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**Leadership and Charisma: Maimonides, Nahmanides and  
Abraham Abulafia**

**FROM MESSENGERS OF GOD TO ERUDITES**

Leadership, dependent as it is on a given society, changes with the changes in societies. Nevertheless, each society keeps some forms of ideal leaders from the past, and negotiates the new forms of leadership between its present needs and the exemplary models of the past. We shall be dealing below with three medieval types of leadership, which should be understood as both attempting to preserve the best of the canonical types of leadership and as adding new dimensions. This is the reason why a brief survey of biblical and rabbinic forms of leadership may help put in relief the medieval types.

Biblical Judaism only knows two types of religious leaders: priests and prophets. Kings and army-leaders were often tolerated by religious leaders as a necessary evil for leading the nation, especially in times of a military crisis. For the biblical authors, theocracy was conceived of as the ideal even when the reality was different. When Israelite priests turned to God through their

prayers, sacrifices or mantic operations, or when God employed men as messengers, or prophets, a vertical and direct relationship was dominant -- a type of relationship that was missing from the dominant views of kingship in Judaism, where the king was anointed by the priest or prophet. Although some scholarly interpretations of Israelite kingship emphasize the divine sonship of the king in a manner reminiscent, at least in part, of kingship in Egypt or that in Mesopotamia, in Biblical-era Israel the king was anointed by the religious leaders, indicating that kings were subordinate to these religious figures. The prophets were imagined to have received the divine word, and they were said to be chosen personally by God. Not so the priests, who were chosen by the dint of their tribal and family extraction. Once chosen, however, neither prophet nor priest, nor anyone else, could do much to change their status. External circumstances were much more important than their deeds. It should be pointed out that the prophet was, phenomenologically speaking, closer to the charismatic ideal leader than the figures of either the priest or the king. The prophet's mission was more directly related to delivering a speech addressed directly to the people. It is the prophet's claim of having a divine mission that Max Weber defines as being an important characteristic of the charismatic leader, and there are reverberations of this relationship with the divine in the leadership styles of the Jewish sages of the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

In post-Biblical Judaism, human actions become dramatically more important in gaining status in the religious hierarchy. In Rabbinic Judaism, there are few instances in which a seminal figure is formally nominated to a high formal position, such as *Nasi'* or *Rosh Golah*. In the ancient apocryphal and pseudepigraphic texts, such as the books of Enoch, and in Heikhalot literature, leaders were also assumed to be chosen by God, reminiscent of the way in which priests and prophets were chosen in Biblical literature. Still, the members of Heikhalot groups differ from the

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<sup>1</sup> *On Charisma*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004).

Biblical priests and prophets in that they belong, in my opinion, to secondary elites, since they namely do not play the principal role in their societies.<sup>2</sup>

In the Middle Ages, Jews lost all form of centralized leadership, political and religious. Each community had to rely on its own local leaders, who in turn could appeal to greater authorities on particular matters of Jewish law, but such authorities did not govern the religious affairs of the Jewish people. During this Rabbinic period, the vast majority of these authorities rose to their special status through their intellectual achievements. While such an accomplishment may seem difficult to attain during one lifetime in today's world, one would think it would be even more of a challenge in the medieval Jewish cultures of the Diaspora, where communication was slower and more limited. However, most of the seminal figures that arose during this period gained their recognition relatively quickly in their careers. This is not only the case for those who lived long lives, such as Moses Maimonides, Moses Nahmanides, R. Joseph Karo or R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilnius, but also with persons who died quite early, like R. Isaac Luria Ashkenazi or R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto. Elite Judaism, a culture based on the merit of erudition, allowed geniuses to be recognized early in their lives. The fastest way to get wide recognition was to specialize and excel in the fields that were accepted by all the Jews as central for their religious life: Halakhic literature and commentaries on canonical books such as the Bible or the Talmud.

In this article, I shall compare three figures of the Middle Ages that represent three modes of leadership, all stemming from what is today called Spain: Maimonides of Andalusia, Nahmanides of Catalan origin, and Abraham Abulafia of Aragon. All three started their careers in the Spanish territories, though some of their major achievements were attained outside of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Michael D. Swartz, "'Like the Ministering Angels': Ritual and Purity in Early Jewish Mysticism and Magic," *AJS Review*, vol. 19/2 (1994), 135-167, especially 165-167, Moshe Idel, "On Judaism, Jewish Mysticism and Magic," *Envisioning Magic*, eds. P. Schaefer - H. G. Kippenberg, (Brill, Leiden, 1997), 212-213.

country. However, the relations between the three are not only a matter of geography. Nahmanides' scholarship indubitably interacted with Maimonides' views in several instances, while Abulafia, who knew many of the writings of both Maimonides and Nahmanides, was influenced by and reacted to both of them. As such, I shall divide the three men into two categories: the "first elites" as represented by Maimonides and Nahmanides, and the "secondary-elite" figure of the ecstatic Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia. The latter represents both a continuation of some trends found in the two Moses, but he proposed a totally different approach, that may highlight the specificity of his much more famous predecessors.

Abulafia depicted the two medieval Moses as friends, consonant to each other's thoughts, both disciples of the Biblical Moses. Abulafia described the three Moses as the "princes of the world."<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, they still had their differences. It should be noted that the title of the two most important books of Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide of the Perplexed*, imply a leadership role that Maimonides assumed for himself. *Mishneh Torah* is an audacious title reminiscent of the Torah of Moses of the Bible,<sup>4</sup> while the *Guide of the Perplexed* implies guidance the philosopher sought to provide to the Jewish elite. While the former represents a plainly exoteric type of guidance, the latter is a quintessentially esoteric type of guidance. Nahmanides' books do not bear titles that point to any claim of leadership, though he occupied a special status as a leader, at least insofar as Catalan Jews were concerned. Further down, this article will have more to say about the difference between the strategy concerning esotericism in Maimonides' *Guide* and the style used by Nahmanides. Here, however, let me remark that unlike Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, where he dispenses to the Jews a tool for dealing with the Talmudic

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<sup>3</sup> See *The Seven Paths of the Torah*, ed., Adolph Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabala* (Leipzig, 1854), I, 20.

<sup>4</sup> See Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 105, 527.

and post-Talmudic deliberations, Nahmanides' most important contribution to the genres of Halakhah is the *Hiddushin* and the *Novellae*, which constitute a deep immersion in the finesse of Talmudic analyses,<sup>5</sup> and as such express an opposite approach to that of Maimonides.

Abraham Abulafia, on the other hand, started to specialize in his scholarly work relatively late in his life and focused neither on the Talmud nor philosophy. He commenced his study of Kabbalah only at the age of thirty, an age when both Maimonides and Nahmanides had already earned serious recognition from their contemporaries. While they combined both the Halakhic core and meta-halakhic elements in their work, Abulafia was meta-halakhic *par excellence*.<sup>6</sup> However, it is not only his preoccupation with Kabbalistic issues that distinguishes Abulafia from the two Moses, but more so his claim, not found among Kabbalists before him or among his contemporaries, that Kabbalah is not only an occult lore or an interpretation of Judaism but also a path for transforming the Kabbalist into a spiritual being capable of becoming the messenger of God or, more explicitly, a prophet. For example, he describes the ecstatic experience induced by his mystical technique:

It will appear to him as if his entire body, from head to foot, has been anointed with the oil of anointing, and he was 'the anointed of the Lord' [*Mashyiah YHWH*] and His emissary, and he will be called 'the angel of the Lord'; his name will be similar to that of his Master,

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<sup>5</sup> See Israel M. Ta-Shma, *Talmudic Commentary in Europe and North Africa, Part Two: 1200-1400*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), II, 35-38 (Hebrew) and Moshe Halbertal, "By Way of Truth," Nahmanides and the Creation of a Tradition, (Jerusalem, 2006) (Hebrew).

<sup>6</sup> I cannot include in here Abulafia's critiques of the Rabbis, contemporary and some preceding him, either because of their interest in magic or because of their non-spiritual approach. See Moshe Idel, "Between the Magic of Holy Names to Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah of Names," *Mahanayyim*, vol. 14 (2002), 79-96 (Hebrew). See also below note 71.

which is *Shaddai*, who is called Metatron, the prince [namely the angel] of the divine Face.<sup>7</sup>

Abulafia conceived himself as a messenger to an entire nation<sup>8</sup> rather than only to an elite and traveled from country to country in order to fulfill his “mission” also by oral teaching. The claim of being a divine messenger is one of the main characteristics of a charismatic leader as described by M. Weber.<sup>9</sup>

Abulafia’s mission had much to do with the disclosure and dissemination of a new divine name for himself in a manner reminiscent of Moses’ receiving the name *'Eheyeh asher 'eheyeh* before the beginning of his mission to Egypt.<sup>10</sup> In any case, Abulafia would still resort to the Tetragrammaton “YHWH” to describe his status and mission:

And when I, *Zekhariah ben Ma'ali Ma'alumi'el ben YHWH, YHWYHW*, who is reciting the name *YHWH*, heard the words of *YHWH*, My Lord and the Lord of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, His servants, I fell on my face on the ground and my heart was [both] afraid and joyful. And *YHWH* raised me up in order to praise the name of his Glory, in privacy and in public<sup>11, 12</sup>

*Zekhariah* is a cognomen for Abulafia's first name, Abraham, since both names carry the same numerical valence of 248. The term *Zekhariah* means “the one who recites the name of

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<sup>7</sup> *Sefer Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Ms. Paris BN 777, fol. 109. For an analysis of the context of this passage, see: Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 15-16, idem, "Enoch is Metatron," *Immanuel* vol. 24/25 (1990), 236.

<sup>8</sup> See *Sefer ha-'Ot*, ed., A. Jellinek, "'Sefer Ha-Ot'. Apokalypse des Pseudo-Propheten und Pseudo-Messias Abraham Abulafia" in *Jubelschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstag des Prof. Dr. H. Graetz* (Breslau 1887). 75, 78.

<sup>9</sup> See note 1 above.

<sup>10</sup> On this issue see Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 306-7.

<sup>11</sup> See below note 29.

<sup>12</sup> *Sefer ha-'Ot*, 81.

God” and it is explained immediately afterwards when the recitation or the divine name is mentioned. The meaning of the words *Ma‘ali Ma‘alumi‘el* are less transparent, but numerically they amount to 377, a figure identical to the proper name of Abulafia's father, *Shmu‘el*. However, even more exceptional is the description of himself explicitly as the Son of *YHWH YHWYHW*. I cannot explain why Abulafia adopted these forms of the Tetragrammaton, but there can be little doubt that the doublets are evident in both the forms *Ma‘ali Ma‘alumi‘el*, and the *YHWH YHWYHW*. There is an inner repetition of units in each syntagm and thus a similarity between the two syntagms. Thus, a parallelism emerges between the unit that represents the name of his father *Shmu‘el* and the two forms of the Tetragrammata. This is important in order to understand the second occurrence of the term *Ben*. If in the first case Abulafia was the corporeal son of a human father, he becomes then also the spiritual son of the divine power, represented by the Tetragrammata. At least in this context the description implies an interactive situation in which God is portrayed as revealing Himself to the mystic and encouraging him to spread the glory of the divine name. In any case, this text is reminiscent of the phrase used in the same period, “*Ben ‘El*.”<sup>13</sup> Mentioning the praise of the divine name in public reflects the exoteric trend in Abulafia’s thought.

The interaction with divine secrets also differentiates Abulafia from the two Moses. Maimonides and Nahmanides were figures who alluded to knowing divine secrets without divulging them in a systematic manner. As first elites, whether philosopher or Kabbalist, their reputation depended primarily on their Halakhic grandeur; thus, they did not have to boast about possessing secrets and then revealing them to find their place under the sun. Abraham Abulafia was a figure of the second intelligentsia, whose Halakhic education was meager, and his status

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<sup>13</sup> See the autobiographical passage in his *‘Otzar ‘Eden Ganuz*, ed. Amnon Gross, (Jerusalem, 2001), 369.

depended on the one type of knowledge he could reveal: his special brand of Kabbalah or the personal impression he made on his acquaintances. Abulafia's limited rabbinic background is conspicuous also in the autobiographical confession of his student R. Nathan ben Sa'adya Har'ar.<sup>14</sup> This is the reason why the shift from esotericism and exotericism is so necessary in his case and also in those of other second-elite figures in his generation. So while the two Moses played a traditional rabbinic game of Halakhists who kept some secrets that late antiquity rabbis forbid from public discussion, Abulafia sees himself at the end of an aeon in which the esoteric interdictions are no longer valid. Thus the dissemination of Kabbalah in both oral and written forms became essential for his understanding of his role in history. In a way, he imagined himself as the culmination of the ideals of the two Moses as he understood them.

### FROM MASTERS TO STUDENTS

Rabbinic Judaism was an erudite elite that gained its status through its learning and its intellectual ingenuity, often doing so through the dissemination of knowledge that was the core of the rabbinic literature. However, Maimonides employed a special teaching method of hinting at philosophical ideas without actually revealing them – a method described by Warren Z. Harvey as a puzzle.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, according to the Introduction to the *Guide*,

A sensible man thus should not demand of me or hope that when we mention a subject, we shall make a complete exposition of it; or that when we engage in the explanation of the meaning of one of the parables, we shall set forth exhaustively all that is expressed in that parable. An intelligent man would be unable to do so even by

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<sup>14</sup> See Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, a Cura di Moshe Idel, tr. M. Mottolese, (Adelphi, Milano, 2001), 412-413.

<sup>15</sup> See his "The Return to Maimonideanism," *Journal of Jewish Studies* vol. 42 (1980), 263, n. 1.

speaking directly to an interlocutor... But rather they are scattered and entangled with other subjects that are to be clarified. For my purpose is that the truth be glimpsed and then again be concealed.<sup>16</sup>

This is not just a theoretical statement found in an introduction. Only rarely do introductions reflect faithfully what happens in the book, or what the author is indeed doing after writing it. In a famous letter by Maimonides addressed to R. Shmuel ibn Tibbon, he responded to the desire of the latter to come from Provence to visit him in Cairo. The answer was quite negative, with Maimonides citing many preoccupations, such as his duty to treat the health of Saladin and his concubines, leaving him without even the time to engage in a discussion with his translator.<sup>17</sup> This is, *prima facie*, a surprising response to be sending to the most ardent, learned and influential of his followers as well as the main translator of his writings from Arabic to Hebrew. After writing a whole book entitled the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides elegantly refused to engage with one of the most intellectually equipped persons of the time and one who was also directly seeking out Maimonides' thoughts. This astonishing fact must reflect something deep in Maimonides' approach. I assume that for him, the attainment of a secret is carried out not so much by what someone is told, or transmitted, but much more as something that someone comes to understand by himself.

Both Maimonides and ibn Tibbon were figures of Andalusian Spain, sharing a predisposition to Arabic neo-Aristotelianism, like some their Muslim contemporaries, and the

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<sup>16</sup> *Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. Shlomo Pines, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> See Alexander Marx, "Texts by and about Maimonides," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 25 (1935), 378-380. More on this letter see Steven Harvey, "Did Maimonides's Letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon Determine which Philosophers Would Be Studied by Later Jewish Thinkers?" *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. LXXXIII (1992), 51-70; Isaiah Sonne, "Maimonides' Letter to Samuel b. Tibbon according to an Unknown Text in the Archives of the Jewish Community of Verona," *Tarbiz*, vol. 10 (1939), 135-154, 309-332 (Hebrew).

capacity to consult the major pertinent material in its Arabic versions. In exile from their common land and culture, the Andalusian refugees in Egypt and Provence shared a common philosophical heritage and they constitute what can be called an Andalusian *internationale*, which eventually helped defend Maimonides' *Guide* against the sharp critiques pouring from more traditional corners of the Jewish world.<sup>18</sup> If Maimonides decided not to meet his translator in Hebrew ibn Tibbon, we may quite plausibly assume that he was also unwilling to meet any other person seeking to receive oral instruction from him.

In other words, Maimonides did not rely on the possibility of oral instruction as an opportunity for elucidating the intricacies found in his writings, although sometimes Maimonides himself inserted them there premeditatedly. His teaching method is quite a literary one, which means that the ideal reader should be able to find his own way in the hermetic style and structure of Maimonides' *Guide*. The passage of information orally was presumably believed to be superfluous since someone is either capable of discovering the secrets by himself or not worthy of receiving them at all.

Nahmanides provided a different answer involving the transmission of Kabbalistic secrets. In his writings he denied that anyone could decode the secrets of the Torah from the biblical texts in which they are found or even from his own commentary on the Pentateuch, in which he alluded to the places in which secrets are found. The most important example of this is found in Nahmanides' introduction to the *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, where he wrote in quite a solemn manner that:

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<sup>18</sup> See Moshe Idel, "Maimonides' 'Guide of the Perplexed' and the Kabbalah," *Jewish History* vol. 18,2-3 (2004), 197-226.

I bring into a faithful covenant and give proper counsel to all who look into this book not to reason or entertain any thought concerning any of the mystic hints which I write regarding the hidden matters of the Torah, for I do hereby firmly make known to him that my words will not be comprehended nor known at all by any reasoning or contemplation, excepting from the mouth of a wise Kabbalist [speaking] into the ear of an understanding recipient; reasoning about them is foolishness; any unrelated thought brings much damage and withholds the benefit.<sup>19</sup>

Thus we have another case of an introduction to a seminal book that addresses the issue of transmission of divine secrets. In another treatise, Nahmanides wrote that:

Indeed, this matter contains a great secret of the secrets of the Torah, which cannot be comprehended by the understanding of a thinker, but [only] by a man who gains them, learning [them] from the mouth of a teacher, going back to Moses our master, from the mouth of the Lord, blessed be He.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to Maimonides' emphasizing that independent understanding or reasoning take place, Nahmanides explicitly ruled out such intellectual activities insofar as esoteric matters were involved. It should be stressed that here, unlike the previous text, the emphasis is on the informant, while the qualities of the receiver are not mentioned at all. In yet another text, a *Sermon on Ecclesiastes*, Nahmanides declares that:

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<sup>19</sup> Introduction to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, ed. Ch. D. Chavel, (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1959), vol. I, 7-8 (Hebrew).

<sup>20</sup> *The Commentary on Job*, printed in *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, ed. Ch. D. Chavel, (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1964), vol. I, 23 (Hebrew).

These issues<sup>21</sup> and others similar to them, their essence cannot be understood properly from his own reason [*mi-da'at 'atzmo*] but by [means of] Kabbalah. This issue is explained in the Torah to whomever has heard the rationale of the commandment by Kabbalah, as it is proper, a receiver [*meqabbel*] from the mouth of [another] receiver, until Moses, our master from the mouth of the Lord.<sup>22</sup>

Nahmanides is therefore offering a theory of transmission that is quite different from that of Maimonides as described above. While the latter questioned the efficacy of oral transmission, the former would not commit to writing anything esoteric that could be reasoned out by an intelligent student. I assume that while Maimonides attempted to distance himself from any direct contact with the perplexed, Nahmanides wanted to establish a strong dependence of the student upon his master. He was assuming that the existence of secrets could be disclosed in a rather short oral communication because the secret has quite a clear biblical context – a verse – and because the understanding of the secret depends less on the sharpness of the mind than on the specificity of the concepts and the words found in the theosophical Kabbalistic system.

Different as the two approaches are, they still share some common denominators. For example, the attainment of secrets is less experiential than cognitive, although in Maimonides' introduction to the *Guide*, some intermittent flash of truth may lead to understanding a secret of reality.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Traditions related to the cosmic cycles, referred by the biblical terms *shemittah* and *yovel*. On Nahmanides' views of these concepts see Haviva Pedaya, *Nahmanides, Cyclical Time and Holy Text* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003) passim, (Hebrew), and M. Idel, "The Jubilee in Jewish Mysticism," in Yoseph Kaplan, (ed.), *Fins de Siècle – End of Ages* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar, 2005), 67-97 (Hebrew).

<sup>22</sup> Nahmanides, *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, ed. Chavel, vol. I, 190. On Nahmanides' esotericism, as well as esotericism in the Middle Ages see Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications*, tr. Jackie Feldman, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> See Yair Lorberbaum, "'The Seventh Reason' – On Contradictions in the *Guide of the Perplexed* – a New Inquiry," *Tarbiz*, vol. 69 (2000), 211-257 (Hebrew).

Nahmanides and his disciples claimed that remnants of these particular secrets were still in their hands. However, this is a fragmentary tradition, and one that should not be expanded beyond the details that have been transmitted by means of independent reasoning.<sup>24</sup> His school of Kabbalists may be described as part of a counter-Renaissance, given its refusal to develop the esoteric traditions it inherited from Kabbalistic sources presumably different from those of Rabad and R. Isaac the Blind.<sup>25</sup> The literary output of this later Kabbalistic school is conspicuously smaller than that of the Geronese school, despite the fact that it included a larger number of great personalities and existed for a longer period than the Geronese one.

A critique of Kabbalistic esotericism is found in the work of Abraham Abulafia, the founder of a school of Kabbalah that diverges from Nahmanides'. Abulafia explicitly refers to revealing secrets of the Torah:

Despite the fact that I know that there are many Kabbalists who are not perfect, thinking as they are that their perfection consists in not revealing a secret issue, I shall care neither about their thought nor about their blaming me because of the disclosure, since my view on this is very different from, and even opposite to theirs.<sup>26</sup>

Immediately afterwards Abulafia refers to his views about *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, the account of the chariot in the first chapter of Ezekiel, which is one of the most important esoteric topics in Jewish mysticism. Abulafia states that this practice should be understood neither as a visionary

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<sup>24</sup> On the claim of a diminution of the acquaintance with secrets of Kabbalah as a result of the Exile in reference to Nahmanides and his followers, see Moshe Idel, "We Have no Kabbalistic Tradition on This," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. I. Twersky, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 54, 62-63.

<sup>25</sup> For other aspects of Nahmanides' conservatism see Moshe Halbertal, "Custom and the History of the Halakhah in Nahmanides' Thought," *Zion*, vol. 67/1 (2002), 25-56 (Hebrew).

<sup>26</sup> *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1580, fol. 55a.

experience nor as an allegory for metaphysics, as with Maimonides, but rather as a matter of combining letters of the divine names, as a technique of interpretation and perhaps also as a mystical technique.<sup>27</sup>

The disparity between his approach and that of the other Kabbalists is explicit. In fact, he describes it as “opposite.” This is certainly not the only instance in which the conceptual divergences between Abulafia’s thought and other Kabbalistic systems are explicitly acknowledged.<sup>28</sup> However, in this case we not only have a conceptual divergence, which is quite regular in Kabbalistic literature, we also have the expressed awareness of transgressing an explicit, strong interdiction issued by a major Kabbalist such as Nahmanides. Indeed, Abulafia already put in practice his policy of exotericism years before he formulated the above confession in 1286. Already in the opening poem of his major book, *Hayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, written in Rome in 1280, he recommended: “You should vivify the multitude by the means of the name *Yah*, and be as a lion who skips in every city and open place<sup>29</sup>.”<sup>30</sup>

However, much more exceptional for him as a Kabbalist, both prior to his time and for many decades after him, was his deliberate turn to Christians as part of the disappointment from the Jews' reactions. Abulafia is well known for his attempt, unsuccessful but nevertheless comforting to him, to meet the Pope. The audience did not take place first because of the Pope's initial refusal to see the Kabbalist in Rome and then because of the Pope’s sudden death in a castle

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<sup>27</sup> See Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, tr. Menachem Kallus, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 51-53.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., idem, “The Kabbalistic Interpretations of the Secret of `Arayyot in Early Kabbalah,” *Kabbalah*, vol. 12 (2004), 89-199 (Hebrew). For a somewhat harmonistic understanding of the relationship between Abulafia and the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists see the approach of Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> In Hebrew *migrash*. See also above, note 11 the text on public praise of the name of God.

<sup>30</sup> The poetic epilogue to his book *Sefer Hayyei ha-‘Olam Ha-Ba’*, printed by Jellinek as an appendix to Abulafia's *Sefer ha-‘Ot*, 87. For the propagandistic activity of Abulafia see also his *Commentary on Sefer ha-Yashar*, Ms. Roma-Casanatense 38, fol. 41a.

north of Rome, at Soriano da Cimino.<sup>31</sup> As I understand the goal of this meeting, Abulafia intended to discuss with the Pope matters of true Judaism, which for him is identical with his special sort of Kabbalah – the Kabbalah of the divine names.<sup>32</sup> Abulafia's *Sitrei Torah*, a commentary on *Guide of the Perplexed* written only a few months before Abulafia's abortive attempt to meet the Pope, reads as follows:

These secrets will be revealed during the advent of the Messianic era, by the prophets who will arise, and by the Messiah Himself, because through them<sup>33</sup> all of Israel and those who are drawn to them, will be strengthened.<sup>34</sup>

Disclosure of secrets is therefore a path to salvation and this ethos inspired much of his intense activities, literary and others, in the decade between the years 1280-1290. The last passage was written in 1280 and Abulafia envisioned the arrival of the Messiah in 1290. In the case of *Sefer ha-'Ot*, Abulafia describes his preaching to the Christians and even claims that he has had some initial success.<sup>35</sup> In any case, we know from the testimony of Abulafia's student, R. Nathan ben Sa'adya Har'ar, about attempts Abulafia made to attract students to study and practice his ecstatic Kabbalah.<sup>36</sup> Shortly before he met R. Nathan early in the 1280s, Abulafia left four of his students in Capua, who had studied the *Guide* with him:

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<sup>31</sup> Moshe Idel, "Abraham Abulafia and the Pope, The Meaning and the Metamorphosis of an Abortive Attempt," *AJSreview* vol. 7-8 (1982-1983), 1-17 (Hebrew).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, 12-17.

<sup>33</sup> Namely through the secrets of the Torah.

<sup>34</sup> Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 119a.

<sup>35</sup> *Sefer ha-'Ot*, 76.

<sup>36</sup> See Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 413-414.

I am today in the city of *Phonon*<sup>37</sup> and four precious stones joined my academy... God bestowed these four children knowledge and intelligence in order to understand every book and science, and this is the reason I had brought them closer as far as I could and I invented to them names Daniel, and Hananyah, Mishael and 'Azaryah, and I called the latter Zekhariah<sup>38</sup> and they are children with no deficiency, good-looking and understanding every science and knowing knowledge, and having the capacity to stand in the palace of the king... and those four children ...when they come to shelter under the wings of the *Shekhinah*, false witnesses<sup>39</sup>... attempted to seduce them from the table of the Lord, the God of Israel, in order not to be nourished from the splendor of the *Shekhinah*,<sup>40</sup> at the time when other men consume grass<sup>41</sup>... and they came and implored and asked me to interpret the secrets of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, together with some secrets of the Torah which are in my hands, dealing with very profound matters [*Inyanim 'amuqim me'od.*] in order to have a proof and merit and mouth and recommender in order to extract some wisdom to which their soul was striving very much, to know it and comprehend its essence in order to know their creator. And they implored me very much to this effect.... and I, because of my love of them, did not desire to turn them down and I fulfilled their desire

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<sup>37</sup> Namely Capua in gematria.

<sup>38</sup> This is one of the designation that he took for himself elsewhere in his writings, as it amounts in *gematria* Abraham. However, here it seems plausible that in Capua Abulafia had a student named Abraham. Interestingly enough, he wrote an epistle to a certain Abraham, from Messina. See the *Seven Paths of the Torah*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> I assume that here there is clear evidence that there was an antagonism to Abulafia's Kabbalistic thought, as he exposed it in Capua.

<sup>40</sup> *Ziv ha-shekhinah*. This Rabbinic term was interpreted in ecstatic Kabbalah in order to point to an ecstatic experience. See e.g., Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 32-33, and idem, *Messianic Mystics*, 91.

<sup>41</sup> This may be a remark pointing to anthropomorphical understandings of the divinity, influential in some circles in contemporary Italy. See Israel Ta-Shma, "*Nimnuqei Humash le-Rabbi Isaiah mi-Trani*," *Qiryat Sefer*, vol. 64 (1992\1993), 751-753 (Hebrew).

according to their wish and I composed this commentary for them and for those similar to them.<sup>42</sup>

This is an interesting document that testifies to Abulafia's concern for his students. His written commentary on the *Guide* is a surrogate for oral instruction, which took place for some months before he had to leave the city of Capua. His book is presented as a response to the implorations of the four students, not as his initiative. It is here that I see the charismatic touch that creates a special bond between the teacher and the students. The argument that Abulafia wrote down the secrets of the *Guide* out of love demonstrates that a special type of affinity had emerged between him and his students, at least for a while, when the students were under his spell.

Unlike this type of testimony, we have no evidence of any efforts made by the two Moses to recruit students. Although Maimonides dedicated the *Guide* to a student, it is not the student who triggered its composition.

### THREE ATTITUDES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEANING

There is no doubt that Maimonides had quite a limited audience in mind in his famous book. This is obvious from his own introduction, and from the language in which the *Guide of the Perplexed* has been written: Arabic. The very use of this language excluded a significant part of the Jewish *intelligentsia* from being guided in their alleged perplexity. In fact, the extent of the audience Maimonides had in mind was one that had access to some forms of Greek philosophy and could read it dressed in Arabic garb. This assumption excludes, again, many of the European *intelligentsia* who were not exposed to what Maimonides believed was the true understanding of

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<sup>42</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 120a. In this passage there seems to be a distinction between the secrets found in the *Guide of the Perplexed* and those found in the Torah, an issue which requires a more detailed analysis.

God and reality, formed so strongly by the literatures he consumed in Arabic. Using Arabic was certainly not something that began with Maimonides: he was preceded by Sa`adya Gaon, Shlomo ibn Gabirol, Bahya ibn Paquda and Yehudah ha-Levi. Maimonides is one of the last major figures in Judaism to use Arabic to write a theological book that became a classic. Like the other authors mentioned above, the longevity of their work as philosophers has been assured by their translation into Hebrew. This means that the authors' audience changed dramatically: for a variety of reasons, the Arabic speculative writings intended for Jews living in the Islamicate regions flowered only after passing through the filter of Hebrew. This way they also had a dramatic impact on other regions of the world, which Maimonides hardly had in mind. In the places where the writings of Al-Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes arrived much later and in smaller quantity than Maimonides' writings, the *Guide* served not only to correct perplexities, but actually became some form of introduction in philosophy for those who did not read Arabic.

This passage from the Islamicate to the Christian regions is part of an irony of history and it owes much to what I called above the Andalusian *internationale*. They imposed a new type of intellectual culture in regions where the philosophical orientation among Jews and non-Jews was minimal. This import of Greek philosophy in Arabic-Jewish garb in Provençal, and later on in French and German Jewish communities, is a fascinating phenomenon of influence<sup>43</sup> and has created the huge tensions that crystallized in the sharp controversies between Maimonides' followers and his numerous detractors.<sup>44</sup> Aware as I am of recent tendencies to relegate the term

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<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Zvi Blumberg, "Alfarabi, Ibn Bajja, and Maimonides on the Conduct of the Solitary: Sources and Influences," *Sinai* 78 (1976), 135-145 (Hebrew). On the controversies related to Maimonides see the bibliography mentioned in the next footnote.

<sup>44</sup> See e.g., Daniel .J. Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy*, (Leiden: Brill, 1965); Joseph Sarachek, *Faith and Reason, the Conflict over the Rationalism of Maimonides*, (New York, 1935); Bernard D. Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition, The Career and*

“influence” to the margin, I hardly understand some aspects of the cultural history of medieval Jews without assuming that they consumed neo-Aristotelian tendencies found earlier among the Muslim thinkers. The sequence in time is quite evident since Al-Farabi, writing in Turkey, first influenced other Muslim thinkers – including Andalusian ones – and only then the Jewish thinkers. Even more manifest is the influence of this trend in non-Islamic territories, which did not share the Islamicate regions’ concern with neo-Aristotelianism. Influenced by recent nomenclature stemming from cultural studies without a proper critique, some scholars subscribe to a non-historical vision of cultural developments. The controversies in Judaism (and to a certain extent already in Islam concerning Islamic philosophy) that surrounded the Greek-Arabic influence on Jewish philosophy, especially the disputes concerning Maimonides’ thought, are the best proof for the perception dominant in some traditional circles as to the radical nature caused by this sudden influence.

Nothing similar is found in the case of Nahmanides. With the scant and historically negligible critiques formulated in the generation immediately following his death,<sup>45</sup> Nahmanides’ reception in Judaism was rather smooth.<sup>46</sup> A comparison of the reception of Maimonides’ and Nahmanides’ work is a pertinent desideratum for understanding the various forms of Jewish

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*Controversies of Ramah*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Charles Touati, *Prophetes, Talmudistes, Philosophes*, (Paris: Le Cerf, , 1990), 201-218; idem, "Les deux conflits autour de Maimonide," *Juifs et Judaïsme de Languedoc*, eds. M. Vicaire and B. Blumenkranz, (Toulouse, 1977), 173-184; Azriel Shohat, "Concerning the First Controversy on the Writings of Maimonides," *Zion*, vol. XXXVI, 1-2 (1971), 27-60 (Hebrew); Sarah Stroumsa, "Twelfth Century Concepts of Soul and Body: The Maimonidean Controversy in Baghdad," *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience*, eds. A.I. Baumgarten, J. Assmann, G.G. Stroumsa, (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 313-334; For R. Jacob ben Sheshet's *Sefer Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*, a polemic against the mental prayer plausibly found in Maimonides’ followers see Georges Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la Kabbale dans la Pensée Juive du Moyen Ages*, (Paris: Mouton, 1962), 356-371.

<sup>45</sup> See the material analyzed by Aviezer Ravitzky, "Maimonides and His Students on Linguistic Magic and the "Madness of the Writers of Amulets," in eds. Avi Sagi - Nahem Ilan, "*Tarbut Yehudit be-`Eyn ha-Se`arah*," *Festschrift of Yosef Ahituv* (Jerusalem: `Ein Tzurim, 2004), 431-458 (Hebrew) and his *History and Faith, Studies in Jewish Philosophy*, (Amsterdam: Gieben, , 1997), 265-266.

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., the arrival of many manuscripts of Nahmanides in Rome in the eighties and nineties of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Cf., Moshe Idel, "Abraham Abulafia and Menahem ben Benjamin in Rome, The Beginnings of Kabbalah in Italy," in *The Jews of Italy, Memory and Identity*, eds., Bernard D. Cooperman and Barbara Garvin, (University Press of Maryland, Institute of Jewish Studies, University College, London, 2000), 250.

medieval culture. Nahmanides appealed to a much wider and diversified public, whether in his popular *Commentary on the Pentateuch* or in his Halakhic writings. Like Maimonides's *Guide*, however, which targeted only a small Jewish minority, Nahmanides' oral traditions regarding secrets of the Torah were also intended to reach very few students – those who were studying with him. In both cases, we may speak about masters whose cultural activity had a double dimension: exoteric and esoteric. With Abulafia, however, we have an author who is dealing almost solely with matters that can be described as esoteric, although he might have written some books on Hebrew grammar that are presumably lost.<sup>47</sup> Indubitably, Abulafia was a one-dimensional man.

However, unlike the exclusive stands of the two Moses, who each conceived their specific brand of esotericism to be the only valid one, Abulafia's esotericism was more inclusive. He organized the earlier types of esoteric literatures and their techniques of interpretation into a comprehensive scheme in which the various, and oftentimes conflicting, secrets were arranged in a hierarchical order. The more advanced stages of his sevenfold exegetical system consist of allegory after which certain theosophical interpretations are mentioned. He then employs a combinatory technique reminiscent of an influential tradition quoted by Nahmanides in his introduction to the *Commentary on the Torah* and then goes to an even higher level of interpretation, in which each of the consonants of the words in the Bible should be understood as representing a divine name.<sup>48</sup> This last view is also understood as the path leading to prophecy. It has some affinity with a number of Jewish magical understandings of the names of the Divine and might stem from Abulafia's reading of some Ashkenazi esoteric books.<sup>49</sup> Thus, it seems that for the first time in the history of medieval literature, there is a systematic effort to bring together material belonging to

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<sup>47</sup> See his *We-Zot li-Yhudah*, ed., Adolph Jellinek, *Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik*, (Leipzig, 1853), 18.

<sup>48</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 101-9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, 102-4, 106.

quite disparate literatures, some of which even carry conflicting ideas. This inclusive strategy has, in my opinion, much to do with Abulafia's effort to establish his ecstatic Kabbalah not as contradicting the earlier forms of speculative literature, but rather as their culmination. In other words, viewing Maimonides as the fountainhead of allegorical interpretation and seeing the book of *Bahir* as the source of theosophical interpretations while viewing Nahmanides as the transmitter of (a), the magical tradition in which the text of the Torah comprises a continuum of divine names and (b), an Ashkenazi tradition dealing with separate letters as divine names, is part of what Abulafia conceived to be a cohesive and inclusive complex path leading to the experience he deemed to be the highest: the prophetic or ecstatic experience. The fact that he drew on material from diverse centers of Jewish culture such the Andalusian tradition as represented by Maimonides in Egypt and by his followers in Provence, by Nahmanides and his followers in Catalonia, and by various Ashkenazi authors active in the German Rhineland and elsewhere, is quite significant if we remember that Abulafia was looking to build a profile in Spain, and perhaps even internationally as a Messianic leader. Interestingly enough, the three versions of the sevenfold exegetical technique were written in Messina, Sicily, which was geographically and culturally - though not politically<sup>50</sup> - outside the three cultural centers mentioned above.

This expanding role of the leader as integrating a variety of religious traditions is well-reflected in images used by Abulafia to illustrate the transition from an exegetical technique to a higher level of interpretation as the passage from a smaller sphere or circle to a wider one.<sup>51</sup> This expansion is illustrated through a passage from Abulafia's introduction to his commentary on the Pentateuch:

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<sup>50</sup> Sicily was then a territory of the Aragonese crown.

<sup>51</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 122-123.

The Torah was needed in order to guide us in these paths of three levels. The first level -the plain meanings of the Torah - is intended for the perfection of the righteous. For their sake the plain meaning of the parables and riddles [in the Torah] endures, as do the simple meanings of the Midrash and Haggadah and their like. All of these are construed in terms of their plain meaning.<sup>52</sup> And yet, the ultimate purpose of these is not [found] in their plain meaning, as we indicated earlier, for the ultimate purpose of the Torah and its commandments, statutes and laws, is not that people should merely be righteous, without knowing any wisdom, merely rendering the service of a servant. Rather, there is a second purpose. The Divinity also intended that human beings should be righteous and that they should learn until they are wise. And when they observe the ways<sup>53</sup> of righteousness and wisdom they ought to become sages. And further, there is a third intention: God intended that after human beings become sages they should attain to prophecy, for this is the epitome of the capacity of human intellectual grasp in this world, and it is for this end that God originally intended the creation of man in this form.<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, unlike the Maimonidean ideal of the perfect man as being a philosopher, Abulafia emphasizes the prophet and his work as the highest purpose in the creation of man, an ideal attainable according to his view, which differs from Maimonides' one, in the present. Maimonides' view of the double aim of Torah study as achieving the well-being or the perfection

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<sup>52</sup> The three first types of exegesis are described elsewhere in many details. See Idel, *ibidem*, 83-91.

<sup>53</sup> The use of *derekh*, path or way for the first two type of perfection, may imply that there is also a third way that of prophecy, *derekh ha-nevu'ah*. This expression is found already in Maimonides and was adopted also by Abulafia. See, e.g., his *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, 115.

<sup>54</sup> *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, Ms. Parma - de Rossi 141, fol. 7b; ed. Amnon Gross, (Jerusalem, 2001), 21-22; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 109-110.

of both the body and the soul<sup>55</sup> is expanded here to a threefold vision that relegates Maimonides' ideals to a subordinated status. Abulafia adds a third aim of Torah study: prophecy. Prophecy is also to be found in Maimonides' work; he too portrayed prophecy as a religious experience higher than philosophy.<sup>56</sup> By adding prophecy to the two lower perfections of the Torah, Abulafia assumes that the achievement of the prophetic experience is a religious obligation in the present of any man and is not a state imposed by God upon the chosen man in the Bible or an experience that is unavailable in the present, as described by Maimonides.

An earlier passage of Abulafia mediates between Maimonides' discussion of the two forms of well-being and the Kabbalists' threefold qualities of leadership. Three years before he wrote the above passage from the introduction to the commentary of the Torah, Abulafia described the meanings of the term *hanhagah* and *manhig*, leadership and leader (respectively):

The issue of leadership should refer eminently to the guidance of someone who has a potential intellect, despite the fact it stands for someone who leads a living being, and someone who leads someone who has a potential intellect.<sup>57</sup> But the word leader should not be used according to the way of truth but for the instance in which the relationship between the leader and the led one is like that of the shepherd and the flock, even if the flock is a man....And behold the prophets who are referring in their parables to the vulgus [*benei 'adam ha-hamoniim*] as a flock...And behold the sages were called shepherds because those whom they lead are called in their parables by the name flock...And according to all the parables of the prophets

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<sup>55</sup> *Guide of the Perplexed* III:27, Pines, 510. See also the more complex division between four types of perfection in *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:54, Pines p. 635, discussed by Lawrence V. Berman, "Maimonides on Political Leadership," in Daniel J. Elazar, *Kinship and Consent, The Jewish Political Tradition and Its Contemporary Uses*, (Ramat Gan: Turtledove Publishing, 1981), 113-115.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, II:40, Pines, 381-385.

<sup>57</sup> The version found unique manuscript in which this book is extant may be deficient here.

the Torah is referring to the sages and the prophets by the name shepherds and it is not necessary to mention all the instances because they are many and they are all known. And indeed it is said ‘Now Moses kept the flock of Yitro his father in law the priest of Midyan; and he led the flock far away in the desert and came to the mountain of God,’<sup>58</sup> is a faithful testimony to all of them that it is the place of the revelation of the Torah...And the leaders of men are of two kinds: the first one leads those lead by him in accordance to the guidance that testifies the order corresponding to the well-being of the body. And the other is the leader of those lead by him according to the order of the well being of the souls. The first points to the king who suffices for the well-being of the human community. And the second refers to the prophet or to the sage, dealing with the true essence of the soul. However, the perfection of this guidance is when the two mentioned issues are found together in one individual, like David and Solomon.<sup>59</sup>

In this passage, there is a clear hesitation between the Maimonidean twofold theory of well-being mentioned above and a threefold theory of leaders, the latter becoming more explicit in the passage from the *Commentary on the Torah*. I assume that Abulafia conceives of the two Israelite kings not as prophets but as sages, and thus they comprise in their personalities the first two types of leadership. If this is the gist of the passage, it is easier to understand the emergence of the third type of leadership, the prophet, as distinct from the two leadership qualities of the two kings which was then added to Maimonides’ concepts of leadership. Thus, I assume that Abulafia

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<sup>58</sup> Exodus 3:1. For the mountain, the place of the revelation of the Torah, as an allegory for the spiritual experience see additional examples in Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, tr. Jonathan Chipman, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 102-103, 115.

<sup>59</sup> ‘*Otzar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 169-170.

contrived a new structure of threefold leadership based upon Maimonidean elements but absent in the latter's writings.

Let me draw attention to the way in which Abulafia constructed his discussion. The Exodus 3:1 verse quoted in the previous passage points to a secret meaning: the mountain of God, a sublime issue, occurs together with the mundane flock. This uncanny juxtaposition points to a secret that is interpreted by the ecstatic Kabbalist as an esoteric description of humans as the flock of the shepherd – the spiritual leader. This leader is described as someone who is capable of guiding people to a revelation. Abulafia is not only referring to Moses in this text, but to any spiritual leader. Moses becomes, therefore, an allegory for the intellectual or prophetic leader, just as the flock is upgraded to the status of human disciples. The innocent verse about Moses the shepherd underwent a special metamorphosis under Abulafia's hand, pointing to the paradigm of leadership.

Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah is a synthesis of the conceptual framework of Maimonides' neo-Aristotelianism and various types of linguistic speculation and permutations with words and letters stemming from various (mainly Ashkenazi) sources. Those operations also include different vocalizations of the new combinations of letters of the biblical words. These combinations were conceived by the human intellect operating in the microcosm and by the cosmic Agent Intellect in the macrocosm. Just as words are combinations of letters created by the human intellect, so were the variety of beings conceived of combinations of forms by the cosmic, Agent Intellect. Thus, for example, Abulafia enumerates one of the three principles of Kabbalah as follows:

The third principle is that the Holy Spirit<sup>60</sup> and it moves this sphere of the Torah, and its action is found in vowels which move the consonants...letters, combinations [of letters] and vowels.<sup>61</sup> Their acronym is 'AZN, which can be permuted as *Tzo'N* ...The combination turns the letters and the vowels turn the combinations and the spirit of man, given by God, turns the vowels until they will cause the emergence and the illumination of the concept<sup>62</sup> that is proper to any intelligent Kabbalist.<sup>63</sup>

The emphasis on the “intelligent Kabbalist” represents, in my opinion, another type of veiled critique addressed to the Nahmanidean vision that excludes the process of reasoning from the realm of Kabbalah. By putting the emphasis on intelligence, Abulafia is indubitably following Maimonides and not Nahmanides. The assumption is that the intelligent Kabbalist leads the flock, *Tzo'n*, namely in the linguistic material. For the ecstatic Kabbalist this is the highest form of leadership: combining various linguistic elements as a technique to bring about a mystical experience. Therefore, Abulafia takes Maimonides' vision of the prophet embodying intellect as the highest human achievement and adds his own speculations about the linguistic permutations, all of which have little to do with Maimonides' thought.

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<sup>60</sup> A similar stand, according to which the Holy Spirit is the leader of all, and is identical to the Agent Intellect is found in *ibidem*, 139.

<sup>61</sup> See also *Shomer Mitzvah*, Ms. Paris BN 853, fol. 78b.

<sup>62</sup> *Tziyyur*; on this medieval concept see H.A. Wolfson, "The Term *Tasawwur* and *Tasdiq* in Arabic Philosophy and Their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents," *The Moslem World*, (April, 1943), 1-15.

<sup>63</sup> *Sefer Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1582, fol. 45b. See also Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 3-11. On the influence of this quote on R. Mordekhai Dato's description of R. Moses Cordovero's Kabbalistic activity see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 137. On intellectual Kabbalah see also Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 367.

That Abulafia believed himself to be a prophet is evident in several of his writings.<sup>64</sup> Positing himself as a Christic prophet<sup>65</sup>, namely by prophesying his own messianic role, Abulafia also forged a new anthropology that assumed that by overloading the consciousness with combinations of letters and other technical elements by a special rhythm of breathing, someone may attain a prophetic experience which he conceived to be available in the present. It should be pointed out that the righteous man is described as a servant, while in the two more advanced levels of human categories there is no such description. As we know, in Rabbinic literature there is a recurrent distinction between worship as a servant and another, higher one, as a son. I assume, on the basis of earlier discussions above, to see in the prophet someone who worships God as a son. Neither Maimonides nor Nahmanides regarded themselves as sons of God, but Abulafia certainly did.<sup>66</sup>

Whether or not Maimonides believed he was a prophet or aspired to become one is certainly an open question in scholarship.<sup>67</sup> Nahmanides did not articulate such a claim in any of his writings. It seems that both figures, like R. Shlomo ben Abraham ibn Adret following them, subscribed to the Rabbinic assumption that prophecy ceased long ago and that its return was not imminent.<sup>68</sup> This claim of the cessation of prophecy created the necessary space for the

<sup>64</sup> See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 295-302. See also 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz, 116, where the possibility to prophesy is dealt with as quite plausible for his reader.

<sup>65</sup> This is a term I take from André Neher. See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 346, note 5.

<sup>66</sup> See Moshe Idel, *BEN: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*, (London: Continuum, 2007), 305-313, idem, *Messianic Mystics*, 73-74, 85-93.

<sup>67</sup> See Abraham J. Heschel, *Prophetic Inspiration after the Prophets, Maimonides and Other Medieval Authorities*, ed. M.M. Faienstein, (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publication House, 1996), 69-125.

<sup>68</sup> See the study of the issue in Ephraim E. Urbach, *The World of the Sages, Collected Essays*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1988), 9-19 (Hebrew). For the controversy between Abulafia and ibn Adret over the former's claim that he is a prophet see Moshe Idel, "R. Shlomo ibn Adret and Abraham Abulafia: For the History of a Neglected Polemic," in eds. D. Boyarin, & alia, *Atara L'Haim, Studies in the Talmud and Medieval Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky*, (The Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2000), 235-251 (Hebrew); idem, *Messianic Mystics*, 59-60. For the Christian phenomena see Niels Christian Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy: The Post-Biblical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and for the Sabbatean prophecy see Matt Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2004), and Idel, "On prophecy and magic in Sabbateanism," *Kabbalah* 8 (2003), 7-50.

development of rabbinic intellectual and independent activities and generated a certain type of leadership that is based primarily on writing, commenting, expanding or organizing knowledge. Abulafia worked with a totally different assumption; he regarded the return of prophecy as something quite possible, imminent, and very much related to his engagement with eschatology and messianic aspirations.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly enough, Abulafia, who worked under the assumption that he was continuing the religious work of the two medieval Moses', was sharply attacked on the one hand by Nahmanides' main follower in Barcelona, R. Shlomo ibn Adret, and on the other hand, at least implicitly by Zerahya ben She'altiel Hen (Gracian), a follower of Maimonides. Ibn Adret discredited Abulafia's claim to prophecy using Maimonides' argument that a return to prophecy was not possible at any time when Jews were in exile.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, the philosopher Zerahya Hen criticized Abulafia's understanding of the *Guide of the Perplexed*.<sup>71</sup> It should be pointed out that Zerahya, who was active in Rome when he criticized Abulafia, was originally from Barcelona like ibn Adret. Moreover, Abulafia was initiated in Kabbalah in this city in 1270. Thus, it seems that the three different intellectual developments that took place in Barcelona in the 1270's confronted each other in the 1280's in Italy and Sicily.

## CONCLUSIONS

Let's return to the issue of the perfect man as a son of God. We should clarify the meaning of these words as Abulafia used them; whether he used the term Messiah or a son of God, Abulafia did not share the Christian vision of Jesus as the incarnated, single and ultimate son of God. His vision is quite different: everyone can and should, at least in principle and for

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<sup>69</sup> See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 295-298.

<sup>70</sup> See idem, "R. Shlomo ibn Adret and Abraham Abulafia."

<sup>71</sup> See note 46 above.

himself, cultivate a spiritual life and become a Messiah and a son of God. His own brand of Kabbalah is conceived to lead people on this particular path – the ultimate goal of his messianic aspirations. For him, the aim of the Torah study is for people to become prophets, Messiahs, and sons of God. By proclaiming that it was possible to reach these high ideals even in his lifetime, Abulafia was also a propagandist with the aim of reaching as many people as possible – even Christians. The two Moses chose to have their impact on a wider Jewish audience through their literary works and thus occur at a certain distance, leaving them static figures both geographically and intellectually. Abulafia, on the other hand, was an itinerant scholar who moved incessantly from country to country for several years, spreading both Maimonides' thought and his own Kabbalah.<sup>72</sup> His move from esotericism to exotericism also offered a form of mobility, which was not necessary in the cases of masters who wanted to keep the secrets for a small minority. In the case of someone who emphasizes direct contact at least as much as written communication, charisma would understandably play a greater role. Abulafia's claim to being a prophet and his preference for direct contact can be seen as circumventing the legendary distance that the rabbis maintained between themselves as the erudite and the rest of the Jewish people – the vulgus or common people. Abulafia's leadership style hearkens back to an earlier time when teaching was oral and initiated by the prophet going directly to the people without waiting for them to come to him as was the case of rabbis and priests. In a certain but limited way, Abulafia returned to the pre-rabbinic situation where the role of the religious messengers was more important than that of the erudite, which, in contrast, was a value of vast importance in the projects of the two rabbis Moses.

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<sup>72</sup> See Idel, "Maimonides' "Guide of the Perplexed" and the Kabbalah," *Jewish History*, vol. 18 (2004), 197-226.

According to the views of the two Moses, different as they are in many important details, a person's spiritual development was conditional upon a long accumulation of knowledge whose gradual process would be quintessential toward reaching their ideal of perfection. Abulafia, however, was particularly much more interested in spiritual experiences that could be obtained in a relatively short time or, to use one of his terms, "easily."<sup>73</sup> To this end, he articulated some techniques in attaining such experiences, techniques that I regard as anomian, namely as indifferent to Halakhic laws.<sup>74</sup> In this too he diverged dramatically from the two Moses, both nomian figures *par excellence*. Does today's abrupt renewal of interest in his mystical techniques, exegetical approaches, and books – which have been printed for the first time in the last decade – in Haredi, orthodox and secular audiences reflect something about what forms of knowledge, and perhaps what type of leadership, is expected by some segments of those audiences?

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<sup>73</sup> See idem, "Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names," in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, & Typology*, ed. R. A. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 112-113.

<sup>74</sup> For a description of Abulafia's mystical techniques see idem, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, 13-54. For another understanding of Abulafia as a hypernomian Kabbalist see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy*. See also note 6 above.