *Pēruš ha'aggādot* (ed. Isaiah Tishby; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982) 24–25, 54 n. 1 (for association also with *malkhut*); Elliot R. Wolfson, "Megillat 'Emet we-'Emunah: Contemplative Visualization and Mystical Unknowing," *Kabbalah* 5 (2000) 55–110, at 82; and Mark Warren Verman, *The Book of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 213.

³² Todros ben Joseph Abulafia, *Ša'ar hārāzīm* (ed. Michal Kushner-Oron; Jerusalem: Bialik, 1989) 57; Moses Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, at Exod 17:12; Zohar 3.23a, 178b; Cordovero, *Pardēs rimmonim* 23.1; Menachem Recanati, *Commentary on the Torah* (2 vols.; Rehovot: Gross, 2003) 1:244; and *Sēfer ma-arekhet hā'elohut*, ch. 13.

³³ Yonathan Garb, "The Principle of Faith in the Zohar," in *On Faith* (ed. Halbertal, Sagi, and Kurzweil), 294–311 (Hebrew).

³⁴ See below, n. 36.

³⁵ See the early anonymous commentary on the *Sēfer yēširāh* in Gershom Scholem, *Kitvē yād bēqabbālāh* [Kabbalistic manuscripts] (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1930) 220.

³⁶ Wolfson, "Megillat 'Emet we-'Emunah," 80.

Likewise, for this anonymous kabbalist, a believer (*ma'amin*) is one who believes in the essence of the concealed.³⁷ This specific link between concealment and faith, found also in earlier rabbinic sources,³⁸ became the key to the theosophical equation between human and divine faith. In an early kabbalistic text belonging to the 'Iyyun Circle it is written that

He is the foundation of everything that is hidden and revealed. From Him issues forth all that is emanated from the wondrousness of the Unity and all the powers that are revealed from the Supreme Hiddenness, which is called 'aman. The explanation is that from Him the sustaining power emanated, which is called father of faith, since faith was emanated from its power.³⁹

As scholars have noted, the 'Iyyun Circle had much in common with the writings of Azriel of Gerona, where there is in fact another example of such a conception.⁴⁰ Here too, 'emunāh is referred to on both the divine and human levels, each depending on the other.⁴¹ In a famous passage Azriel reinterprets a philosophical formulation of Yehuda Halevi: whereas in the *Kuzari*, “the roots of faith and heresy”⁴² are to be found in humanity,⁴³ Azriel places them in the divine realm, in 'en-sof:⁴⁴

And since He is both exalted and hidden, He is the essence of all that is concealed and revealed. But since He is hidden, He is both the root of faith and the root of rebelliousness.⁴⁵ Regarding this it is written: “In his faith a righteous man shall live” (Habakkuk 2:4).⁴⁶

³⁷ Ibid., 83.

³⁸ For example, Gen. Rab. 1:1.

³⁹ Verman, *Book of Contemplation*, 39.

⁴⁰ For a discussion of their mutual influences see ibid., 194–99; Oded Porat, *The Works of Iyyun: Critical Editions* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2013) 29–31.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the two sets of *tēmurot* based on the word *amen* see Karl Grözinger, “The Superior Puissances of Amen and their Permutation in R. Azriel’s Thought,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1997) 299–308 (Hebrew).

⁴² Yehuda Halevi, *Kuzari* 1.77 (translation is the author’s).

⁴³ Halevi’s definition of faith truly differs from the formulation of Maimonides’s principle of faith. While for Halevi, suggesting humanity is the root of faith is meant to emphasize the necessity of a religious commitment, for Maimonides principles of faith are meant to outline the epistemological/legalistic ground.

⁴⁴ On this subject see Mordechai Pachter’s important article: “The Root of Faith is the Root of Heresy in R. Azriel’s writings,” *Kabbalah* 4 (1999) 315–41 (Hebrew). For an analysis of Azriel’s epistle “Ways of Faith and Heresy,” see Joseph Dan, “Faith and Heresy in Rabbi Azriel’s Writings,” in idem, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism* (10 vols.; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2008–2014) 8:141–59 (Hebrew); Valabregue-Perry, *Concealed and Revealed*, 66–82.

⁴⁵ For a parallel passage see Gershom Scholem, “New Fragments from the Writing of R. Azriel of Gerona,” in *Studies in Memory of Asher Gulak and Samuel Klein* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1942) 201–20, at 207 (Hebrew). See also Meshulam da Piera’s poem: “Faith is the root and the principle of every philosophy. The tradition is to be followed in all essentials” (Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism*, 194–95; for the Hebrew edition, see Brody, “Poems of Mesullam ben Selomo da Piera,” 91 n. 210).

⁴⁶ *The Early Kabbalah* (ed. Joseph Dan; trans. Ronald C. Kiener; New York: Paulist, 1986) 89–90.

The central question here is how to believe in an unfathomable principle. To my view, Azriel is playing with the double meanings of the word *ne'lām*, which means “concealed” but also “absent.”⁴⁷ God as a transcendent principle is both invisible and concealed and can therefore be understood to be absent from rational inquiry. It is possible to misconstrue the concealed and the secretive as being absent and therefore nonexistent. Azriel thinks that God should be seen as an omnipotent principle, active by way of revelation and concealed through the *sefirot*. God, not man, is the origin of faith and heresy; faith is not a disposition for man to find in itself but is to be found, literally, in God because faith is God. Only then does *'emunāh* become part of man too. The previous quote from Habakkuk, “in his faith,” should thus be understood to mean in God’s faith; in God, who is faith. God is faith to the righteous and heresy to those for whom God is absent. In this example divine and human faith, with the latter subordinated to the former, are embedded in one another. Faith, for Azriel and Halevi, is the point of the encounter between God and man. While for Halevi, and later on Maimonides, faith depends on humanity, in the theosophical system faith is located in God—faith is God. Halevi and Maimonides have, however, no more in common than their focus on humanity; in general, Maimonides relies on reason, whereas Halevi insists on a religious state. It is important to notice that Azriel and Halevi argue, from their respective positions, against different philosophical conceptions. Yehuda Halevi argues with the philosophical conception of nature as Logos and, more specifically, with astrological determinism.⁴⁸ Azriel of Gerona, on the other hand, argues with certain aspects of the negative theology tradition and its claim that nothing can be known of God.⁴⁹ Yehuda Halevi’s objections to philosophy in favor of the Jewish religion are articulated in a philosophical language, whereas Azriel relies on the theosophical system.⁵⁰ Moreover, the case of Azriel reflects the position of early theosophical kabbalah toward Halevi. The *Kuzari*, as it is well known, was influential in twelfth-century Provence and Spain, and together with other Neoplatonic Jewish philosophical sources it formed part of an influential pool of texts, which perhaps explains the resistance to Maimonides and his Aristotelian tradition.⁵¹ Azriel accepts Halevi’s religious critique of philosophy

⁴⁷ For a similar view that connects *ne'lām* and *'emunāh*, probably influenced by Azriel of Gerona, see Wolfson, “*Megillat 'Emet we-'Emanah*,” 79–81, 60–62 (for apophatic and kataphatic aspects of faith).

⁴⁸ Ehud Krinis, “The Arabic Background of the ‘Kuzari,’” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 21 (2013) 1–56.

⁴⁹ Azriel does not reject the “way of negation” (*derekh hallo'*) but sees it as inferior to the kabbalistic positive ontology. See Valabregue-Perry, *Concealed and Revealed*, 66–71.

⁵⁰ This important point has been outlined in Pachter, “Root of Faith,” 335–36. For Halevi’s critical view of philosophy, see Harry A. Wolfson, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion* (ed. Isadore Twersky and George Harry Williams; 2 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973–1977) 2:140.

⁵¹ Idel, “Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism,” 319–21; Sarah Sviri, “Spiritual Trends,” 78–84.

and in fact takes an even more radical stand by adding one more step: religious motivation cannot rely on human inclination alone but has to rest on ontological grounds, on a substantive ontology.

To sum up, the theosophical divinization of faith follows the philosophical path initiated by Maimonides, which gives to faith a theological status but only in order to claim its ontological status. This ontological status differs from the epistemological approach followed by Maimonides and the psychological approach presented by Halevi. It does not mean that Maimonides was not concerned with ontology but only that his ontological approach is epistemological and therefore refers to an ontological sphere that is beyond reach. Here lies kabbalah's principal contention with Maimonides's philosophy: God's knowledge cannot be approached through the limit of knowledge but can only be achieved within the esoteric tradition. The psychological/religious dimension of the *Kuzari* has been seen as an opportunity for theosophical kabbalists to offer an alternative to the epistemological approach that focuses on defining the correct knowledge of God. For Azriel, faith is indeed about God, but this is because it is God and not due to the correct knowledge of God. Halevi's religious dimension has been understood literally. The outcome is radical: divine and qualitative faith stands as an alternative to propositional faith. Azriel's conception of *'emunāh* provides an example of what happened on a wider scale in theosophical kabbalah: the extension of the divine to that which was restricted to the human realm by logical and philosophical standards.



The complex relations between philosophy and kabbalah can also be seen in another central question: God's creation. Only a narrow dimension of this wide topic will be discussed here, namely some aspects of the theosophical and philosophical conceptions of *creatio ex nihilo*.⁵² At first glance, theosophical kabbalah and Maimonides's philosophy seem to share the same belief regarding the creation of the world—out of nothing. However, the differences in their respective understandings of *creatio ex nihilo* could account for their alternative heretical philosophical traditions.

⁵² For the philosophical traditions I will mainly focus on Maimonides's position. As for the theosophical conceptions of creation I will focus on *creatio ex nihilo* only, while acknowledging that there are different accounts of *ma'asēh b'ērēšit* in early theosophical kabbalah, on which see Daniel Abrams, "Some Phenomenological Considerations on the Account of Creation in Jewish Mystical Literature," *Kabbalah* 10 (2004) 7–19. For an overview of the different philosophical positions, see Lenn E. Goodman, "Creation and Emanation," in *Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy* (ed. Steven M. Nadler and Tamar Rudavsky; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 599–618.

Maimonides's position on creation seems at first unequivocal. In a famous passage from the *Guide*, he disregards altogether both the Neoplatonic conception of primordial matter and the Aristotelian conception of the eternity of the world.⁵³ His main argument for rejecting the belief in the eternity of the world is not its incompatibility with the biblical narrative;⁵⁴ rather it is that natural causality cannot explain the passage from the One to multiplicity as a direct emanation from the first principle and therefore creation is a necessity. Interestingly, Maimonides's argument is the same as that used to defend the eternity of the world: *creatio ex nihilo* must be adopted in order to be consistent with the idea of the impossibility of change in the absolute divine essence. There is a transformation that cannot be explained either by physical laws or by the idea of the passage from potential to actual. From the One can emanate only a simple One, and therefore the passage from simple substance to the world of generation and corruption must rely on the metaphysical argument of creation.⁵⁵ To this purpose, Maimonides quotes the verse from Psalms: "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord; but the earth hath he given to the children of men" (Ps 115:16).⁵⁶ His conception of *creatio ex nihilo*, however, has not always been understood straightforwardly, especially put in the context of his double hermeneutic system. Scholars have also studied Maimonides's

⁵³ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* 2.13, 30, and 32; for a detailed analysis of the *ex nihilo* argument, see Andrew L. Gluck, "Maimonides' Arguments for Creation 'Ex Nihilo' in the 'Guide of the Perplexed,'" *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 7 (1998) 221–54; Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and idem, "Maimonides on Creation," in *Jewish Philosophy, Perspectives and Retrospectives* (ed. Raphael Jospe and Dov Schwartz; Boston: Academic Studies, 2012) 185–99. For an analysis of the different positions on creation in Maimonides's philosophy see Sarah Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides's Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (Jerusalem: Reuven Moss, 1987) (Hebrew). For an analysis of the creation argument in light of prophecy (*The Guide of the Perplexed* 2.33) see Lawrence Kaplan, "Maimonides on the Miraculous Element in Prophecy," *HTR* 70 (1977) 233–56; Herbert Alan Davidson, "Maimonides' Secret Position on Creation," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (ed. Isadore Twersky and Jay M. Harris; 3 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979–2000) 1:16–40; idem, *Moshe Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 387–407; Zeev Harvey, "A Third Approach to Maimonides' Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle," *HTR* 74 (1981) 16–27; Howard Kreisel, "Maimonides and the Eternity of the World," in *Jewish Philosophy* (ed. Jospe and Schwartz), 158–84; and Micah Goodman, *The Secret of "The Guide of the Perplexed"* (Or Yehuda: Devir, 2010) 253–69.

⁵⁴ For example, anthropomorphic attributes of deity are very common in the Torah and nevertheless cannot be accepted for theological reasons. Therefore the creation argument cannot be adopted simply out of coherence with the biblical narrative.

⁵⁵ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* 2.22. See also Arthur Hyman, "From What is One and Simple Only What is One and Simple Can Come to Be," in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (ed. Goodman), 111–35. Hyman understands Maimonides's theory of creation as twofold—a *creatio ex nihilo* followed by emanation (Alexander Hyman, "Maimonides on Creation and Emanation," *Studies in Medieval Philosophy* [1987] 45–61).

⁵⁶ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* 2.24 (translation is the author's).

conception of creation in light of his conception of emanation.⁵⁷ Some have opted for a radical esoteric reading, understanding emanation as his real position, while others have identified a mixed position of creation and emanation, thus offering a moderate reading. However, according to the dominant interpretive voice, beyond his argument in favor of *creatio ex nihilo* hides the Aristotelian conception of the eternity of the world.⁵⁸

Whereas the double hermeneutic system of Maimonides has long been a subject of discussion in modern scholarship, that of the kabbalists, with its resemblance to Maimonides's philosophy, has escaped the attention of scholars. A similar coexistence of contradictory positions combining creation and emanation can be found in theosophical kabbalah. The combination of the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* and emanation is in fact a common trait among most of the Neoplatonic philosophers, such as Abraham bar Hiyya,⁵⁹ Isaac Israeli,⁶⁰ and Shlomo ibn Gabirol⁶¹ in the Jewish world; Dionysius the Areopagite, Scotus Eriugena, and Augustine in the Christian world; and al-Farabi in the Islamic world.⁶² Concepts of emanation

⁵⁷ Sarah Klein-Braslavy, "The Creation of the World and Maimonides' Interpretation of Gen. i-v," in *Maimonides and Philosophy* (ed. Shlomo Pines and Yirmiyahu Yovel; Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1986) 65–71; eadem, "Maimonides' Esoteric and Exoteric Biblical Interpretations," in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought* (ed. Howard Kriesel; Beersheba: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006) 159–63; Hyman, "Maimonides on Creation"; Alfred Ivry, "Maimonides on Creation," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1999) 115–37 (Hebrew); and see also n. 53 above.

⁵⁸ For an Aristotelian esoteric reading of Maimonides among early commentators, see Gad Freudenthal, "Samuel ibn Tibbon's Avicennian Theory of an Eternal World," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 8 (2008) 41–129. This is also Jacob ben Sheshet's reading in *Sefer mēšiv dēvārim nēkkoḥim*, 134. For similar ideas in Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi's writings, see *Mélanges Georges Vajda* (ed. Weil), 563.

⁵⁹ Leon Stitskin, *Judaism as Philosophy: The Philosophy of Abraham bar Hiyya, 1065–1143* (Brooklyn: Yeshiva University Press, 1960) 93–107; Hannu Töyrylä, *Abraham bar Hiyya on Time, History, Exile and Redemption* (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 80–81.

⁶⁰ Alexander Altmann and Samuel M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli: A Neo-platonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958) 171–80; Alexander Altmann, "Creation and Emanation in Isaac Israeli: A Reappraisal," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (ed. Twersky), 1:1–15; Harry A. Wolfson, "The Meaning of Ex Nihilo in Isaac Israeli," *JQR* 50 (1959) 1–12; and Sarah Pessin, "Jewish Neoplatonism: Being above Being and Divine Emanation in Solomon ibn Gabirol and Isaac Israeli," in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (ed. Frank and Leaman), 91–110.

⁶¹ Shlomo ibn Gabirol, *Fons vitae* 3.3, 25; Jacques Schlanger, *La philosophie de Salomon ibn Gabirol. Étude d'un néoplatonisme* (Leiden: Brill, 1968) 193–94; Abraham J. Heschel, "The Concept of 'Beings' in the Philosophy of Ibn Gabirol," *Conservative Judaism* 28 (1974) 89–95, at 94–95; John A. Laumakis, "Avicibron (Solomon ibn Gabirol) on Creation *ex nihilo*," *The Modern Schoolman* 79 (2001) 41–55; Sarah Pessin, *Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 119–31; and eadem, "Jewish Neoplatonism."

⁶² On this notion in early Christianity and its polemics with Gnosticism, see Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought* (trans. A. S. Worrall; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); Joseph N. Torchia, *Creatio ex Nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichaean Polemic and Beyond* (New York: Lang, 1999); and *Creation and the God of Abraham* (ed. David B. Burrell et al.; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press,

were common currency, and though not always in direct association with the concept of creation, they usually played an active part in the Neo-Aristotelian cosmological system as well.

Following the Neoplatonic systems, theosophical kabbalists proposed their own conceptual mixture of emanation and creation. Promoting *creatio ex nihilo* does not preclude asserting a concept of primordial matter combined with a concept of emanation. On the contrary, it seems that this kind of mixture was common not only in the Jewish world but in the Christian and Muslim worlds as well.⁶³ In many respects, kabbalah, alongside rabbinical and midrashic views and Jewish Neoplatonic conceptions, tended to reinterpret creation in terms of emanation.⁶⁴ The second heretical position discussed and rejected by Maimonides concerning primordial matter refers to a Platonic and Neoplatonic theory that stands at the heart of the theosophical traditions. Thus, Ezra of Gerona, a prominent kabbalist active in the first half of the thirteenth century, openly discards Maimonides's rejection of the second position.⁶⁵ Ezra of Gerona agrees that his interpretation of primordial matter is no different from that of Plato,⁶⁶ but that it also is strongly rooted in ancient Jewish tradition—not only in Pirqē Rabbi Eliezer⁶⁷ but in other sources as well.⁶⁸

2010). On the mutual ambivalence between creation and emanation already in Plotinus's works, see Lloyd P. Gerson, "Plotinus's Metaphysics: Emanation or Creation?," *The Review of Metaphysics* 46 (1993) 559–74.

⁶³ The three monotheistic traditions share parallel developments. David Winston sees, for example, *creatio ex nihilo* as a medieval Christian and Islamic theological renewal: "The Book of Wisdom's Theory of Cosmogony," *History of Religion* 11 (1971) 185–202; for a conception native to Judaism see Jonathan Goldstein, "The Origins of the Doctrine of Creation Ex-Nihilo," *JJS* 35 (1984) 127–35; Winston Replay: "Creation Ex Nihilo Revisited: A Reply to Jonathan Goldstein," *JJS* 37 (1986) 88–91.

⁶⁴ According to some scholars, some Neoplatonic thinkers distinguish between creation and emanation as two different phases; these include Isaac Israeli and Ibn Gabirol. Others identify a distinction between creation and emanation, including Plotinus and al-Farabi. However, scholars such as Harry H. Wolfson, Arthur Altmann, and Sarah Pessin have argued whether or not Isaac Israeli's conception of creation should be understood as an *ex nihilo* conception or as emanation: see above, nn. 60–61.

⁶⁵ Alexander Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Ithaca, NY: Routledge, 1969) 138. For the Hebrew version, see "Letter to Abraham," in Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah*, 1:28–29; see also Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona, "Pēruš Šir hašširim," in *Ramban (Nachmanides): Writings and Discourses* (ed. Charles B. Chavel; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963–1970) 2:476–518, at 482–83; Azriel of Gerona, *Pēruš ha'aggādot* (ed. Isaiah Tishby; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982) 110–11.

⁶⁶ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* 2.26. For an understanding of Maimonides's Aristotelian noesis in terms of Platonic essences, i.e., creation as the process of the auto-contemplation of God, see "Sefer hā'emunāh wēhabbitāhon," in *Ramban (Nachmanides): Writings and Discourses* (ed. Chavel), 2:351–447, at 409.

⁶⁷ Pirqē Rabbi Eliezer 3.

⁶⁸ See on this topic Altmann, *Studies in Philosophy and Mysticism*, 128–39.

Theoretically, advocating for *creatio ex nihilo* contradicts the very principle of an emanative system.⁶⁹ But this theoretical contradiction did not seem to pose a problem for theosophical kabbalists; on the contrary, it proves a true understanding of creation according to the esoteric tradition and offers an all-encompassing theory. This associative character of theosophical kabbalah has been described in scholarship as eclecticism or philosophical incoherency but never laid out as a theological method. The tension between the two concepts was ignored in order to integrate them into a stratified system with *creatio ex nihilo* at the first level of the emanative system.⁷⁰ The names given in the theosophical tradition to the first two *sēfirot*—something (*yēš*) out of nothing (*mē'ayin*)—are clear testimony to such a manipulation.⁷¹ Creation (*yēš mē'ayin*) can thus be understood as the emanation of the *sēfirāh ḥokhmāh* out of *keter*, and subsequently the creation is relayed to lower realms.⁷² A similar manipulation can be seen with the term will (*rāṣon*), which is associated with the first *sēfirāh*. The identification of will with *keter* implies the integration of the act of creation in the emanative process, now understood as God's will.⁷³ It follows, in both cases, that the act of creation is enclosed in an emanative system and therefore subordinated to it. In the same vein, the Neoplatonic principles of primordial/first matter and form were also incorporated into the theosophical system.

⁶⁹ On the notion of creation in kabbalah, see Gershom Scholem, *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970) 53–89; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:279–81; Ephraim Gottlieb, *Researches in Kabbalistic Literature* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1976) 11–28, 263–65, 271–72 (Hebrew); Daniel C. Matt, “*Ayin*: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism,” in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (ed. Robert K. C. Forman; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 67–108; Arthur P. Hayman, “The Doctrine of Creation in *Sefer Yesira*: Some Critical Problems,” in *Rashi, 1040–1990. Homages à Ephraim E. Urbach* (ed. Gabrielle Sed-Rajna; Paris: Cerf, 1996) 219–27; and Sarah Heller-Willensky, “The ‘First Created Being’ in Early Kabbalah and Its Philosophical Sources,” *Binah* (1989) 65–77.

⁷⁰ One method is to integrate the *creatio ex nihilo* at the very beginning of the emanative process; another is to see emanation and creation as different steps, as for example in *Zohar* 1.240b.

⁷¹ The fusion and integration of philosophical notions into the kabbalistic emanative system is a large phenomenon, so I will give only one more example: matter and form are usually identified with *ḥokhmāh* and *bināh*.

⁷² Azriel of Gerona, in *Sēfer yēširāh* 2.6 (Warsaw, 1884) ad loc.; R. Asher Bahya, *Commentary on the Torah* (ed. Charles B. Chavel; 3 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1982) 1:15; *Sefer ha-Shem attributed to R. Moses de Leon* (ed. Michal Oron; Los Angeles: Cherub, 2010) 68; Joseph Gikatilla in Gottlieb, *Researches in Kabbalistic Literature*, 140–41. *Yēš mē'ayin* appeared first in the 11th cent.: see Matt, “*Ayin*: The Concept of Nothingness,” 70 n. 17; Scholem, *Origins*, 62–63.

⁷³ This appellation of the first *sēfirāh* shows the reliance of the kabbalistic emanative system on the Neoplatonic tradition as known in such authors as Shlomo ibn Gabirol. On his influence on kabbalah, see Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah*, 1:39–64; Shlomo Pines, “‘He Called Forth to the Nothing and It Split’: Research on the Keter Malkhut of Solomon ibn Gabirol,” *Tarbiš* 50 (1982) 339–47 (Hebrew); Idel, “On the Conception of the Divine in Early Kabbalah,” in *Šefa' ṭal: Studies in Jewish Thought and Culture Presented to Bracha Sack* (ed. Zeev Gries, Chaim Kriese, and Boaz Huss; Beersheba: Ben-Gurion University, 2004) 141–44 (Hebrew); and Yehuda Liebes, “Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol's Use of the *Sēfer Yēširāh* and a Commentary on the Poem ‘I Love Thee,’” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987) 73–123 (Hebrew).

The shift from advocating for *creatio ex nihilo* to totally misreading its basic assumption is very subtle. In *creatio ex nihilo* two disconnected phases can be identified: before the creation and after the creation. In contrast, theosophical kabbalists such as Nachmanides⁷⁴ and Azriel of Gerona⁷⁵ worked out the intricacies of the two notions. Naught is not simple nothingness, the absence of anything, but rather God himself and therefore indicates the fullness of his concealed being. Where an antithetical relationship might have been expected between the being and the naught, their differences are instead blurred. It can be argued whether or not philosophical concepts were intentionally manipulated and subordinated in order to fit them into the theosophical system, but the more important point is that the theosophical system here represents once more the main explanatory system and therefore the legitimate interpretation.

In short, behind the consensus on *creatio ex nihilo* that unified the Neo-Aristotelian and Neoplatonic schools hide other conceptions deemed heretical by theological standards. In fact, these two schools of thought shared more than a consensus on *creatio ex nihilo*: they also shared controversial heretical views on that very topic. Neo-Aristotelian systems have at their core the heretical Aristotelian concept of the eternity of the world, whereas for Neoplatonic theosophical systems, the heretical view lies in their conception of primordial matter that precedes the creation. In both cases, albeit for different reasons, the controversy lies in the transformation from eternity to temporality.

Following Neoplatonic traditions, *creatio ex nihilo* has been reinterpreted in an emanative system, and in this context theosophical kabbalah presents an extreme emanationist position among the different combinations of creation and emanation found in Jewish Neoplatonic philosophy. Furthermore, while for followers of Maimonides *creatio ex nihilo* allows for a clear distinction between the periods before and after the creation and between the physical and the metaphysical, for theosophical kabbalah the opposite is true. The emanative system, displaying an intradivine conception of creation, promotes a system in which continuity prevails; in the Neo-Aristotelian philosophical system, however, *creatio ex nihilo* serves the ontological dichotomy between creation and its Creator. The theosophical system, on the other hand, drawing on the Neoplatonic tradition, sees the creation as one step in God's revelatory process. To some extent, as in the case of faith, *creatio ex nihilo*—a philosophical notion intended to mark the passage from God to his

⁷⁴ Moses Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, at Gen 1:8.

⁷⁵ "For the Being is in the Naught after the manner of the Naught, and the Naught is in the Being after the manner [according to the modality] of the Being" (Scholem, "New Fragments from Azriel," 207). Azriel relies here on a paraphrase of the *Liber de causis* §107: see *The Book of Causes* (ed. and trans. D. J. Brand; Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1984) 30; Scholem, *Origins*, 423–24; Pachter, "Root of Faith," 323–28; and *Mélanges Georges Vajda* (ed. Weil), 574–81. On the primordial matter, see Azriel of Gerona, *Pēruš ha'aggādot*, 81–85; *Mélanges Georges Vajda* (ed. Weil), 652–60. For an unequivocal position in favor of emanation against the philosophical *ex nihilo* position, see Joseph Gikatilla (above, n. 72).

creation and from the divine to the human realm—is relocated in the theosophical inner dynamics in the divine. Explaining the creation as an extension of the divine provides theosophical kabbalah with a basic paradigm, an all-encompassing theology. The theosophical system of emanation is not only an explanation of God's creation but is also the divine structure where creation takes place. This appropriation is possible due to accumulation, the expression of an associative and combinatory system that surpasses the explanatory mode. To view emanation/creation as encompassing everything was a major theological innovation, and in this respect the theosophical emanative system not only distinguishes itself from the Neo-Aristotelian system but also from the Neoplatonic conception of *creatio ex nihilo*.

■

Medieval conceptions of God's unity provide another striking example of how philosophy and kabbalah are built upon similar categories, while nonetheless holding very different views.⁷⁶ In what follows, it was no longer the philosophical model (the Neo-Aristotelian concept of eternity or the Neoplatonic concept of primordial matter) that was in danger of being characterized as heresy but rather the theosophical model. The difficulty lies in the confrontation between two different models of unity: simple philosophical unity versus complex theosophical unity. Faced with such a dilemma, kabbalists were forced to secure their conception of divine plurality while simultaneously ensuring a conception of divine unity/unification, which they did by means of a complex conception of unity and a unique use of the category of heresy. I will now focus on the kabbalistic category of theurgic heresy and how it helped to redefine the borders of theosophical divine unity.⁷⁷

While it is not pertinent to this discussion to deliberate at length on the question of divine unity in philosophical traditions, it should, however, be recalled that the major renewal inspired by the encounter of the philosophical tradition with Abrahamic religions resulted in growing interest in the unity of God. Furthermore, God's unity became the core of every theological system. At the risk of dismissing the diversity of philosophical conceptions of God's unity, it can nevertheless be claimed that there was a theological consensus regarding the conception of a transcendent, simple, and undifferentiated unity of God.⁷⁸ Given this prevalent theological model,

⁷⁶ I am not dealing here with the anti-Christian polemic, which also had a vital role in the kabbalist formulation of divine unity, though apparently later in the 13th cent. See on this subject: Hames, *Art of Conversion*, 246–83; idem, "It Takes Three to Tango: Ramon Lull, Solomon ibn Adret and Alfonso of Valladolid Debate the Trinity," *Medieval Encounters* 15 (2009) 199–224.

⁷⁷ I hope to dedicate an independent study to the different model of unity/unification presented by theosophical kabbalah in light of its argument with the model of simple and inseparable unity.

⁷⁸ In the Neoplatonic tradition, see Plotinus, *Enneades* 5.4; *Liber de causis* 4.39–40 and 20.163. And in the Neo-Aristotelian tradition, see Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* 1.50. For the relationship between the conception of divine unity and negative theology in Maimonides, see Lorberbaum, *Dazzled by Beauty*, 75. It is interesting, however, to compare the theosophical organon

it is therefore not surprising that from the outset kabbalah, with its conception of the *sēfirot* and the introduction of multiplicity, was accused of heterodoxy.⁷⁹ The problems raised by the kabbalistic conception of divine unity were verbalized in traditional milieus, as can be seen in the letter of Meir ben Shimon of Narbonne, who nevertheless embraces the philosophical conception of divine unity:

He has no one beside Him. He is One in complete unity, without it being possible for sefiroth to be associated and conjoined with Him. He is the Cause of all the causes, who called forth, alone, by His will, Being from Nought, and it behooves us to thank, praise, and exalt Him.⁸⁰

Kabbalists were consequently accused of heretical practice due to their belief that God's unity comprises a plurality of powers (*sēfirot*): "And he who puts together the name of God and some other thing, ought to be uprooted from the world." The confrontation between the two conceptions of God's unity becomes even more acute later on in the letter: "For the creature must not be associated with its creator, nor matter with its mold, nor the emanated with the emanator, saying, for example, that His unity is perfect only when it is together with them."⁸¹

The difficulties raised by the conception of the *sēfirot* are confirmed not only in R. Meir's letter but also in a polemical letter by Abraham Abulafia:

Thus I will let you know that the sages of sefirotic kabbalah sought to unify his name and to escape the Trinity—but they had made him ten. As the non-Jews say he is three which is one, so some of the kabbalists believe that God is ten *sēfirot* and the ten are one. Here they have multiplied him much and complicated him much, for there is no multiplication more than ten.⁸²

The growing interest and concern in divine unity also found its way into theosophical discourse but only as a means of defending its own concept of divine unity. Theosophical kabbalists answered this accusation of heresy with their own category of heresy, switching paradigms from theological to theurgic heresy. Thus, in yet

unity with the Maimonidean world unity. For, when it concerns world unity, Maimonides is willing to consider a unity made of parts on the model of the body. See on this important question the difference between Maimonides and Saadia Gaon in Norman Lamm, "The Unity of God and the Unity of the World: Saadia and Maimonides," in *Torah and Wisdom: Studies in Jewish Philosophy, Kabbalah, and Halacha; Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman* (ed. Ruth Link-Salinger; New York: Shengold, 1992) 113–20.

⁷⁹ For an analysis in the work of R. Abraham bar Hiyya of a similar philosophical conception presenting a unity of multiple divine attributes in contradistinction to a simple divine unity, see Dauber, "Pure Thought," 185–201; idem, "Standing on the Heads of Philosophers: Myth and Philosophy in Early Kabbalah" (PhD diss., New York University, 2004) 47–81.

⁸⁰ Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah*, 1:16–18; the English translation is from idem, *Origins*, 399.

⁸¹ Scholem, *Origins*, 400. This view of complementary unity is echoed in R. Ezra of Gerona's writings: "The [divine] name was not complete until man was created in the image of God, and [then] the seal [*hotām*] was complete" (in Ramban [*Nachmanides*]: *Writings and Discourses* [ed. Chavel], 2:510).

⁸² Abraham Abulafia, "'Iggeret wēzot Lihudāh," in Aharon Jelinek, *Gēnizē ḥokmat haqqabbālāh* [Treasures of kabbalah's wisdom] (Jerusalem: Maqor, 1969) 13–28, at 19 (translation is the author's).

another famous letter, by R. Isaac the Blind, one of the first theosophical kabbalists, the phrase “cutting the plants” is used to describe the heretical practice of another group of kabbalists.⁸³

The phrase “cutting the plants” was appropriated by the theosophical discourse, as can be seen in Meir ben Shimon’s letter.⁸⁴ Abulafia also gives an example of such an appropriation when he describes theosophical kabbalah as based on a notion of unity that is unification—a unification that will not be broken, for whoever does so is “cutting the plants” and destroying them.⁸⁵

This category of heresy, with its dualistic overtones, is mentioned already in the Mishnah and in the literature of Hēkhālōt and is revisited and reformulated in early kabbalah.⁸⁶ The *pardēs*, the object of the mystic’s ascent, is now the sefirotic tree, and “cutting the plants” becomes the theological reference to any theurgic deviation, defined as separation or rupture, which is introduced in the divine realm:

Thus whoever said that there are two powers is cutting the plants to make the branch a three itself, and from the root a three itself. The cutting concerns, in my opinion, the ten things—every one of the ten, between the tenth and the ninth and between the ninth and the eighth and so on, all of them until the one from *’En-sof*.⁸⁷

⁸³ In an apologetic letter answering a critical letter written at this time by other kabbalists, Isaac the Blind writes: “And they (people from Burgos) cause devastations of the plants, whereas these things are united as the flame is bound to the coal, for the Lord is unique and has no second” (Scholem, *Origins*, 394). For the danger inherent in the esoteric lore kept secret by the fear of heresy see the famous words of R. Shlomo ben Meshulam da Piera: “They (R. Ezra and R. Azriel) know the *Shiur*, but they keep private the teaching out of fear of causing heresy” (Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism*, 194).

⁸⁴ Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah*, 1:16–18; for the English translation see idem, *Origins*, 400.

⁸⁵ “Kabbalah . . . is divided into two trends. Some gain knowledge of the Name by way of the ten *sēfirot*, called plants: whoever separates them (the *sēfirot*) destroys them. They discover the secret of unification. Others (gain) knowledge about the Name by way of letters” (Abulafia, “‘Iggeret wēzot Lihudāh,” 15) (translation is the author’s).

⁸⁶ Tzahi Weiss, *Cutting the Shoots: the Worship of Shekhinah in the World of Early Kabbalistic Literature* (Jerusalem: Magness, 2005). On the heretical behavior of Elisha ben Abuya, see Yehuda Liebes, *Elisha’s Sin: Four Who Entered the Pardēs and the Nature of Talmudic Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1990) 11–50 (Hebrew).

⁸⁷ Jacob ben Sheshet, “Sēfer ha’emunāh wēhabbitāhon,” in Ramban (*Nachmanides*): *Writings and Discourses* (ed. Chavel), 2:233–447, at 362 (translation is the author’s). See also R. Azriel of Gerona: “The seventh way (of the second group) does agree on the order of the dimension (*middot*) of the Creator but set his mind on the power of one dimension and withdrew his will from the rest of the dimensions. He is called cutter, following what is said: ‘cutting the plants’” (Scholem, “New Fragments from Azriel,” 207). See also Todros ben Joseph Abulafia, *Ša’ar hārāzīm*, 139. For an understanding of “cutting the plants” as destruction, see *Sēfer ma’arekhet hā’elohut*, ch. 8.

From a theological and theurgic perspective, heresy is defined by the act of isolation and separation of one dimension from another.⁸⁸ The dualistic and gnostic overtones of the category of “cutting the plants,” as it appears in the Mishnah and the literature of the Hēkhālōt, is now used to imply any rupture in the sefirotic realm. Furthermore, any change of perspective in the organization of the inner unity, i.e., generalizing (taking a part for the whole) or particularizing (taking the whole for a part), belong to the same category of separation. Such a position indicates a move from the category of heresy as dualism to that of heresy as fracturing the divine unity, from a theological heresy to a theurgic one.

“Cutting the plants” should thus be understood in the kabbalistic context as an innovation. The emphasis on the necessity of keeping the divine unified shows a change of categories that should be understood within the context of kabbalah’s argument with philosophy. Theosophical kabbalah seems to have adopted the model of simple unity with its theological ultimatum. However, this unity was open to some amendments that suggest another subversive conception. This new category of heresy shifted the attention to the theurgic level and by doing so validated a conception that had itself been deemed heretical.

Whereas philosophy held a conception of God’s unity that was exclusive, theosophical unity was inclusive: on the one hand, we have God’s immutable unity, and on the other, a dynamic divine unification. The claim for the unification of the divine is one of the cornerstones of theosophical mysticism, the very theological algorithm that sustains every theurgic activity.

It is important to understand that this reinterpretation of the category of heresy within a theosophical and theurgic context was the kabbalists’ answer to the same attacks made against kabbalah as represented in R. Meir’s letter. By using the category of heresy directed against them to defend themselves—shifting from a theological heresy to a theurgic heresy—the kabbalists thereby defended the theosophical system against any misunderstanding. In this way, the motto “cutting the plants” came to establish an important theurgic boundary without which divine unity could be misunderstood as divine plurality.

The rise of kabbalah has been understood historically as the emergence or reemergence of esoteric Jewish traditions under the influence of a new intruder: philosophy. It was with the philosophical model in mind that kabbalists set their new esoteric and exoteric boundaries. While the implications of this supposition far exceed the few cases discussed in this article, the pattern displayed does not

⁸⁸ There is a general theosophical scheme that sees separation/limitation as belonging to creation and unification/infinity as belonging to emanation. This can be seen in R. Asher ben David as well: see *R. Asher ben David, His Complete Works and Studies in His Kabbalistic Thought* (ed. Daniel Abrams; Los Angeles: Cherub, 1996) 118; Ibn Gabbay, ‘*Avodat haqqodeš* 1.12; and Valabregue-Perry, *Concealed and Revealed*, 144–48.

exclude other possible paradigms. Not only are there other models of relations, but there are also important aspects concerning the development of kabbalah that are entirely independent of its relationship to philosophy.

In this article I have shown that kabbalists were not solely defending their new normative system but were also answering the philosophical challenge. I have, moreover, discussed the complex interaction between kabbalah and philosophy, particularly where they seem to share the same stance but are actually hiding profound differences. Such a statement is not meant to point to a difference of perspectives but rather to an intriguing pattern, that of an inverting mirror. Three paradigmatic heretical discourses have been discussed: philosophical heresies, competitive philosophical heresies, and finally kabbalistic heresy.

The description of philosophical heresies gives us a clear understanding of what was at stake for major medieval kabbalistic figures. The different points of contention all touch upon God's involvement in the world: providence, the role of prayers, and the creation. It is with this in mind that I have explained the changes that occurred in the categories of heresy and *'emunāh* in Maimonides's philosophy and, likewise, the response of theosophical kabbalah to new philosophical standards in its own category of *'emunāh*. The decision to locate *'emunāh* in the divine should be understood as a response to its epistemological treatment in Jewish philosophy. This is only one case among many. It is evident that the divinization of different aspects of the human world, which was at the core of theosophical kabbalah's renewal, presented a new theological structure that was antithetical to Neo-Aristotelian Jewish philosophy in more than one respect. The theosophical system should, therefore, be viewed as a theological answer to the danger presented by what was considered philosophical heresy.

In the second test case discussed, Maimonides's philosophy and theosophical kabbalah adopted the same exoteric lore setting forth a conception of *creatio ex nihilo* but differed in their esoteric lore. In this case it was their views concerning heresy that competed: the theosophical interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* embraced a conception of emanation and primordial matter, while, for some, Maimonides's philosophy appears to have assumed a concept of the eternity of the world. The concept of emanation offers an ontological continuity, whereas the concept of the eternity of the world reinforces a model of absolute transcendence. In this case, theosophical kabbalah relied on the Neoplatonic tradition as opposed to the Neo-Aristotelian one. At the core of their divergence stands once more the difficult question of God's encounter with the world. Kabbalah, yet again, adopted the tradition that reinforced ontological continuity as a theological answer to the problem raised by a philosophically remote God.

The third case of heresy could have imperiled theosophical kabbalah, and forced it instead to examine its response to the accusation of heresy and justify its theological anomaly. This category of heresy, "cutting the plants," turned this time by theosophical kabbalists against those who would threaten theosophical unity,

should be understood as a theological answer to the previous accusation of heresy. It set new theological borders that came to validate a subversive conception of divine unity, replacing simple unity with a model of unification.

The cases discussed have not only shown different aspects of kabbalah's attitude toward philosophy but have also introduced a wider paradigm through which their differences and similarities should be understood. This paradigm follows a pattern where similarity and difference are combined in a very peculiar way. Precisely where their systems look identical or at least very similar lurk profound differences. Similarity and difference do not alternate but exist simultaneously in an inverted reflection in a way that allowed theosophical kabbalah to present a different theology while embracing crucial philosophical concepts. When philosophy offered new patterns and established new theological standards, theosophical kabbalah followed suit and adopted some of them—for example, the concepts of faith, creation, and divine unity—but with some major amendments. Thus, precisely where their resemblances seem to indicate identical theological structures, profound theological differences can stand. These differences are not arbitrary: rather, theosophical kabbalah offered an alternative theology, and, what is more, a counter-theology. The inverting mirror paradigm highlights the complexity of kabbalah's relationship to philosophy with its special combination of fascination and rejection. In a way the tremendous influence of philosophy on kabbalah was not merely in the reception of philosophical ideas, but philosophy also served as a catalyst for kabbalah's own theological renewal.