

From Mystic to Prophet: Abraham Abulafia & Ecstatic Kabbalah

One strand of medieval kabbalah focused on achieving a transformative mystical experience.

By [Dr. Elliot R. Wolfson](#)

Abraham Abulafia was a revolutionary mystic, but he was also a devoted follower of Maimonides, the philosopher and rationalist par excellence. In Maimonidean philosophy, the greatest religious experience is a kind of intellectual experience. God is pure intellect, and humans become intimate with God when their intellects are actualized. This happens when they receive an overflow from one of the cosmological intellects, which are powers associated with both the celestial spheres (sun, moon, planets) as well as the angels. According to Abulafia, the ten sefirot (divine attributes or powers) of kabbalah are parallel to these ten intellects. The following is excerpted and reprinted with permission from "Jewish Mysticism: A Philosophical Overview," in [History of Jewish Philosophy](#), edited by Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, published by Routledge, a member of the [Taylor & Francis Group](#) (1996).

In the latter part of the thirteenth century, at the time when theosophic kabbalah [the primary strand of kabbalah, aimed at understanding and affecting the divine world] was flourishing, there emerged as well an alternative kabbalistic tradition with a different focus. The main exponent of this tradition was Abraham Abulafia.

Experiential Mysticism

Whereas the theosophic kabbalists focused their attention on the hypostatic potencies [i.e. the underlying powers] that made up the divine realm, Abulafia turned his attention to cultivating a mystical system: that could assist one in achieving a state of unio mystica [i.e. union with God], which he identified as prophecy.

He thus called his system "prophetic kabbalah" (*kabbalah nevu'it*), though modern scholars have referred to it as ecstatic kabbalah in so far as it is aimed at producing a state of mystical ecstasy wherein the boundaries separating the self from God are overcome.

Prophetic kabbalah, according to Abulafia, embraces two parts, *kabbalat ha-sefirot* and *kabbalat ha-shemot*; the former is primary in time, but the latter is primary in importance. Abulafia is harshly critical of the theosophic kabbalists who interpret the *sefirot* as potencies that make up the divine. By contrast, according to him, the *sefirot* represent the separate intellects in the cosmological chain.

Contemplation of the *sefirot* results in the intellectual overflow that facilitates the attainment of prophetic consciousness, which is essentially characterized as comprehension of the divine name. The process of intellection thus enables the mystic to unite with the divine. In so far as this process facilitates the union of the self with its divine source, Abulafia on occasion describes the *sefirotic* entities as internalized psychological states. There is a perfect symmetry between the external cosmological axis and the internal psychical one.

How to Become a Prophet

Abulafia adopted the understanding of prophecy found in the philosophical writings of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), who in turn was influenced by Islamic thinkers such as al-Farabi and ibn Sina, to the effect that the prophet receives an overflow from, and thereby attains a state of conjunction with, the active intellect, the last of the ten separate intellects in the cosmological chain.

For Abulafia, too, prophecy can be attained only when one is in a state of conjunction, a state that can come about only when the soul is freed from the bonds of the body. Thus, for example, he writes in his treatise *'Or ha-Sekhel*: "The connection of human existence with

the divine existence during intellection--which is identical with the intellect in [its] existence--until he and He become one [entity]." The union between human and divine intellects is so complete that in this state the individual can utter with respect to God, "He is I and I am He."

One of the things that distinguishes Abulafia's mystical system from the more rationalist approach of Maimonides is that he introduced special techniques in order to bring about this state of conjunction or union (*devekut*).

The main techniques consisted of letter-combination (in three stages: written, oral, and mental) and recitation of the divine names, which involved as well special breathing exercises and bodily postures. Abulafia referred to his "science of letter-combination" (*hokhmat ha-tzeruf*), also identified as the "path of names" (*derekh ha-shemot*) as the true account of the chariot [the prototypical Jewish mystical experience derives from Ezekiel's vision of the *merkavah*, divine chariot or throne] (the term "*merkavah*" deriving from the root "*rkb*," which can mean in one of its conjugational forms, "*leharkiv*," "to combine").

[Scholar Moshe] Idel has attempted to locate the Abulafian technique of recitation of names as an ecstatic exercise in the history of Jewish mysticism, beginning with the Merkavah texts of late antiquity and culminating in some of the writings of the [12th and 13th century] German Pietists. Moreover, Idel has drawn our attention to some striking parallels between Abulafia's system of letter-combination and Eleazar of Worms [c.1176-1238] whose works Abulafia himself on occasion mentions by name.

Envisioning the Divine

Although Abulafia gives preference to the auditory mode over the visual, accusing the theosophic kabbalists of focusing primarily on

the latter, in his own system visionary experience plays a critical role.

For Abulafia, not only is the esoteric wisdom of the divine chariot brought about by knowledge of the various combinations and permutations of the names of God, but vision of the chariot itself consists of the very letters that are constitutive elements of the names. The ecstatic vision of the letters is not simply the means to achieve union with God; it is, to an extent, the end of the process.

The culminating stage in the *via mystica* [the mystical endeavor] is a vision of the letters of the divine names, especially the Tetragrammaton [the four letter name of God; the equivalent of YHVH], originating in the intellectual and imaginative powers. These letters are visualized simultaneously as an anthropos [a physical form]. Gazing upon the divine name is akin to beholding the divine form as constituted within one's imagination.

This vision results from the conjunction of the human intellect with the divine, but, like all prophecy, following the view of Maimonides and his Islamic predecessors, there must be an imaginative component. The latter is described either as the form of the letters or that of an anthropos. Both of these are figurative depictions of the active intellect who, in Abulafia's writings, is also personified as Metatron [a supreme angel].

In some sense, as is pointed out most emphatically in the anonymous *Sha'arei Tzedek*, written by a disciple of Abulafia, the image is a reflection of the individual prophet or mystic, an externalization of his inner self to the point of identification of the human intellect and the active intellect [i.e. the intellect that actualizes human intellects], personified as an anthropomorphic shape or the letters of the name.

With respect to the possibility of envisioning the letters as an anthropos, there is again an interesting parallel between Abulafia and the German Pietists as discussed above. The corporealization of

the letters of the name in the shape of an anthropos represents, in my estimation, one of the cornerstones of kabbalistic thought, which has its roots in ancient Jewish esotericism. While it lies beyond the confines of this summary to substantiate my claim in detail, let me underline the essential point that the letters assume an anthropomorphic form [i.e. a human form].

This renders problematic [Gershom] Scholem's general claim that Christian and kabbalistic doctrines of (visual) meditation should be distinguished on grounds that "in Christian mysticism a pictorial and concrete subject, such as the suffering of Christ and all that pertains to it, is given to the meditator, while in Kabbalah, the subject given is abstract and cannot be visualized, such as the Tetragrammaton and its combinations."

Scholem's point concerning the centrality of the Passion for mystical visions in Christianity is well taken, but his characterization of the subject of visual meditation in kabbalah as always being abstract needs to be qualified. The visualization of the letters of the name as an anthropos in German Pietism, in Abulafia, and in theosophic kabbalists indicates that in the Jewish mystical tradition as well the abstract can be rendered in a pictorial concrete image in the contemplative vision.

Abulafia's Influence

The ecstatic kabbalah had an important influence on the history of Jewish mysticism. In the last decade of the thirteenth century a circle of Abulafian kabbalah was established in northern Palestine. From this circle, which combined Abulafian mysticism with Sufic [Islamic mystical] ideas there derived several works, including *Likkutei ha-Ran* (the teachings of Rabbi Nathan) and the anonymous *Sha'arei Tzedek*.

It is likely, moreover, that two important theosophic kabbalists, Isaac of Acre and Shem Tov ibn Gaon, were influenced by this

circle, and thus assimilated ecstatic kabbalah within their respective theosophical traditions. In the sixteenth century Abulafian kabbalah began to have a pronounced effect on some of the major kabbalists in Safed, such as Solomon Alkabetz, Moses Cordovero, Elijah de Vidas, and Chayyim Vital, and at the same time on kabbalists in Jerusalem, such as Judah Albotini, and Joseph ibn Zaiah.

The influence of Abulafian kabbalah is also quite evident in eighteenth-century Chasidic literature, deriving directly from Abulafian manuscripts or indirectly through the writings of Cordovero and Vital.



Dr. Elliot R. Wolfson is Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University.