

THE TRANSMISSION OF KABBALAH

INTRODUCTION TO
SHOMER EMUNIM
HAKADMON

Translated by
Rabbi David Sedley

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Foreword

Shomer Emunim, also known as Shomer Emunim HaKadmon, by Rabbi Yosef Irgas was first published in Amsterdam in 5496 (1736). It is written in two sections and explains the basic principles and concepts of kabbalah in the form of a dialogue. Written as an introductory book for beginners in kabbalah, it also provides a history of the development of kabbalah as well as the importance of its study.

In 5725 (1965) Rabbi Yitzchak Stern, Rabbi of Givat Shaul, republished Shomer Emunim in Jerusalem with several introductions. His first introduction traces the history of the transmission of kabbalah, based primarily on pieces taken from the text of Rabbi Irgas. Rabbi Stern then went on to update this history to the modern era.

The following is a translation of that first introduction.

*David Sedley,
Jerusalem 5768*

Introduction: The Transmission of Kabbalah

The development of the Concealed Torah

Initially, kabbalah was hidden and treasured only in the hearts of certain individuals in each generation. However, through the generations it became revealed to everyone. The Sages of Israel saw the need to illuminate its ways and to explain the main principles to the Jewish masses.

Moshe received the Written Torah from Sinai. In addition all its explanations and clarifications were transmitted to him orally, and are known as the Oral Law. The Oral Law includes the revealed details of the mitzvos as they have been transmitted to us in the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi. In addition to this revealed element there is also a hidden component of the Oral Law, known as the Concealed Torah. This includes many deep secrets which are hidden and buried within the Written Torah. With these the scholar will know how to unify God's name and truly serve Him. The revealed component of the Oral Law was taught by Moshe to all of Israel. The Concealed Torah was taught only to certain individuals in the generation. Everyone who is part of Israel is obligated to believe in the Oral Law - anyone who does not acknowledge it is included within the category of heretic. In a similar fashion, anyone who denies the Concealed Torah is also called a heretic, for all of these things were received by Moshe at Sinai with the revealed components of the Oral Law.

Hiding the Concealed Torah

It was accepted by the Sages that the Oral Law should always be transmitted by word of mouth. Therefore it was not compiled into manuscript form. The Sages of each generation would pass it on to the next generation verbally. The students would write notes on scrolls as reminders of what they had learned. These scrolls are called Secret

Scrolls because the students hid them to prevent anyone else from looking at them.

For more than 1500 years, from the year 2448 (1314 BCE), when the Torah was given, until 3975 (214), when the Mishna was compiled, the chain of transmission continued in this way, from one generation to the next. The revealed part of the Oral Law was given by word of mouth to all of Israel, while the Concealed Torah was passed down to individuals, the few who were designated by God. Eventually Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi, known as Rabbeinu HaKodesh (Our Holy Teacher), collected all the revealed parts of the Oral Law and compiled them as the Mishna. This was publicly taught to the Sages and revealed to all of Israel, who wrote it down for themselves. Rabbeinu HaKodesh relied on his interpretation a Biblical verse in order to permit the compilation of the Oral Law in written form.¹

Long before Rabbeinu HaKodesh compiled the revealed part of the Oral Law, some of the Sages compiled special manuscripts of the concealed parts of the Oral Law. These are: Sefer Yetzirah (The Book of Creation) which is attributed to Avraham Avinu; Sefer HaBahir; Pirkei Heichalos; and one manuscript which encompassed all of the Concealed Torah which is the holy Zohar and Tikunim, written by the Godly Tanna, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. His spiritual level was higher than that of all his contemporaries. However, even after portions of the Concealed Torah were written, its hidden secrets were not revealed to all of Israel, but rather remained in the category of Oral Law. It was written in such an artful manner that only someone who is wise and discerning, and who knows the ways of kabbalah can understand it. If someone has not received the kabbalah orally, these books will seem as though they are sealed. They cannot be understood merely through in-depth study and logic. These manuscripts were written with the original intention that they would only be understood after explanation and clarification from a teacher. In fact, if someone reads books of kabbalah without this preparation, not only will they not understand the truth of the words, but this type of study can also lead to mistakes in several of the principles of faith. Therefore these books were not available to everyone,

as was the Mishna, but were kept secret so that they should not reach the masses. The Sages and Rabbis would protect them in the same way that they hid the Secret Scrolls. This led to a situation whereby the books of Concealed Torah were very scarce and only very few individuals in each generation had access to them.

This system of passing the Concealed Torah to only a few individuals in each generation continued until the time of the Gaonim.² During that time of transmission, from the Mishnaic to the Gaonic period, a great improvement was made to one of the most fundamental books by dividing the Zohar according to the weekly Torah portion and putting each verse in its correct place. However, in the time of the Gaonim the Zohar was hidden and became totally lost from the world. As a result, the secrets of the Concealed Torah were almost completely forgotten. Spiritual darkness ruled over the world. The Rambam wrote about the secrets of the Concealed Torah that “these great secrets once showed us the truth. But the day grew dark and they disappeared, leaving us sitting in the darkness of night”.³

The Spread of Philosophy and its Consequences

“It was evening (erev)”

Evening – because the shapes became confused (nitarvu)

Ibn Ezra (Bereishis 1:5)

The crumbling of the foundation of the spiritual status of the Jewish people began in that time when the Concealed Torah disappeared and the Zohar was buried and hidden. The Concealed Torah was a sealed vision; there were very few individuals who merited receiving the kabbalah by word of mouth, to such an extent that there was no one who could properly understand even those books of Concealed Torah that remained such as Sefer Yetzirah and others.

Darkness reigned in those difficult times and hid the world of Jewish thought from a large numbers of the Jewish people. The science-

philosophy of both the Greeks and the Arabs began to take the place of kabbalah. All difficult questions of divinity were answered in the light of philosophy, and the Jewish philosophers made the Torah fit in with this type of science-philosophy. Philosophy was considered as if it were the hidden part of the Oral Law. Some Jews went so far as to switch beliefs and put philosophy, which is fabricated wisdom from a nation which does not believe in the Torah of Moshe, in place of the Concealed Torah, which is the Torah of the Living God, received by Moshe, from God at Mount Sinai. These individuals continued to follow after philosophy with closed eyes and did not abandon it even when their philosophical beliefs caused them to ignore the words of the Torah and obscure them with foreign explanations so as to seemingly agree with the wisdom of philosophy.

Not only did these philosophers realign God's Torah to fit their philosophy, but they also explained His actions and interactions with the world accordingly. They found a natural explanation for every miraculous event in the world; every display of His existence was explained scientifically. Eventually there was not a single activity in the world that was not explained and understood according to philosophy and nature. If a scientific explanation for every miracle, which God performed for His righteous and holy ones, according to the principle of "the righteous one decrees and God fulfills",⁴ could not be found, they denied it and considered it false.

Rav Hai Gaon, who was one of the few at that time who merited to receive the Concealed Torah, was extremely angry with this kind of thinking, and he wrote strongly against it: "You should know that this was been accepted by every single one of the earlier Sages, and not a single person denied it... that God does miracles through the righteous, as He did through the prophets. He shows the righteous wonders like He showed the prophets.... When they began reading books of Greek wisdom they began to deny every act that was done for a righteous person." Rav Hai Gaon was not only displeased with this specific aspect of philosophy, but against philosophy in general, as he concludes: "One who is involved in these things removes the fear of Heaven from

himself... for he completely removes the words of Torah from himself... and if someone says that philosophy is the correct path and the way to attain knowledge of God, do not listen or pay any attention to him!"

From the time of the Gaonim onwards, the kabbalah and the Concealed Torah continued to disappear, and through the passage of time faded away. Eventually even the greatest of Sages, such as the Rambam, thought that it had been completely forgotten. The Rambam struggled to explain how a whole section of Torah could have been forgotten. This is what he writes: "Our Sages explained that the reward for keeping the Concealed Torah concealed ... is very great ... and it is forbidden to teach it except face to face ... this is the reason that it is no longer known amongst the nation, and there is no longer anything big or small left of it ... and I did not receive it from my teachers."⁵ Since the tradition of kabbalah did not reach that generation, and the people turned to philosophy, the Rambam wrote his Guide for the Perplexed to answer the challenges of philosophy on the simple readings of the Torah.

Even though the Rambam is known primarily for his greatness in the revealed Torah, Rabbi Irgas tells us something that is known to only a few of the greatest of the last generation. The Rambam himself, at the end of his life, received the kabbalah and Concealed Torah from a learned kabbalist. Don Yitzchak Abarbanel writes that he heard that the Rambam wrote the following in a letter: "At the end of my life a man came to me and told me things which made a great deal of sense. Were I not at the end of my days and my books spread throughout the world, I would retract many of the things that I wrote there". The Abarbanel concludes: "There is no doubt that these things that he heard at the end of his life were words of kabbalah".⁶ Rav Irgas had a manuscript from the Rambam in which he wrote deep and hidden secrets to his students. From what is written in this letter it is clear how devalued philosophy had become in the eyes of the Rambam after he merited to receive the true kabbalah. He writes there, "most of my life I was confused with examining existence... based on philosophy, and with their signs... the ways of logic confused the mind and troubled it. But with true kabbalah the paths are free of stumbling blocks and this is the path of the prophets.

This is how they achieved knowledge of the future, and were able to do miracles outside nature”. However, this was at the end of his life, as we have said, after his books, which were largely based on philosophy, were already popular all over the world.

In the period after the Rambam people continued to flock after the study of philosophy. Unlike the Rambam, who learned the entire Torah including halachah and aggada; Tosefta; Sifra; Sifrei; and the entire Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi before he began to study philosophy, the youth of Israel - who did not know their right from their left - examined and explored only within the depths of philosophy. Not only were the discerning intellectuals who were able to distinguish between light and dark studying philosophy, but also the young sheep of the flock.

The tragic results of following after scientific philosophy did not take long to appear. Rav Hai Gaon had warned that “those who involve themselves with these things will remove the fear of Heaven from themselves... and this will lead to people who are so confused that they will abandon prayer and the rest of the mitzvos”. It did not take long for this prediction to be fulfilled. In the year 4995 (1234) Rabbi Moshe of Kotz in Spain found tens of thousands of Jews who were not keeping the mitzvos of tefillin, mezuzah and tzitzis. There were many scholars who raged against philosophy. One of the foremost critics was the great Rabbi and doctor, Rabbi Yehuda ben Alifchar who wrote to the Radak (Rabbi David Kimche) “Tell me please, Kimche, may your name grow, since when are the verses of the Torah given to be explained using Greek wisdom? You are going backwards.... This is not the correct way, but rather ‘from Zion will come forth Torah, and the word of God from Yerushalayim’.”

The Renewal of the Torah of Kabbalah

By the end of the fifth millennium philosophy had greatly influenced all the communities of Spain and Provence, and the danger to the simple faith of the people was at its greatest. It was as if the words of the

Rabbis at Kerem in Yavneh were about to come true – that in the future the Torah will be forgotten from Israel.⁸ In this difficult time in the spiritual wellbeing of a great proportion of our people, in the midst of the days of darkness and clouds, the strong bright light of kabbalah once again shone forth. Like the sun breaking out from between the black clouds, the Concealed Torah illuminated the face of the earth and breathed life into the souls of the Jewish people, who were tired from the depths of philosophy. The true wisdom lit up their eyes and their hearts with renewed clear faith in God and His holy Torah. Then all the people saw how wonderfully the promises of the Godly Tanna, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai were fulfilled. “Heaven forbid that the Torah should ever be forgotten from Israel, as the verse states, ‘it will never be forgotten from your descendants’.”⁹ ¹⁰In the Torah of the holy Tanna, which is the Concealed Torah, the glorious crown was restored to Israel as it had been.

In those days, when all of Spain, Provence and the surrounding countries were steeped in philosophical investigations, a holy genius, Rabbi Avraham ben David, lived in the city of Poshkira in Provence. He is also known as the Raavad who wrote the glosses on the Rambam. With great dedication he studied the Concealed Torah. Even though the study of kabbalah was very rare, even amongst the scholars and Rabbis, and its paths had been desolate for many years, nevertheless the hidden secrets were revealed and explained to the Raavad. Because of his great righteousness and piety he was elevated to great heights until he experienced a revelation of Eliyahu HaNavi. Eliyahu taught him the hidden secrets of the Concealed Torah and explained clearly the concepts of kabbalah. From that time the kabbalah once again began to spread through the world. The Raavad passed on the secrets of the Concealed Torah that he had received from Eliyahu HaNavi to his son, the pious Rabbi Yitzchak the blind.

Rabbi Yitzchak was called ‘the blind’ because he was blind from birth, but his spiritual vision was extremely sharp. He could recognize who a person was from his spiritual incarnation and could tell whether a person would live or die. With his brilliant intellect he learned everything that

his father taught him, and also merited to learn from Eliyahu HaNavi, who taught him more secrets of the True Wisdom. Rabbi Yitzchak had two great students to whom he passed on the secrets that he had learned from his father and from Eliyahu HaNavi. They were Rabbi Ezra and Rabbi Ezriel. These students began teaching kabbalah in public, and from them it came to Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, known as Ramban who sat at the doors of the Concealed Torah with his close friend, Rabbi Yitzchak of Akko, who was also an expert. God arranged that Eliyahu HaNavi would reveal the Concealed Torah to these pious people so that this wisdom would never be forgotten from the individuals of the nation.

Discovering the Book of the Zohar

With its renewed discovery, the Torah of kabbalah began to reclaim its place, despite natural opposition from logicians, who thought that philosophy was the Concealed Torah. Kabbalah continued to spread further and further as the leaders of the nation, who knew the validity and truth of the True Wisdom, elevated it over philosophy which had been so widespread until that time. The value of kabbalah was known not only to the leaders of each generation, but also amongst the people themselves, for even though they had no grasp of the hidden wisdom, they gave great value to the Torah of kabbalah. In their hearts the people felt its holiness and purity, and treated it with feelings of honor and greatness as well as tremendous respect. At that time people once again began learning the secret parts of Torah. Based on the principle of “one who comes to purify himself is helped from Heaven”¹¹, suddenly and miraculously the original book of kabbalah, the Zohar, which had been hidden and lost for hundreds of years, was rediscovered.

It is not known exactly how it was rediscovered, but we do know that the first person to publish the Zohar was the kabbalist Rabbi Moshe De Leon, who lived at the beginning of the sixth millennium (c. 1250–1305). He promulgated many early manuscripts. Rabbi Moshe Zacuto (ca. 1625–1697), one of the greatest kabbalists of his time, found an

ancient manuscript which describes how the Zohar was rediscovered. It states, “A certain king from the East gave a command to dig for treasure in a certain place. They found a chest with the book of the Zohar inside. He sent it to all the non-Jewish scholars around the world, but they did not know what it was and could not understand it. He sent it to the Jews... they told him, ‘our master the king, this book was written by a certain Sage, but we do not understand it’. They sent it to Tultitula in Spain, and when the wise men of Tultitula saw it they rejoiced greatly”.

It was Divine Providence that the renewal of kabbalah happened in Spain and Provence, specifically in those places that had been the most misled by philosophy. It was particularly there that the Zohar first shone its light after having been hidden for such a long time. God, in His mercy and kindness, showed favor to the Jews in those countries, and released them from the terrible chill which philosophical investigation had injected into their very bones. They had reached the point where the service of God had become a burden and difficult chore for them, and they performed the mitzvos with heavy hands.¹²

This was replaced by the light of the paths of kabbalah which revived their spirits and brought holiness and sanctity to their souls. The study of kabbalah encompassed and wrapped those who served God in truth, until their inner hearts were filled with a happiness and spiritual joy in keeping the mitzvos, a joy which surrounded their entire being. The kabbalah especially invigorated and fixed in their hearts the sparks of pure faith, and allowed their hearts to remain firm in the face of the storms and waves of forced conversion which poured over the people of Israel in those places at those most difficult times.

The happiness of those generations at the discovery of the Zohar is expressed by Rabbi Yehuda Chayat, one of the great Spanish kabbalists who was exiled during the expulsion [of 1492]. He writes, “How fortunate are we, how great is our portion that we have merited the Book of the Zohar, which earlier Sages, such as Rav Hai Gaon, Rav Sheses Gaon, Rabbi Eliezer of Germiza, Ramban, Rashba and Raavad, did not have, though their Torah knowledge was far superior to ours.

All of them knew kabbalah but were unable to taste its honey, because in their time the Zohar had not been revealed.”¹³

When they Jews were made to feel most unwelcome in Spain, which began in 5151 (1390) and continued for almost one hundred years, until the beginning of the expulsion (in 1478) the philosophers became less pervasive. Rabbi Yosef Yaabetz, one of the Rabbinic leaders of Spain who was expelled, testified about the philosophers that “almost all of them gave up their religion when it was tested”.¹⁴ During this difficult time the Zohar served as a source of hope and encouragement for those who were suffering.

The homeless, persecuted Jews drew strength, comfort, consolation and hope from the words of the Zohar. The very fact that they had the Zohar and were involved in learning it gave their hearts certainty and hope that they would be saved from the terrible dangers which came upon them one after another. The kabbalist Rabbi Yehuda Chayat writes of their involvement with the Zohar, “I believe with complete faith that its merit has supported me through every tribulation that has come upon me from the time I was expelled from Spain”.¹⁵

Printing the Zohar

The Sages of Israel showed extra caution with the holy Zohar to ensure that it would not fall into the wrong hands. It seems that because of their caution they decided at first not to print and publish it. It was only in the year 5318 (1558), some 85 years after the first Jewish books were printed, that they began to publish the Zohar. Even then there were dissenting opinions who did not want it to be published. Rabbi Yitzchak Delatash tells of the storm that raged over the printing of the Zohar. He writes, “The heavens and earth shook, and the foundations of the house trembled from the shouting that it is not appropriate to make hidden and sealed things available to the masses. The sacred stones are poured out at the corner of every street.”¹⁶ For this they will excommunicate and rage. Someone who wants to learn about these things should learn

from the scribes and not the books, [for] “mouth to mouth he should speak to him”.¹⁷ The Concealed Torah must be hidden and kept secret, as the name attests. Those who wish to print it are debasing it in sin, and they will be judged”.¹⁸ Apparently the final verdict of the sages was that it should be printed, and it was printed simultaneously in two cities, Cremona and Mantua.

In Mantua they printed the halachic ruling of Rabbi Yitzchak Dalatash regarding the publication of the Zohar at the beginning of the book. In his ruling he rails against those who were against the printing, and claimed that they were “confusing ideas, removing the love from the hearts, weakening desire and extinguishing the fire which burns in the hearts of the people” to learn kabbalah. He begins his ruling permitting the publication of the Zohar with the question “Will the desire for false acquisitions always rule over us? Will faith be lost from us forever? When will we see the fulfillment of the verse ‘The earth will be filled with the knowledge of God’? If not now, when? Are we waiting until the seventh millennium when the world will be destroyed? We are almost a third of the way through the sixth millennium!” After he rebuts all the challenges to printing the Zohar he claims that especially at this time it is vital that it is printed, because “the Book of the Zohar was compiled in the generation of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai so that at the end of days, in the time of messiah, as the salvation comes closer, in the merit of the Zohar, Israel will be redeemed. Just as when they left Egypt the Israelites needed the merit of the blood of the Pesach sacrifice and the blood of circumcision to remove them from that exile, how much more so in our time when the redemption is very nearly coming about. You can see the exceptional awakening in the hearts of every person to seek out kabbalistic wisdom with tremendous effort, and to copy it with great dedication and with great expense. This is a clear sign that the time of redemption is about to arrive”.

The later leaders of the generations were very grateful to Rabbi Dalatash for his ruling. The Arizal said “The sage who ruled that the Zohar could be printed was the spark of a great pious and holy man, and deserves everything good”.¹⁹

An Argument Amongst Kabbalists

From the time of the expulsion from Spain, when the wisdom of philosophy had proved to be a failure, the Torah of kabbalah continued to become more established and widespread. It became very popular after the first printing when it became available to a very wide and strong audience. Despite this, the Concealed Torah remained only for select individuals because the sages of each generation treated the great secrets with exceptional care. They did not want it to reach the hands of those who were not trustworthy or qualified. Even when they were forced to write kabbalistic ideas, they would follow the lead of earlier generations and only write abbreviated notes or in hints so that only those who had received the tradition from a teacher would be able to understand.

This fact, that the secrets of Torah were written in abbreviated notes eventually led to two consequences. Even though the early kabbalists who wrote these notes orally transmitted their deep meaning to their students who were sitting before them, nevertheless with the passing of time the explanations were forgotten and all that remained were the notes. Other sages followed who deciphered these notes without benefit of the oral transmission and explained them according to their own intellect and understanding. Since every person's intellect is different, the explanations that they gave to the earlier works were also different from each other. This led to arguments amongst the kabbalists. These arguments in explaining the secrets of Torah gave strength to those who held that the simple meaning of the Written and Oral Law was the correct one. They denied that the Torah hints to deep concepts which are explained by the Concealed Torah. They would ask "If this wisdom is a received tradition, how can there be arguments about it?" Rabbi Irgas responds clearly to this challenge and his answer clarifies the transmission of the kabbalah. He wrote:

"The truth is that I have never seen nor found anyone who argues substantially or at all on the Sefer Yetzirah, the Sefer HaBahir, Pirkei

Heichalos or the book of the Zohar. As for the arguments between contemporary kabbalists I will explain the reason to you:

You should know that the arguments between kabbalists began after the Ramban. The reason was that from the time of the Gaonim until the Ramban they would only write this wisdom in the form of notes and hints so that only people who had the keys from a teacher would be able to understand it. You see this from the end of the introduction of the Ramban, where he writes “It is impossible to give a detailed explanation in writing. The hint can cause much damage because it can lead to thinking ideas that are not true”. You find similar thoughts in the writings of other early kabbalists who only wrote their explanations in hints and with great concealment. It is impossible for someone to read them without confusion unless he has orally received the tradition of this wisdom. Therefore, after the Ramban, when the oral transmission of kabbalah diminished, their minds became confused with regard to understanding the earlier generation and each person wrote what came into his mind after study. Because their intellects are not all the same, there arose arguments between later kabbalists. However after these later kabbalists came Rabbi Moshe Cordovero who delved deeply and made astute corrections and was therefore able to minimize the arguments. He was very wise and filled with Torah, wisdom, humility and piety. He also had previously unknown manuscripts from earlier generations and he worked with the later explanations and separated the wheat from the chaff. The Arizal said of him, “Moshe is true and his Torah is true²⁰ in the world of restraint”.

After Rabbi Cordovero, the great light shone, the tower of strength, the holy angel, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, known as the Arizal. Through his great wisdom and holiness he merited to have Eliyahu HaNavi revealed to him at all times, just as he was revealed to the Tannaim and Amoraim. Eliyahu revealed to him the Concealed Torah and the deep secrets which had not been revealed since the time of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. He silenced the critics and reconciled all the arguments of the later kabbalists. From the time that the writings of the Arizal were revealed to the world until the present you will never find anyone who

challenges or argues on his words at all. Everyone knows that the spirit of God spoke through him and filled his tongue.

With the appearance of these two great lights in the city of Tzfas at its zenith, the Torah of kabbalah began to spread from the land of Israel throughout the world. It reached Italy and passed from community to community and conquered the hearts until it seemed that the day of revealing the secrets of Torah as an inheritance of Israel was imminent. They felt the promise was about to be fulfilled that “When in the future Israel will taste from the tree of life, which is the book of the Zohar, they will be redeemed from captivity with mercy and the verse will be fulfilled “The Lord alone guided him, and there was no foreign god with him”²¹.

The Time of Shabbatai Tzvi

The time before the arrival of messiah is a testing time, a time which allows for no spiritual tranquility. Only a few years after the wisdom of kabbalah was publicly explained by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero and the Arizal, when a spirit of grace and kindness returned and spread through the great communities of Israel, the light of kabbalah was suddenly dulled at the hands of a wicked Jew. This caused the leaders of the generation to limit the learning of kabbalah and completely prevented most of the people from coming near it.

At this difficult and troubling time a destroyer and corruptor arose over the nation, a man whose imagination was filled with dreams and visions, who led the remnants of Israel as if he was a messenger from on high sent to redeem them. This impure man, who was known as Shabbatai Tzvi, wrote black pages full of trouble and woe in the annals of our people’s history. He cloaked himself in the robe of concealments, as a man who knew the secrets of the Zohar and the wisdom of kabbalah. In this way he managed to gain the trust of many people including some of the greatest, who mistakenly thought he was a man of God. In order to demonstrate his strength in the hidden wisdom he would pronounce

the holy name of God as it is written when he would read from the Torah. When this became known to the great Rabbi Yosef Iskafa and his court they excommunicated him and instructed people to shun him. Shabbatai Tzvi was then 25 years old. He left his home city of Izmir and went to the cities where Jews dwelt in the Diaspora. He gathered empty and reckless people around himself. At their head was a scoundrel full of debauchery called Natan Binyamin of Aza. Natan of Aza became the false prophet for Shabbatai Tzvi, the false messiah. The cry went out through the camp of Israel that the great day has arrived when God would save Israel through His messiah.

When the people heard that the redemption had arrived they believed in their hearts and their spirits were happy. There was no end to the clamor and uproar that continued to grow and surround cities and countries, and tens of thousands of Jews. The great uproar began through their simple belief that the flowering of redemption was coming through this messiah. Not only did they believe that Shabbatai Tzvi was the messiah, but they clamored after him to follow him and hear his voice even when he was telling them to uproot explicit laws of the Written Torah. This false messiah misled tens of thousands of Jews to believe in strange beliefs that he made up from his heart. He fooled them with the smokescreen of claiming that these beliefs were taken from the Zohar and kabbalah. The people believed everything disgusting thing he said, even though he had not a shred of connection to the wisdom of kabbalah. The end of this false messiah was that he led the people away from God. His ultimate end was like all those who mislead the people to idolatry. After he publicly renounced his faith, by converting to Islam, more tragedies and suffering followed him one after another until they dragged him down to hell in the year 5436 (1676), alone and barren.

Unfortunately, even though the false messiah was dead, and his name was a disgrace and shame, his falsehood, lies and false faith did not die with him. Other seducers and corruptors came to lead the depressed and broken people to idolatry. After the death of Shabbatai Tzvi they tried to mislead the people from their faith through strange rituals. They all based themselves on books of kabbalah. In particular there was a

cunning and proud man who destroyed and debased the people. His name was Nechemiah Chaye Hayyun. Through his great cunning he misled the leaders of Israel to approve of his books which were written as if they were kabbalistic. In reality they were filled with the poison of heresy which originated with Shabbatai Tzvi. Hayyun tried to mislead Rabbi Irgas and came to his city and presented his books, apparently for approval.

Rabbi Irgas was only about 25 years old at the time, however the paths of kabbalah were well known to him. He immediately discerned that the writings of Hayyun were filled with Sabbatean heresy. The veil of the spirit of jealousy for the wisdom of kabbalah which misled them caused them to reveal things that were against halachah. Rabbi Irgas came after Hayyun with a stormy vengeance and revealed his shame to the world, as will be explained in the next section. In this battle with the seditionist Hayyun, the difficult situation of the generation became clear to Rabbi Irgas. On the one hand the actions of the false messiahs who were basing themselves on kabbalah caused people to stop learning kabbalah. On the other hand, the lack of knowledge of the Concealed Torah helped those who were trying to undermine Judaism to achieve their goals, because they were easily able to base anything that came into their minds, regardless of how foreign or extreme it was, on the books of kabbalah, and nobody was able to contradict them. They had only to say that their words were based on foundations of kabbalah and were rooted in the Concealed Torah, and their words became believed and holy. It seems that at this point in time Rabbi Irgas decided to write this book, *Shomer Emunim*, which clarifies the truth of the Torah of kabbalah in a wonderful way, and which clarifies and explains, in simple understandable language, all the foundations of kabbalah.

Limitations on learning kabbalah

This turbulent time, in which the Sabbateans of various stripes based their sordid and foolish faith on the Torah of kabbalah continued for about one hundred years. They did not damage the holiness of those

books, Heaven forefend, but as a temporary measure the leaders of the generation decided to put limitations on learning kabbalah. In the year 5516 (1756), the sages of Poland gathered in Brody to put in place measures against the new Sabbateans embodied by the infamous Yaakov Frank. They decided to excommunicate the Frankists and their supporters. Included in this letter of excommunication was a strong prohibition on learning kabbalah, with the exception of three books. One of the permitted books was this work of Rabbi Irgas.

These sages issued the following proclamation:

“We have seen the need to repair the breach and put things in order to contain those who are trying to destroy and wage war against God by ascending to the Chariot. They throw away the Talmud and halachah and go out to gather lights of Concealed Torah. Before they know how to read from the Torah or have developed their intellects, without being able to understand the simple meanings of the Talmud, they prepare the ways to read and attempt to jump straight into the secrets of Torah. They have caused this stumbling block and through their lack of intelligence have destroyed the fences of the Torah and its validity. They have made a mockery of mitzvos and service of God. Therefore we decree against those mentioned above. It is forbidden for any person to learn from those books, even the well known ones which are certainly from the Arizal. It is completely forbidden for any person to learn from these books until they have reached the age of forty. The only exceptions are the books of the Zohar, Shomer Emunim and Sefer HaPardes of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero. It is permitted to learn these books from the age of thirty on the condition that they are printed and not handwritten. Anyone who transgresses our decree should be judged like the heretics and wicked people and like one of the hypocrites even if he is already forty years old. The only people who are permitted to learn this are those who have filled their bellies with Talmud and halachah.”

This decree of excommunication, which was signed in Brody on the 26th of Sivan 5516 (1756) was publicized throughout the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe “with the sound of the Shofar and extinguishing of

lights” and it was also ratified by the Council of the Four Lands²² who convened in Elul in that same year in Kontantinov.

As proof that Shomer Emunim was not included in the ban on learning kabbalah we can look at the fact that in the year 5526 (1766) it was republished in the city of Zalkova. The Rabbi of that city, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai, who was one of the sages of the Kloiz in Brody, was one of the signatories to the limitations of learning kabbalah signed in Lvov. ²³He gave a letter of approbation to this second printing dated 5th Av 5526 (1766) in which he writes, “Even though I am nervous about approving new books, and particularly those which are rooted in the tree of kabbalah lest they will be found by inappropriate people, as has already happened in this confused and chaotic generation, however the book Shomer Emunim already has the approval of many leaders. The righteousness of the author has allowed him to write it cautiously and carefully so that it cannot be corrupted by those trying to cause damage”.

We see from this the tremendous impression that this book made on the leaders of the nation, and its immediate great influence. The sages recognized Shomer Emunim as one of the fundamental books of kabbalah and placed it on the same shelf as the Zohar and Sefer HaPardes of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero. This was only roughly twenty years after it was first printed in Amsterdam, yet the great Rabbis of Eastern Europe already included it as one of a handful of reliable sources to learn and understand the Hidden Hisdom without risk of causing damage.

On Learning Kabbalah Today

It is worth pointing out that many of the great leaders of our generation, including the followers of the light of Israel, the Baal Shem Tov, who lived soon after that time, strongly encouraged the study of kabbalah. In order be brief we will point out just a few sources which will convey the general view. At that time the Godly kabbalist Rabbi Baruch of

Kossov, who studied under a student of the Baal Shem Tov, wrote his important book *Amud HaAvodah*. This volume explains very clearly the fundamental principles of kabbalah. In his introduction Rabbi Baruch expresses amazement at the sages of his generation that “the modest ones amongst them avoid learning kabbalah. Some of them explain that the infamous rotten dog Shabbatai Tzvi, may his name and memory be blotted out, caused a plague where some books of kabbalah now have introductions which contain great heresy, and base themselves on the words of the Zohar and Tikunim in crooked and corrupt ways”. He decided that this is not a good basis on which to limit the learning of kabbalah, and the Rabbis of the time gave Rabbi Baruch’s book glowing approbations. This was in the year 5521 (1761) approximately five years after the first banning of kabbalah.

In *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*²⁴ Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, author of the *Tanya*, comments on the statement of the Talmud: “A person should always divide his learning time in three: one third in the study of Tanach, one third in the study of Mishnah and one third in the study of Talmud”²⁵ Rabbi Shneur Zalman writes: “Learning kabbalah is considered within the third of Talmud. When the Sages of the Talmud said ‘If you want to know He Who created the world through His speech, you should learn aggada, for through that you will come to know God and will attach yourself to His ways’. This is explained in kabbalah where it is written, “Most of the secrets of the Torah which are the wisdom of kabbalah and knowledge of God, are hidden within the aggada”.²⁶

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch of Ziditchov also wrote a special pamphlet called *Sur MeRah VaAseh Tov* to explain the importance of the obligation of learning kabbalah. Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov, author of *B’nei Yissaschar* wrote a commentary called *Addenda* from Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech on this pamphlet. He writes there regarding learning Concealed Torah that “challengers and claimants were numerous against this kind of wisdom, until God sent the holy soul of the Baal Shem Tov to revive it. He enlightened the eyes of the world as to how to study this wisdom and to derive perfect service from it, as can be seen by an intelligent person through the works of his students”. Rabbi Shapira

concludes, “You should know that the words of the students of the Baal Shem Tov are only understandable by someone who has studied kabbalah. He will see in them ideas as broad as the sea, which reach to the heavens. Through this wisdom he will understand the correct and pure service of God”.

The nephew of the Rabbi of Ziditchov, Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Suffrin was even more effusive on this topic. In one place he writes “There are many fools who flee from learning the secrets of the Arizal and the Zohar. These are our life, as God said, ‘If only My people would listen to Me’. In the time before the coming of messiah, when evil and heresy will multiply, if they would spend their entire life immersed in the learning of the Zohar and Tikunim and the writings of the Arizal, combined with chassidus and the introductions of our teacher the Baal Shem Tov, they would remove all the evil decrees”. Rabbi Suffrin publicly stated, “If my people would listen to me, in this wicked generation when heresy grows strong, you should learn the Zohar and Tikunim with children from the age of nine to give them familiarity. This will cause their fear of sin to be greater than their wisdom and it will endure”.²⁷

He explained to the vulnerable ones, “My children, my brothers, don’t be evil in your hearts to say that when you are free from all the bad traits and desires you will learn – perhaps you will never be free from them. The only way to life in this world and the next is through learning Talmud and halachahh with the wisdom of the Zohar, the writings of the Arizal, and the introductions of the Baal Shem Tov. You will gain this by sitting in the dust of the feet of the righteous”.

Endnotes:

¹Psalms 119: 26 “It is time to work for God; make void Your law!” He interpreted it as justification for writing down the Oral Law, though it contravened halachah, because otherwise it would have been lost from Israel completely.

²10th century CE

³Introduction to Guide for the Perplexed

⁴Talmud Bavli, Shabbos 59b on Iyov 22:28 “You shall decree a thing, and it shall be established for you”.

⁵Introduction to Guide for the Perplexed.

⁶Nachalas Avos end of chapter 3.

⁷Yishaya 2:3

⁸Talmud Bavli, Shabbos 138b

⁹Devarim 31:21

¹⁰Talmud Bavli, Shabbos ibid.

¹¹Talmud Bavli, Yoma 38b

¹²The Tur (Orech Chaim 585) writes “Originally people were quick in their observance of mitzvos, and loved them, and this is still true in Germany. But in Spain they flee from the mitzvos...”

¹³introduction to Minchas Yehuda in his book Ohr HaChaim

¹⁴Introduction to Minchas Yehuda

¹⁵Eicha 4:1

¹⁶based on Bamidbar 12:8

¹⁷his ruling is printed at the beginning of the Zohar

¹⁸The Chida brings this in Shem HaGedolim under the entry ‘Cheshek Shlomo’.

¹⁹Talmud Bavli, Bava Basra 74a

²⁰Devarim 32:12

²¹The Council of Four Lands (Va’ad Arba Aratzos) in Lublin, Poland was the central body of Jewish authority in Poland from 1580 to 1764. Seventy delegates

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from local communities met to discuss taxation and other issues important to the Jewish community. The «four lands» were Greater Poland, Little Poland, Ruthenia and Volhynia.

²²In 1759 the Frankists underwent a spectacular mass baptism at Lvov, Poland. This led to another ban on learning kabbalah for anyone under the age of 40 which was signed in 1760.

²³Hilchos Talmud Torah chapter 2 halachah 1

²⁴Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 19b

²⁵Hilchos Talmud Torah chapter 2 halacha 2. See also chapter 1 halachah 4.

²⁶Notzer Chesed on Pirkei Avos chapter 4:20

²⁷ibid 4:1

