

Beyond the Dark Ages: Modern Jewish Historians and Medieval Judaism

Eli Isser Kavon

Abstract:

It has been more than 30 years since the publication of Professor Y.H. Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Yerushalmi's work has impacted a new generation of Jewish historians, despite its pessimism regarding the role of history as a substitute for tradition, as well as its doubt that the historian's craft will resonate within Jewish memory. My focus in this essay is on the four greatest modern historians of Judaism: Heinrich Graetz, Simon Dubnow, Yitzhak "Fritz" Baer, and Salo Baron. I investigate each historian's analysis of medieval Jewish rationalism—as represented by the towering figure of Moses Maimonides—and each historian's assessment of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. My goal in this effort is to challenge Professor Yerushalmi's pessimism and to highlight how historians of Jewish faith and life can enrich our understanding of tradition, memory and the past. I do not make the claim that *Zakhor* is wrong—in fact, Yerushalmi's analysis of History and Memory is brilliant. No doubt, History will likely never replace Memory and tradition. Yet, there is more room for hope. I believe that Yerushalmi is too pessimistic in his assessment of the abiding power of the historian of Judaism and Jewish life to instill faith and hope for the future. Perhaps one day, the yeshiva seminary will be able to engage the historian's classroom in a constructive and inspiring manner. That is my hope in writing this essay.

Keywords:

Historicism, Rationalism, *Kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism), Memory, *Halakhah* (Jewish law)

Introduction: Y.H. Yerushalmi's *Zakhor* and the Jewish Historian's Challenge

“I would simply forbid teaching our children Jewish history. Why the devil teach them about our ancestors' shame? I would just say to them: Boys, from the day we were exiled from our land we've been a people without a history. Class dismissed. Go out and play football.”

—from Haim Hazaz's “The Sermon”¹

In *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought*, historian David N. Myers explores the intellectual world of four Jewish thinkers with roots in modern Germany: Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Leo Strauss, and Isaac Breuer. What united these different men was their rejection of applying historical-critical tools to the study of Judaism. In the twelfth century, Maimonides, the greatest of medieval Jewish thinkers, dismissed the study of history as a “waste of time.”² Nine centuries later historicism has emerged as “a remarkable success story”³ in modern thought. While the “crisis of historicism” is still with us in the 21st century—especially, the issue of the relativism that the historian can create—we, as human beings and as Jews, cannot seal the Pandora's box. Scholars of Jewish life and Jewish texts cannot escape the presence of the historical-critical method. To do so is an act of denial and an attempt to place a fence around “holy ground” that can never be approached without reverence and blind faith. This worldview in no way diminishes the achievements of Cohen, Rosenzweig, Strauss or Breuer. But it does emphasize that the approach to “resisting history” is not a viable approach for Jewish thinkers, including theologians and philosophers.

It is no coincidence that David N. Myers, the author of *Resisting History*, is a student of Columbia University's Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. In Myer's earlier study of “The Jerusalem School” of historians at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he lauds Yerushalmi as “my teacher, master, and guide through the intricate byways of Jewish history.”⁴ Professor Yerushalmi's most influential study—it is still the subject of discussion and scholarly analysis more than 30 years after it was first published—is *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Yerushalmi's slim volume, based on a series of lectures he delivered at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1981, is a

curious work, permeated with frustration and self-doubt. Yerushalmi struggles with the questions that haunted the German-Jewish thinkers in Myers' study. While Yerushalmi does not reject the historical-critical approach to understanding Judaism and Jewish life—indeed, Yerushalmi never denies that he is an historian who employs the modern method—*Zakhor* reflects the author's existential and professional struggle to find a meaningful place for the academic study of Jewish history in the intellectual, religious, and social life of modern Jewry. "Nothing has replaced the coherence and meaning with which a powerful messianic faith once imbued both Jewish past and future," writes Yerushalmi in *Zakhor*. "Perhaps nothing else can. Indeed, there is a growing skepticism as to whether Jewish history can yield itself to any organizing principle that will command general assent."⁵

The object of this essay is to challenge Yerushalmi's assumption that the historian of the Jewish past has lost the ability to shape the contours of Jews' understanding of their history and faith. I will attempt to analyze the historical investigations of Heinrich Graetz, Simon Dubnow, Yitzhak Fritz Baer, and Salo W. Baron into medieval Jewish life, faith, and literature. All four men played a decisive role in reshaping the way Jews understood their past and, therefore, had a decisive impact on the world around them and on the future of Jewish destiny. While Yerushalmi may be right in claiming that "a professional Jewish historian...[is] a new creature in Jewish history,"⁶ this does not mean that this innovation renders the Jewish historian impotent in forging a new understanding of the way Jews remember their past. Historians such as Graetz and Baron challenge the "Yudkas" who dismiss Jewish history in the Diaspora—especially the "dark ages" of the medieval epoch—as a history of persecution, pogroms and defamation. Indeed, the Middle Ages for Jews is not a dark, unlightened, stagnant "black hole" in Jewish history. It is "vibrant, alive, and interesting."⁷ Even Yitzhak Baer, as a Zionist historian, cannot completely dismiss medieval Jewry as "lachrymose" despite the demands of national ideology that painted the Exile as Yudka's never-ending misery.

My approach in this essay is to focus on the histories of Graetz, Dubnow, Baer, and Baron on two specific areas of medieval Jewish history: the first is the most influential figure of medieval Jewish thought, Moses Maimonides; the second area of exploration is the movement of mysticism as embodied in the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* and the Kabbalah. How does each of the historians I am studying understand these aspects of medieval Jewish history? What does their analysis have in common and how do they differ? How

did the political ideology and movements of the modern epoch shape their understanding of medieval Judaism and Jewish life? I will approach these questions by referring to the historians' work, secondary sources, as well as my own research notes.

The Sephardic Paradigm and Rationalist Supremacy: Graetz and Dubnow

The period of the ascendancy of the Umayyad caliphate in Spain has not only been of interest to historians in understanding the events of Jewish history in the medieval period. The “Golden Age” of Jewish life in Muslim Spain culminating in the career of Maimonides has been central to the polemic of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement and its critics. As Ismar Schorsch writes in *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism*:

The full-blown cultural critique of the *Haskalah* (German Jewry's ephemeral Hebraic version of the European Enlightenment) drew much of its validation, if not inspiration, directly from Spain. The advocacy of secular education, the curbing of Talmudic exclusivity and the resumption of studies in Hebrew grammar, biblical exegesis, and Jewish philosophy, and the search for historical exemplars led to a quick rediscovery of Spanish models and achievements.⁸

Maimonides is central to what Schorsch calls “the myth of Sephardic supremacy” among German-Jewish *maskilim* two hundred years ago. The *Haskalah* did not only view Maimonides through the disinterested lens as a purely academic endeavor to understand medieval Jewish history but championed the great thinker as a forerunner to Jewish intellectual endeavors in the Germanic states to reconcile Judaism with Kantian rationalism and, later, the philosophy of Hegel. It is no coincidence that Galician philosopher and historian Nachman Krochmal—a pioneer of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*—titled his Hegelian interpretation of Jewish history “Guide to the Perplexed of the Time” (published after his death in 1840). In this period, Maimonides is a constant presence in the works of the scientific and academic study of Judaism. Schorsch analyzes a satire written by Aaron Wolfsohn, a *maskil*, in which Maimonides and Moses Mendelssohn are reunited in the afterlife and discuss each other's philosophies as true colleagues. “Collapsing the Moses of Egypt and the Moses of Dessau into the Moses of

Cordoba,” writes the former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, “rendered the philosophic strain of Spanish Judaism both pristine and normative.”⁹

It is important for us to understand the role of medieval Sephardic Jewry and Moses Maimonides within the context of the movement for Jewish enlightenment spurred by Mendelssohn. Heinrich Graetz is a stern critique of the methodology of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* but the influence of Maimonides is so great among German-Jewish thinkers that not even Graetz can resist the opportunity to engage in a bit of hagiography in his analysis of Maimonides and the “Golden Age.” Here is a sample of the near-sainthood bestowed upon the medieval Jewish thinker by the groundbreaking modern historian:

It was, however, not only his wide and deep knowledge, but his character, which constituted Maimuni’s distinction. He was a perfect sage, in the most beautiful and venerable sense of the word. Well-digested knowledge, calm deliberation, mature conviction, and mighty performance, were harmoniously combined in him. He was possessed of the deepest and most refined sense of religion, of the most conscientious morality, and of philosophical wisdom; or rather these three elements, which are generally hostile to one another, had, in him, come to a complete reconciliation. That which he recognized as truth was to him inviolable law; from it he never lapsed for a moment but sought to realize it by his actions throughout his whole life, unconcerned about the disadvantages that might accrue.¹⁰

In his survey of Jewish historians throughout the ages, Michael A. Mayer quotes Graetz’s belief that with death of Maimonides, “the period of rich spiritual harvest is followed by an ice-cold, ghastly winter” in the history of the Jewish people.¹¹ Graetz’s focus on biography and persecution—scholars and suffering—colors his analysis of Maimonides’ life and thought. Krochmal’s Hegelian understanding of Jewish civilization’s rise, growth, and decay influences Graetz’s analysis. And, of course, he is also influenced by Maimonides’ role as an expert halakhist, an outstanding community leader, and a penetrating philosopher. The medieval thinker is a hero for a scholar like Graetz who is attempting to show that, indeed, the Jewish people’s history is vibrant and alive long after the coming of Christianity. The role of the Jews in world history did not end with the coming of Christ. The “dark ages” were not so dark for the Jews. That is the case for Graetz, at least until the death of Maimonides, a genius who illuminated the darkness.

While I have accused Graetz of hagiography in his historical rendering of the life and thought of Maimonides, I may have overstated the case. In Shlomo Avineri's *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State*, the author states that in Graetz's "account of medieval Jewish thinkers," the pioneering historian "tends to prefer Judah Halevi over Saadia Gaon and Maimonides."¹² For Graetz, the "rational laws" of Saadia and Maimonides are not the essence of Judaism. Rather, Judah Halevi's understanding of history is messianic, foreseeing the end of the suffering of Exile and reestablishing the essential links between Jewish Law, the People of Israel, and the Land of Israel. I would imagine that for two reasons Judah Halevi appealed to modern historians as more of a relevant thinker for modern Jewry than Maimonides: first, Judah Halevi believed the legitimacy of Judaism was based solely on Divine revelation to the Israelites at Sinai as an event in history; second, the poet tried to derail the attempt by Jewish philosophers to reconcile Judaism with Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle. For Graetz, this second reason is especially important. Part of the historian's polemic is in establishing a "Jewish history" that does not need to be reconciled with any other movement or religion and would reassert the identity of German Jews in an epoch in which some of the same Jews assimilated or converted to Christianity (including many of Moses Mendelssohn's descendants).

The Maimonidean mystique is also present in the historical work of Simon Dubnow. Dubnow focuses on the Maimonidean controversy—a bitter controversy over the philosophical writings of the great Sephardic sage after his death—and he does so with a searing critique of the forces arrayed against Maimonides. He actually equates the conservative rabbinate that attempted to ban certain Maimonidean writings with the Inquisition Pope Innocent III brought to bear on the Albigensian heretics in Southern France.¹³ Dubnow is a staunch defender of the rationalism of Maimonides:

The traitorous alliance between the fanatics of the synagogue and the fanatics of the Church, the callous enemies and persecutors of the Jews, aroused the wrath of the communities in Provence and Spain. Even the moderate party turned away from Rabbi Solomon and his group of abominable informers...Ramban and Rabbi Meir were shamed by the acts of the fanatics and fell silent...¹⁴

Perhaps Dubnow's discussion of the clash between the evil "Orthodox" and the heroic "freethinkers" tells us more about Dubnow's rejection of Judaism as an organized religion when he was a young man than it tells us about the realities of Maimonides and the fierce controversies after the philosopher's death. Of course, there are broader issues beyond Dubnow's personal history. Dubnow, influenced early in his life by the positivism of Comte and the philosophy of J.S. Mill, argued for absolute intellectual freedom against the demands of religious authority.¹⁵ This obviously colored his discussion of the attempt by rabbis to ban the work of a "freethinker" (whether Maimonides and his followers such as the Ibn Tibbons would have considered the great rabbi as a maverick is open to question).

Baer: Ashkenazic Superiority and the "Proto-Zionism" of Maimonides

In the historical writings of Yitzhak Fritz Baer we begin to see the fading of the Sephardic mystique and a more critical understanding of the role of Maimonides. The aspect of Baer I find so fascinating is that his life and career are emblematic of "the Jerusalem School" of Zionist historians at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, yet he is a medievalist who has to, in some way, dispel the view of "Yudka" in the Hazaz story that the medieval period is solely a time of persecution and defamation. According to the excellent study of the "Jerusalem School" by David N. Myers, Baer—although an expert on the Jews of Spain—portrayed the Sephardic educated class in a negative light, especially when compared to the Jews of Ashkenaz.¹⁶ In his *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, Baer presents what he believes is a dominant leitmotif of Jewish history: the polarity between Judaism and Hellenism.¹⁷ In this world of dualism, foreign philosophies and ways of life always pose a threat to the folk piety of the Jews. This type of piety was not that of the Court Jews of Spain, those who, like Maimonides, attempted to reconcile Judaism with Aristotelian philosophy. Rather, the martyrs of the Rhineland during the First Crusade in 1096 epitomized the true Jewish national spirit embodied in the folk piety of religion that led them to kill themselves and their children rather than convert to Christianity.¹⁸ Genuine Judaism in Baer's worldview is a national spirit that is enshrined in religious unity and religious expression through the self-government of the *kahal* or *aljama*. In a very creative way, Baer was able to salvage what the Zionist pioneers perceived to be a "lachrymose" epoch of suffering and revive it as one of the most creative periods in the history of the Jewish people.

As for the First Crusade—so important to Baer’s typology of medieval Jews—there still remain some important questions as to the importance of the martyrdom outside of the Rhineland. Why did not Rashi, a student of the Rhineland yeshivahs, or his descendants in the Tosafist school, mention the martyrdom of 1096 in their commentaries? Was this destruction on a smaller scale than the chronicle of Solomon bar Simson would have us believe? Baer might be exaggerating the importance of “folk piety” in his contrast of the “assimilating Sephardim” and the “pious Ashkenazim.”¹⁹ Here we have a clash of Y.H. Yerushalmi’s “history” versus “memory.”

Galut, written by Baer in Hebrew in 1936, is his most challenging, demanding, and “unruly”²⁰ volume. Written during difficult years for German Jewry—Baer had made aliya from Germany only a few years earlier—*Galut* is a history of the idea of Exile. While Jewish communities experienced the Diaspora differently in different places, Baer tried to unify the experiences as those of exile, suffering, and ultimate redemption. While I have already mentioned that Baer had presented the medieval period in Judaism as vibrant and alive, *Galut* paints a darker picture of Jewish life in the Middle Ages. This assessment flies directly in the face of Salo W. Baron’s more positive picture of Jewish life in the Diaspora. Baer argued that both Christian anti-Semitism and Jewish assimilation—especially on the intellectual and cultural levels—posed a constant threat to Jews in the Exile in the medieval epoch.²¹

Yitzhak Baer devotes one chapter of *Galut* to “Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon.” In a few pages, the Zionist historian does something curious: He neutralizes Maimonides as a philosopher who attempted bravely to reconcile Judaism and the Arab interpretations of Aristotle, converting the great thinker into an ardent nationalist in the mold of Judah Halevi (the question of Judah Halevi’s “proto-Zionism” is problematic and anachronistic—he viewed the return to the Land of Israel through the lens of traditional Judaism, not 19th century nationalism). Baer emphasizes Maimonides’ giving “a special place to the doctrine of the Messiah.”²² “In [Maimonides’] eyes,” writes Baer, “the Messiah doctrine was basic to the Jewish faith and to the historical existence of the Jewish people, which had to be defended against any attack.”²³ Baer continues:

Again, if [Maimonides] insisted that the true Messiah could be recognized only by outward signs—the political, military, national consequences that were to follow his appearance—he did so simply to erect a wall against spiritualizing

tendencies, which were encouraged among the Jews by internal and external influences, and against the fantasies of the false prophets, which, if allowed to spread, could not in the end fail to shake the people's faith. He fought against the aberrations of a mystical faith to which he himself essentially belonged. *His own faith was genuine and more strongly determined by the historical tradition of Judaism than by any external philosophical influence.* His "rationalism" did not shake the national and political foundations of the Jewish tradition; rather, it strengthened them.(my emphasis)²⁴

Baer's analysis of Maimonides is problematic. Because the Zionist historian is a firm believer that "genuine" Judaism combated the influences of Greek philosophy and culture, he is forced to downplay the role that Arab interpretations of Aristotle played in the great philosopher's worldview. "External philosophical influence" indeed played a crucial role in the intellectual and religious life of the Jewish elite both in the Baghdad caliphate and in the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba. The extent of the influence of Kalam, Neo-Platonism, and the philosophy of Aristotle cannot be denied, although the extent of their role in the intellectual life of Sepharad can be debated. Who was the *real* Maimonides? Julius Guttmann presents a Maimonides who is a traditionalist to the core for whom philosophy served the interest of religion as its handmaiden. For Harvard's Harry Wolfson, Maimonides is a thinker who balanced the truths of the Torah and the truths of philosophy in a two-tiered system, one truth not being subordinate to the other. Philosopher Leo Strauss gives us the most unlikely scenario: That Maimonides was a true Aristotelian for whom Judaism was an inferior expression of Truth—of course, Maimonides could not present himself in that way in the context of the medieval Jewish world. But, as Strauss writes in his classic *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, "The *Mishneh Torah* is primarily addressed to the general run of men, while the *Guide* is addressed to the small number of people who are able to understand by themselves."²⁵ Yitzhak Baer presents us with a fourth version of Maimonides—not that of the author of the *Mishneh Torah* or "The Guide of the Perplexed"—but as a believer in the idea of Jewish nationhood that would culminate in a political restoration under a Messiah in the Land of Israel, putting an end to the suffering of Exile.

In my opinion, Baer overemphasizes a small part of Maimonides' thinking on "natural" messianism at the expense of a much larger body of literature that certainly confirms that "foreign thought" impacted significantly on the greatest Jewish thinker in history. In

Galut, Baer is attempting to induct Maimonides into the pantheon of harbingers of modern Jewish nationalism and, to a certain extent, distorts the reality of Maimonides' life and thought. He is also trying very hard to present the picture of a thinker for whom the dualism of "Judiasm versus Hellenism" is not an issue. Despite his writing of the "Guide," Maimonides—for Baer—is most definitely within the camp of the pious ones, not the assimilating freethinkers.

Baron on Maimonides: External Influences and a "Hopeless Endeavor"

Salo Wittmayer Baron, the dean of 20th century Jewish historians, does not present one in-depth chapter on Maimonides or the controversy that erupted after his death. While Baron's masterwork, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, is roughly chronological, Baron's organization is by topic. Maimonides appears in Baron's work in many different places. For example, the philosopher is presented as a polemicist against Karaism,²⁶ as a codifier,²⁷ and as an influence on early Kabbalah.²⁸ It is by now a truism that Salo Baron attempted to purge the writing of Jewish history of its "lachrymose" and negative elements, as well as present the history of the Jews as being a part of broader Christian and Muslim history. A fine example of both trends can be found in the historian's discussion of the interrelationship between the *halakhah* of Judaism and the *shariah* of the Muslims. Baron argues that "the interpenetration of Jewish and Islamic constituents largely contributed to shaping the destinies of both religious groups."²⁹ In the broader context of the Jewish situation among Christians and Muslims in the medieval world, Baron writes:

Moreover, unlike genuine pariahs, Jews could, severally and collectively, leave their group and, at their own discretion, join the dominant majority. At least until the rise of modern racial anti-Semitism nothing was formally easier for a Jew than, by an act of simple conversion, to become a respected, sometimes leading member of the Christian or Muslim community... The fact that so many Jews throughout the ages repudiated this easy escape, indeed furiously resisted all blandishments and force, testifies to their deep conviction that they would lose, rather than gain, from severing their ties with the chosen people.³⁰

In this assessment of the Jewish condition in history, Baron avoids the value judgments

made by Baer in the typologies of the “pious” Ashkenazim versus the “assimilating” Sephardim.

In his discussion of “Jewish Scholasticism” Baron demonstrates the deep ties between such philosopher as Maimonides and the Arab interpreters of Aristotle. “The weapon of Greek logic,” writes Baron, “sharpened by the dialectics of the talmudic schools in Babylon, the Christian sectarian polemics in Syria, and the juridical controversies throughout the Muslim world, was wielded [by Jews] with astounding ease to resolve the most evident contradictions.”³¹ Yet Baron seems to look upon Maimonides’ endeavor to reconcile Judaism and Aristotle as a partial failure:

This supreme intellectualism was the more necessary for Jewish thinkers, the more they strove to rationalize their adherence to Jewish law and to the peculiar system of Jewish ethics. Like many Muslim and Christian philosophers, Maimonides tried to synthesize the religious ethics of his creed with the Aristotelian system. Even more than in the realm of pure metaphysics, however, this was an almost hopeless endeavor...Maimonides, in his extreme intellectualization of the moral demands of Judaism, can do full justice neither to the rabbinic nor to Aristotelian ethics.³²

Salo Baron’s assessment of Maimonides as a thinker is an honest one that avoids the hagiography of Graetz and the attempt by Baer to reshape the medieval thinker in the contours of modern Jewish nationalism. While all the historians I have discussed are important critics of the *Wissenschaft* understanding of medieval Judaism, Baron is most successful here in taking the glow off a “golden age” that had been the pride not only of *maskilim* but also of critics of *Wissenschaft*. It is important for us to understand the limits of intellectual life, even in the fertile world of philosophy and science under the Abbasids in Baghdad and the Umayyads in Cordoba.

Graetz and the Enlightenment Rejection of Primitive Mysticism

Jewish mysticism—especially in the form of Kabbalah as formulated by Isaac the Blind in 13th century Provence and later by Nahmanides in Gerona—is not an irrational system or a fantasy. Kabbalah, as expressed in the *Zohar*, is a coherent mystical and symbolic system that dares to explore the nature of God. What the Kabbalists attempt is to find the

language to express the grandeur of the Divine and focus on how the individual Jew can experience God in his or her daily life and actually affect the nature of the most powerful force in the universe. The challenge that the Kabbalist faces is trying to use words to explain the Idea of God that is beyond words and beyond the rational. The Kabbalah's use of symbols and a highly imaginative mythology should not be dismissed as superstition but respected as a genuinely Jewish religious and theological expression.³³ Gershom Scholem was the great scholar of the 20th century who revived Kabbalah as a respectable and mainstream expression of Jewish belief, worthy of critical and academic study. Yet, we must remember, that Jewish mysticism was often treated with great disrespect in Jewish scholarly circles before the "Scholem Revolution."

The *Haskalah* and the scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* were openly hostile to Jewish mysticism. No doubt, Kabbalah's mythological and non-rational aspects embarrassed *maskilim* who were attempting to show that Judaism was a philosophical system that could be reconciled with Kant and Hegel. The discussion of the sexual aspects of the *sefirot*, for example, must have been a great source of anxiety for Jewish intellectuals in 19th century Germany eager to prove the rational basis for "ethical monotheism." Ismar Schorsch discusses another reason that deserves our attention for the *Wissenschaft* hostility to Kabbalah:

...I have long felt that the single-minded quest for the literal meaning of the text is what rendered *Wissenschaft* scholars deaf to the mystic chords of *Kabbalah*. To be sure, questions of authorship also got in the way. The traditional and often untenable claims for the antiquity of mystical texts provoked the scholarly wrath of historical positivists crusading for truth...The source of their revulsion was not a rational bent per se, because some of the bitterest critics of *Kabbalah*, like Luzzatto and Graetz, had a pronounced romantic streak, but rather an obsession with what they held to be the sanctity of the literal sense of the text.³⁴

As much as Heinrich Graetz opposed both *Wissenschaft's* neglect of the national elements of Jewish history and its apologetic that reduced Judaism to solely the realm of religion, his history of the Jews derides Kabbalah in the way of the *maskilim*. It seems that Graetz could not escape the intellectual world of 19th century Germany. It would take a German Jew living almost a century later to correct the Jewish intellectual bias

against Kabbalah.

Graetz associates the rise of Kabbalah with the death of Maimonides and the controversies over his writings that followed. According to Graetz:

Through the rupture that arose from the conflict for and against Maimuni, there insinuated itself into the general life of the Jews a false doctrine which, although new, styled itself a primitive inspiration; although un-Jewish, called itself a genuine teaching of Israel; and although springing from error, entitled itself the only truth. The rise of this secret lore, which was called *Kabbala* (tradition), coincides with the time of the Maimunistic controversy, through which it was launched into existence. Discord was the mother of this monstrosity, which has ever been the cause of schism.³⁵

In Graetz's historical scheme the death of Maimonides and the rise of Kabbalah signal a period of decline in the history of the Jewish people that would not end until the rise of Moses Mendlessohn centuries later. The Kabbalah, in Graetz's words, was able to "ensnare the intelligence and lead astray the weak."³⁶ This assessment was grossly unfair and did not even take into account that before Isaac the Blind there was more than a millennium-old tradition of Jewish mysticism dating back to the *Merkavah* and *Hekhalot* schools of the early rabbis. Furthermore, Graetz places Maimonides and mysticism in direct conflict, which is not entirely true. The Kabbalah was, in the end, not a corrupting influence on the Jewish people but a genuine expression of yearnings for cleaving to God and being redeemed (the latter especially in Lurianic Kabbalah). Graetz, the product of his time and place, cannot rise above his environment in analyzing Kabbalah. For all his opposition to *Wissenschaft*, Graetz is firmly in its camp regarding Jewish mysticism.

Dubnow: Kabbalah As a Response to Medieval Rationalism

Simon Dubnow is a bit more charitable than Graetz in his assessment of Jewish mysticism. In explaining the rise of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* in Central Europe in the 12th century, Dubnow states the mystical piety of the Kalonymides was a response to "dry Talmudic scholarship [that] could not satisfy everyone."³⁷ The exegesis of Rashi and the Tosafists was not sufficient to endow the Jew after the shock of the Crusades "with the strength to endure suffering."³⁸ For Dubnow, therefore, the mystics of Ashkenaz are not a

wholly negative phenomenon. They do play their part in sustaining the community.

Having said that, however, I will now turn to Dubnow's assessment of the *Sefer Hasidim* of Rabbi Judah He-Hasid and later editors. Here, Dubnow is fairly negative in the treatment of this important work:

The Book was very popular in the Middle Ages. It is a strange mixture of sublime religio-ethical dictums alternating with naïve superstitions of the simple folk; of sober wordly wisdom along with fairy tales about demons and witches. There is clearly manifested here the world outlook of the Jew, who is harassed not only through persecutions from outside, but through the consciousness of his own sinfulness: who sees in everything the intrigues of Satan: frightful, mysterious forces, lurking on man everywhere, ready to destroy him at every move.³⁹

Dubnow's assumption that the Kalonymides were responding to the tragedy of the Crusades, especially the First Crusaders' devastation of the Rhineland communities in 1096, is probably not correct. Historians are not sure why the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* emerged when they did—but it had likely nothing to do with the suffering and martyrdom of the Crusades.⁴⁰ Yet, Dubnow seems to be right in identifying the mystical pietists as some sort of protest movement against the formal, intellectual world of the Tosafists. Just as with the emergence of modern Hasidim in Eastern Europe in the 18th century, perhaps the medieval Hasidim were attempting to undermine rabbinic authority in these communities and attempting to instill spirituality into a cerebral framework.

As for the later emergence of Kabbalah in Provence and Christian Spain, Dubnow takes a similar approach regarding mysticism's role as a protest movement:

If the rabbinate, after a century of struggle, was victorious over the enlightenment, it was sustained in no small measure by the mystical trend that had gained momentum among the Spanish and Provencal Jews in the 13th century. The rationalism of Maimonides and his more extreme adherents could not satisfy the religious conscience of the faithful, who in that gloomy epoch sought sustenance in Judaism for the heart, not the mind. They yearned to find it in self-forgetfulness, not cognizance...Instead of looking for an explanation

for the highest dogmas and traditions of Judaism in Aristotle's natural science and metaphysics, they began to seek it in the national sources...Many espoused this "secret wisdom" as a counterbalance to Rationalism; and mysticism became the loyal companion and fellow-fighter of the rabbinical Orthodoxy.⁴¹

As with Graetz, Dubnow views the phenomenon of Kabbalah as a response to the Maimonidean controversy. I am not sure if this is correct. Kabbalah may have been, in part, a mode of thought that was meant to counter the formalism and heresy of reconciling Judaism with philosophy. But there is something else at work here—Kabbalah's success has much to do with the acceptance by the rabbis of a Jewish mystical tradition dating back many centuries. Jewish mysticism is not only a reaction to events and philosophical trends. It is a genuine expression of the Jew's yearning for and love of God. Dubnow, in my opinion, is still under the influence of *Wissenschaft* suspicion of Jewish mysticism and it colors his writing of the history of Jewish mysticism.

Baer and the Ambiguous Stance on Medieval Mysticism: Piety and Passivity

David N. Myers, in his study of "The Jerusalem School" provides an important insight into Yitzhak Baer's understanding of Jewish mysticism in history:

Affluence and intellectual cosmopolitanism, contempt for co-religionists and national betrayal thus characterized the Jewish upper classes in Baer's history. Their opposites were the uneducated lower classes, whose insularity and lack of exposure to Gentile culture preserved an unadulterated allegiance to Jewish religion...In his scheme, "the cabalists were not absorbed solely in mystical thought; they also opened a vigorous attack against the dominant courtier class and participated actively in the efforts to raise the level of religious and moral life."⁴²

Baer raises the status of Kabbalah in Christian Spain from medieval superstition to a genuine and legitimate expression of Jewish faith. Gone are the *Wissenschaft* suspicions of mysticism that infected Graetz and, to a certain extent, Dubnow. Like Dubnow, however, Baer also promotes Kabbalah as a reaction to the leadership of the Jewish

community. However, for Baer, it is not only a religious rebellion. It is a revolt against the political and economic hegemony of the court Jews of Christian Spain.

Baer reinforces the positive role of Jewish mysticism in *Galut*. Yet, we should note the ambiguity of Baer toward mysticism not mentioned by Myers. Baer writes:

Mysticism took over the task of reinforcing the structure of tradition that had been shaken by rationalism and Christian polemic...The whole wonder-world of tradition took on a new and magical light that seemed to shed a halo even over the horrors of the Galut. But the body of the nation, thus revived, now almost resembled those unearthly bodies that the dead were supposed to assume after the Last Judgment and the Resurrection...Kabbalah produced new powers that made for the conservation of the traditional patterns of Jewish existence and for their inner vindication, and thereby helped to prevent a premature collapse. Perhaps it prevented at the same time the restoration to health of other forces closer allied to life.⁴³

For Baer, Jewish mysticism is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it strengthened the resolve of Jews to believe in God and retain their faith in the harshest of conditions, whether in Spain or in the Rhineland. On the other hand, Kabbalah distanced the Jews from the realities of Exile and played a part—at least before the messianic influences of Lurianic Kabbalah and the Shabbetai Zevi affair—in creating passivity that could only end in tragedy. As a Zionist, Baer sees the aspects of Jewish nationhood in the way Kabbalah strengthened Jewish resolve to remain a nation. On the hand, in a negative way, Kabbalah distanced the Jews from the reality of returning to the Land of Israel and building up a real nation. Baer is torn in his assessment. I find it interesting that Baer's thesis is the almost perfect critique of Heinrich Graetz's acid-penned attacks on Jewish mysticism. Yitzhak Baer, in this case, is a true critic of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* by his recognition of the positive value of Kabbalah. Perhaps in this case, he was in some important way influenced by his colleague at The Hebrew University, Gershom Scholem.

Baron on Kabbalah: “Sophisticated Theosophy”

Salo Baron, in his analysis of Kabbalah, is the least polemical of all the historians discussed. This does not mean that Baron lacks an agenda—all historians are the product

of a place and time and have a particular “axe to grind.” In Baron’s case, the polemic is toward a reading of Jewish history that is not the Zionist pioneer Yudka’s lachrymose view of history in the Hazaz short story. Still, it seems to me that Baron is the least enmeshed in a political movement such as Baer’s Zionism or Dubnow’s call for Jewish autonomy in Eastern Europe.

Baron rightly claims that Kabbalah “was largely of ancient origin and was always close to Graeco-Oriental gnosticism, Neoplatonism and Islamic mysticism. It reached its highest degree of achievement, however, in medieval Europe and among the Spanish refugee communities in the East.”⁴⁴ A century after Graetz lambasted Kabbalah as medieval superstition, Baron is far more generous—and correct—in his understanding that Jewish mysticism was rarely antinomian and became the intellectual and theological property of rabbis dedicated to *Halakhah* such as Nahmanides. “The opposition of the leading rabbis to the Kabbalah,” writes Baron, “was reciprocally rather half-hearted from the outset.”⁴⁵ According to Baron, beginning with Nahmanides, “even the leading halakists became kabbalists of higher or lower order.”⁴⁶ While the kabbalists by the time of the Maimonidean controversy were certainly involved in a movement against rationalism and philosophy, the Jewish character of the Kabbalah was always “evident in its teachings.”⁴⁷

Baron has no qualms admitting that Jewish mysticism has always been influenced by non-Jewish sources and ideas, such as Neo-Platonism. This is certainly one of Baron’s strengths—in his history he documents the interaction between Jews and the larger world. At the same time, he presents Kabbalah as a unique product of Jewish minds and Jewish societies. He also makes clear that while there is superstition in Kabbalah, it is also a very sophisticated system of theosophy that is a genuine expression of Jewish faith. In addition, he points out that social conditions played an important role in the spread of Kabbalah. Aside from the Kalonymides, the Jews of Germany produced no important mystics in the medieval period (he quotes Scholem on this point).⁴⁸ In his analysis of Jewish mysticism, Baron’s thorough history and lucid explanation of the literature and symbols of Kabbalah are the furthest removed from any *Wissenschaft* influence. In a few short pages, he provides a most concise explanation of medieval Jewish mysticism.

Conclusion: Why “Yudka” is Wrong—The Continuing Meaning of Jewish History

This paper’s origins were in my quest to write an essay on Yitzhak Fritz Baer’s understanding of medieval Judaism. What has always intrigued me about Baer is the fact that he was both a Zionist and a medievalist. In her important study, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*, Yael Zerubavel explores the early Zionist understanding of history and comes to the conclusion that ‘the period of Exile...represents a “hole” between the two national periods’ of antiquity and modernity, an “acute lack of positive characteristics attributed” to Jewish life in the history of the Diaspora.⁴⁹ If Baer is a Zionist, should he not agree with Yudka in the Haim Hazaz story that the history of the Jews in Exile is not a true history? Obviously, Baer transcends the ideology of Zionism in the service of providing an accurate portrayal of Jewish history. While in *Galut*, Baer does mirror some Zionist conceptions of a medieval “dark age” for the Jews, his career and writings are proof that he understood the Middle Ages as being an important, productive, intellectually stimulating and institutionally challenging epoch for the Jewish people. Yes, he is a Zionist. But he is not the doctrinaire ideologist at the center of the Hazaz story.

As for Baer, much the same could be said of Heinrich Graetz, Simon Dubnow, Salo Baron and even the great figures of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* such as Leopold Zunz. These men, even while engaged in apologetics or critiques, never abandoned a belief in the vitality of the medieval period in Judaism that they were studying. Shlomo Avineri writes of Graetz’s groundbreaking scholarly work:

...Graetz’s main impact and legacy was his monumental *History of the Jews*. Many Jews who became deracinated from their religious and traditional background drew their historical self-awareness as Jews from Graetz’s volumes. Biblical heroes who slumbered in Jewish self-consciousness for generations were revived and underwent a far-reaching process of emancipation, secularization, and romanticization. Perhaps more than any other person Graetz contributed to the view of Jews as a nation.⁵⁰

Heinrich Graetz, although so much a part of the Romantic Movement in Europe that sparked nationalism, elevates Maimonidean rationalism at the expense of medieval mysticism. Graetz is a transition figure from Enlightenment and Haskalah—with their

anti-mystical prejudice and their trumpeting of Reason—to Zionist nationalism. He cannot escape the dismissing of Kabbalah corrected later by Gershom Scholem’s academic foray into the investigation of mysticism’s central role in all of Jewish history. Simon Dubnow, as a representative of Jewish historians from Eastern Europe and the Pale of Settlement, cannot help but to represent Maimonides as a “freethinker” who opposed the “Orthodoxy” of his time, despite the fact that the use of such terms was an anachronism. The immersion in mysticism of the Hasidim of Eastern Europe evoked mixed feelings in Dubnow—he rejects mysticism as a phenomenon of “Orthodoxy” much like the fanaticism he believed he was seeing in the shtetl but, at the same time, he could not but admire Kabbalah as a genuine expression of folk piety of the Jewish masses.

Yitzhak “Fritz” Baer’s opposition of assimilating and degrading Sephardic philosophy as against the genuine and proto-Zionist folk piety of medieval Ashkenaz remains a defect of an otherwise brilliant analysis of the Jewish condition in Exile. His conversion of Maimonides into a harbinger of Jewish nationalism is also anachronistic and hardly plausible knowing that the greatest Jewish thinker of all time did not even consider aliya to the Land of Israel as a positive commandment of God (unlike the mystic Nachmanides). As for Kabbalah, Baer is ambiguous, admiring the folk piety that Jewish mysticism evokes but inculcating passivity in Rabbi Isaac Luria’s thought that led to the debacle of failed Messiah who was Shabbetai Zevi. Baron, the least polemical of the four historians at the heart of this essay, expresses some skepticism about a non-Jewish influenced rationalism that produced a reaction of a highly sophisticated Kabbalah that was the “property” of many “mainstream” rabbis who were experts in Jewish law.

Professor Y. H. Yerushalmi fears that historicism will impact little on the Jewish community at large. The reality is that the triumph of historicism has reenergized Jews in a search for their past and the meaning of that past. History will inform Memory and continue to play an important role in strengthening Jewish identity and making known to the world that the relevance of Judaism and Jewish culture to the world did not end with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Yerushalmi’s pessimism regarding the impact of Jewish history on the masses of Jews is the pessimism of a post-modern Jewish historian. The reality for Graetz, Dubnow, Baer and Baron was a deep-seated belief that investigating Jewish history would instill in Jews a strong sense of who they were. Often, their history was written as a *Wissenschaft* influenced or Zionist polemic, but one can sense the

immediacy of their project and its Jewish and global impact. There is no reason to now abandon their optimism regarding Jewish History's impacting Jewish Memory in a constructive and meaningful way. The rupture Yersuhalmi sees in modernity is not a yawning chasm. Let us start building bridges between present and past. I hope this essay contributes in a small way to a greater understanding of the role of the modern Jewish historian and the periods in the Exile and in the land of Israel that he or she is studying.

Notes

- ¹ The passage from the short story by Hazaz is quoted in Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, p.97.
- ² Quoted by David N. Myers in *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought*, p.5.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ David N. Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History*, p.viii.
- ⁵ Yerushalmi, *op. cit.*, p.95.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p.85.
- ⁷ Eli Kavon, "Halakhic Nation," *Jerusalem Post*, June 2014.
- ⁸ Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism*, p.73.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.74.
- ¹⁰ Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews, Vol. III*, pp.447-448.
- ¹¹ Michael A. Mayer, *Ideas in Jewish History*, p.241.
- ¹² Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State*, p.34.
- ¹³ Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews: From the Later Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, Vol. III, p.96.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.103.
- ¹⁵ "Simon Dubnow," in *The Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 6, p.255.
- ¹⁶ Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past*, p.122.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.123.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.119.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.120-1.
- ²² Yitzhak Baer, *Galut*, p.38.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.38-9.
- ²⁵ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p.94.
- ²⁶ Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, Vol. II, p.350.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.339.

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- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.140.
- ²⁹ Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, Vol. I., p.335.
- ³⁰ Cited by Michael A. Meyer in *Ideas of Jewish History*, p.329.
- ³¹ Baron, Vol. I, p.358.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p.367.
- ³³ Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past*, p.163.
- ³⁴ Schorsch, *op. cit.*, pp.153-4.
- ³⁵ Graetz, Vol. III, p.547.
- ³⁶ Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, Vol. IV, p.1.
- ³⁷ Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews: From the Later Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, Vol. II, p.715.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.717.
- ⁴⁰ Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought*, pp.422-425.
- ⁴¹ Dubnow, Vol III., p.123.
- ⁴² Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past*, p.123.
- ⁴³ Baer, *op. cit.*, pp.50-1.
- ⁴⁴ Baron, Vol. II, p.135.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.138.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.139.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.143.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.148.
- ⁴⁹ Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, p.19.
- ⁵⁰ Avineri, *op. cit.*, p.35.