

# Abraham Abulafia and the Ecstatic Kabbalah

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## Summary

Abraham Abulafia, whose writings were ignored or defamed for six centuries, is now recognized as the leading exponent of the important field of ecstatic, or prophetic, Kabbalah. The ecstatic Kabbalah focuses on attaining extreme states of consciousness and even receiving new revelation from God. It contrasts with more familiar branches of Kabbalah that focus on understanding the nature of the Divine and its relationship with humanity.

Abulafia developed a system of meditation whose most conspicuous feature was the invocation of “divine names” created from endless permutations and combinations of Hebrew letters. Over the last several decades the ecstatic Kabbalah has been studied in depth by leading Jewish scholars, and writings in English are now opening this field to a general readership. This article summarizes and comments on work by Gershom Scholem, Aryeh Kaplan, and Moshe Idel and presents a concise statement of Abulafia’s life and contribution to the western esoteric tradition.

## Abulafia’s Life and Work

Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia was born in 1240 at Saragossa, Aragon, a kingdom in the north of Spain, but grew up in the neighboring kingdom of Navarre. Abraham was close to his father, a pious Jew, who taught him the *Torah* and *Talmud*. After the father died in 1258, Abulafia made a pilgrimage to Palestine, only to find the country devastated by the crusades.<sup>1</sup> He returned to Europe but was never able to settle in one location. Moving from place to place, Abulafia devoted his life to teaching—usually to small groups of students—and writing. By the time of his death, sometime after 1291, he had authored a substantial body of works, many of which survive.<sup>2</sup>

On his way back from Palestine, Abulafia spent a few years in Greece and then moved to Capua, Italy. There he studied philosophy and theoretical Kabbalah—the Kabbalah based on the ten sefirot—probably under the famous Talmudic scholar Hillel ben Samuel of Verona. Abulafia returned to Spain when he was about 30 years old. In Barcelona he studied under Baruch Togarmi, a rabbi most likely of Turkish origin who had written a commentary on the early Kabbalistic text, the *Sefer Yetzirah*. It was probably from Togarmi that Abulafia acquired a fascination for the Hebrew alphabet and language. He also learned three methods of textual analysis which would support his work. Those methods: temurah, notarikon and gematria, will be discussed later in this article. During his stay in Barcelona Abulafia began to experience visions that gave him unique insights and also convinced him that he had a special mission in life.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from Hillel ben Samuel and Baruch Togarmi, two individuals greatly influenced Abulafia. One was Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), the preeminent Jewish philosopher of his time who, like Abulafia, hailed from Spain.<sup>4</sup> The other was Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (c.1176–1238), a leading Talmudist and Kabbalist and member of the group known as the *Haside Ashkenaz* (“The Pious of German Jewry”). Maimonides influence gave Abulafia’s work a strong intellectual dimen-

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## About the Author

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sion. Abulafia's own background ensured that he was conversant with Sephardic (Spanish) Kabbalism. But Eleazar's influence helped launch him onto a path that owed more to Ashkenazic than to Sephardic tradition and which alienated Abulafia from rabbinical authorities in Spain and other parts of southern Europe.

While most Sephardic Kabbalists focused on the theoretical or theosophical aspects of the field, their Ashkenazic counterparts in Germany focused on the ecstatic and magical Kabbalah. German rabbis had devised elaborate invocations of the divine names. In most cases the intent was to achieve mystical union with God, but some individuals sought to demonstrate their spiritual attainment by performing various kinds of magic. It was believed, for example, that a very holy person could bring a clay homunculus—a *golem*—to life. Eleazar of Worms explained that, in order to be successful, incantations had to be made over every limb of the golem.<sup>5</sup> Golems could not speak; but reportedly they could perform menial tasks, occasionally serving as house servants.<sup>6</sup>

There is no evidence that Abulafia ever tried to create a golem, and in general he regarded magic as a diversion from true spiritual advancement. But the procedures he proposed for achieving ecstatic states were not unlike those used for such purposes. The Sephardic rabbis frowned upon the publication of such sensitive information. Abulafia's claim to have been given a special mission by God further alienated him from the authorities. It raised suspicions that he had messianic ambitions. Rabbi Solomon ben Adret of Barcelona, the leading Talmudic scholar of the time, emerged as Abulafia's nemesis and denounced him in a scathing diatribe. Ben Adret's standing guaranteed that other rabbis would follow suit. The study of Abulafia's writings was prohibited in Spanish Kabbalistic schools, and Abulafia eventually was expelled from Spain and Italy. For the rest of his life he searched for a haven where he could pursue his work.

Solomon ben Adret's denunciation had lasting consequences. In about 1500 CE, a certain Rabbi Judah Chayit again denounced Abulafia,

accusing him of "walking in darkness" and dismissing his work as "inventions, imaginations and falsehoods."<sup>7</sup> Chayit's contemporary, Judah Albotini, chief rabbi of Jerusalem, was not critical of Abulafia's methods, as such, but warned that people had lost the purity necessary to meditate safely on the names of God.<sup>8</sup> Because of Abulafia's unpopularity, none of his writings was published for 600 years. Even today, most of his books are available only in Hebrew, many are still in manuscript, and some are in private collections. Gershom Scholem and Aryeh Kaplan discuss his life and methods in considerable detail.<sup>9</sup> But the translation of Moshe Idel's *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* is the only book in English devoted exclusively to his work,<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Abulafia had another close shave. As Christian Kabbalists would do two centuries later,<sup>11</sup> he entertained the dream of reconciling Judaism and Christianity. In one of his visions, while still in Barcelona, Abulafia received a message that he should meet with Pope Nicholas III. He made several overtures to the pope but each time was rebuffed. Undeterred, Abulafia set out for the papal residence at Suriano, hoping to be granted an audience. Upon receiving news that Abulafia was on his way, and angered at the Jew's persistence, Nicholas ordered that Abulafia should be burned at the stake as soon as he arrived. Abulafia's life was spared only because the pope died that very day. After being imprisoned for a month by the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor, he quickly left the Papal States. Abulafia spent some time in southern Italy and then traveled to Messina, Sicily, where he lived for about ten years. Later he moved to the island of Comino in the Mediterranean. He was last heard of in Malta in 1291 and is believed to have died there in his early fifties.

## Origins of the Ecstatic Kabbalah

Some of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible may have experienced states of ecstasy, and certainly ecstasy and prophecy are closely linked. But the large-scale exploration of ecstatic states within Judaism began after the

destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. It took two forms. One was the Merkabah movement inspired by the account of Elijah's ascent to heaven:

And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.<sup>12</sup>

The word *Merkabah* was derived from the Hebrew word for "chariot." Merkabah mystics believed that they too could visit heaven, the "throne world," and experience ecstatic visions. The ascent re-

quired the seeker to pass through seven "palaces" or "chambers," which can be interpreted as levels of consciousness.<sup>13</sup> Passage from palace to palace, which became progressively more difficult, demanded knowledge of secret passwords as well as purity of heart. Merkabah mystics approached the ascent with great caution and prepared themselves by rigorous ascetic disciplines. Literature of the period describing terrible pitfalls discouraged all but the most zealous seekers from ever trying. But success offered the rich prize of unity with the Divine.

The other expression of ecstatic mysticism, closely related to Merkabah mysticism, was the early Kabbalah. An important Kabbalistic text of uncertain date was the *Sefer Yetzirah* ("Book of Formation" or "Book of Creation"). Some legends attribute it to the patriarch Abraham, while others claim that it was written by the first-century Rabbi Akiba or his near-contemporary, Elazar ben Arakh.<sup>14</sup> The *Sefer Yetzirah* discussed 32 paths to God. Ten of those "paths" corresponded to the sefiroth (singular: *sefirah*), a word with multiple con-

notations, including "number," "writing," "revelation," and "luminosity."<sup>15</sup> The remaining 22, each identified by a letter in the Hebrew alphabet, referred to the connecting links among the sefiroth.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* placed considerable emphasis on the Hebrew letters, divided as they are into three "mother" letters, seven double letters, and 12 single or "elemental" letters. The divine names, along with all other words in the language, were constructed from those letters. The most important name, YHVH (Hebrew יהוה),<sup>16</sup> was so awesome that only the high priest was permitted to speak—or perhaps

chant—it, and then only once a year in the privacy of the Holy of Holies. Otherwise it was simply alluded to as "the Name," or *Adonai* was used as a substitute.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* inspired both the theoretical Kabbalah of Sephardic Judaism and the ecstatic Kabbalah of the Ashkenazim. Some authorities interpreted the text as a description of creation. God created the universe by speaking words of enormous power, much as he had

created the *Torah* from Hebrew words. As the psalmist had written: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth."<sup>17</sup> The work's title—*Yetzirah* literally means "creation"—supported that interpretation. Others interpreted the text as a manual for the spiritual quest. Each path offered a distinctive experience or opportunity for spiritual growth. Perhaps the pathways could be compared with the ascent from one palace to the next in Merkabah mysticism. Indeed, the words "throne" and "palace" appeared in the text. Influenced by a commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah* by Eleazar of Worms, Abulafia embraced the latter interpretation. He was particularly intrigued by the passage in the *Sefer*:

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Twenty-two letters... Engrave them, carve them, weigh them, permute them, and transform them, and with them depict the soul of all that was formed and all that will be formed in the future. [The letters] are set in a circle as 231 gates. The circle rotates back and forth... Weigh them and transform them, Alef with each one, and each one with Alef; Bet with each one, and each one with Bet. They repeat in a cycle. Therefore, everything formed and everything spoken emanates in one name. Form substance out of chaos and make nonexistence into existence. Carve great pillars out of air that cannot be grasped. This is the sign: One foresees, transposes, and makes all creation and all words with one Name.<sup>18</sup>

“Engrave” and “carve” did not necessarily refer to making indentations in stone or wood; More likely they meant “to imprint firmly on the mind.” Kaplan comments on the “circle of 231 gates.” He notes that 231 is the number of combinations of two letters that can be selected from a population of 22 letters. And he provides an evocative “mandala” formed by drawing lines between pairs of the letters arranged equidistantly around the circumference of a circle.<sup>19</sup>

Abulafia concluded that the *Sefer Yetzirah* was addressed to initiates, hinting at the possibility of gaining mystical insights or ecstatic experiences by the permutation and combination of letters. His fascination for the Hebrew letters became the subject—even the obsession—of lifelong study.

## The Divine Names

### Analytical Techniques

It was mentioned earlier that Abulafia learned three methods of textual analysis that had long been employed by advanced students of Kabbalah. The first was *temurah*, in which new words were formed by rearranging, or permuting, the letters in a word or phrase. For example the letters of “Tree of Life” (ETz H-ChYYM , עץ חיים) could be rearranged to form “Life of Essence” (ChYY H-TzEM, חיי העצם).<sup>20</sup> A favorite target for permutation

was the divine Name YHVH, for which 12 distinct forms could be derived:

YHVH (יהוה)	YHHV (יההו)	YVHH (יוהה)
HVHY (הוהי)	HVYH (הויה)	HHVY (ההוי)
VHYH (והיה)	VHHY (והיה)	VYHH (ויהה)
HYHV (היהי)	HYVH (היוה)	HHYV (ההיו)

These were all regarded as “god-names.”

The second method was *notarikon* in which new words were formed from letters in successive passages from a text, usually a scriptural text. One of the best-known examples, and one that Abulafia himself put to good use, was the “seventy-two name of God” derived from *Exodus* 14:19-21. The three verses are shown below in English, Hebrew (written, as is customary, from right to left), and Roman transliteration (from left to right):

19. And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them.

ויסע מלאך האלהים ההלך לפני מחנה  
 ישראל וילך מאחריהם ויסע עמוד  
 הענן מפניהם ויעמד מאחריהם

VYSE MLAK HALHYM HHLK LPNY MChNH  
 YShRAL VYLK MACHRYHM VYSE EMVD  
 HENN MPNYHM VYEMD MACHRYHM

20. And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these: so that the one came not near the other all the night.

ויבא בין מחנה מצרים ובין מחנה  
 ישראל ויהי הענן והחשך ויאר  
 אתהלילה ולאקרב זה אלזה כלהלילה

VYBA BYN MChNH MTzRYM VBYN ChNH  
 YShRAL VYHY HENN VHChShK VYAR  
 AThHLYLH VLAQRB ZH ALZH KLHLYLH

21. And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.

ויט משה את־ידו על־הים ויולך  
 יהוה את־הים ברוח קדים עזה  
 כל־הלילה וישם את־הים לחרבה  
 ויבקען המים

VYT MShH AThYDV ELHYM VYVLK  
 YHVH AThHYM BRVCh QDYM EZH  
 KLHLYLH VYShM AThHYM LChRBH  
 VYBQEV HMYM

The first “name” VHV (והו) is formed from the first letter of verse 19 (that is, the letter to the extreme right in the Hebrew), the last letter of verse 20, and the first letter of verse 21. The second name YLY (לי) is formed from the second letter of verse 19, the next-to-last letter of verse 20, and the second letter of verse 21. The procedure is continued until 72 names are constructed.<sup>21</sup>

Choice of the particular scriptural passage was not arbitrary. Each verse conveniently contains 72 letters. And Moses reportedly invoked the 72 names to part the Red Sea, allowing the Israelites to escape from the pursuing Egyptian army.

The third method was *gematria*, which attaches significance to the numerical equivalents of the Hebrew letters.<sup>22</sup> The gematric value of words or phrases is formed by summing the values of their component letters.<sup>23</sup> For example, the divine name YHVH has a value of 26 (Y = 10, H = 5, V = 6, H = 5). Words or phrases with the same numerical value were believed to be related in some way. It will be noted that permuting the letters of a word, as in *temurah*, leaves the word’s numerical value unchanged. Thus the 12 names created from YHVH all have a value of 26.

Abulafia noted that the word for “language” (LShVN, לשון) had the same value, 386, as “combination” (TzYRVP, צירוף), reinforcing his belief in the power of these analytical techniques.<sup>24</sup> Abulafia sometimes used *noms de plume*, such as Raziel (RZYAL, רזיאל) and Zekariyahu (ZKRYHV, זכריהו), all of which had the same numerical value as his first name, Abraham (ABRHM, אברהם = 248).

## Abulafia’s Applications

Abulafia made occasional use of *notarikon* and *gematria*, but he found *temurah* to be the most useful technique. Just as an unlimited number of melodies could be created from a finite musical scale, endless series of words could be created from a finite alphabet. Indeed, references to music were more than simply metaphorical.<sup>25</sup> Abulafia encouraged seekers to chant the sacred names, claiming that the practice dated back to the temple practices of biblical times.

In addition to combining and permuting the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, all of which are consonants, Abulafia experimented with vowels, which, from the early Middle Ages onward, had been incorporated into Hebrew texts by means of “vowel points.”<sup>26</sup> The main purpose of vowel points was to assist—and possibly to help standardize—pronunciation, which had always been problematic in classical Hebrew.

In some cases Abulafia used what he called the “natural vowel,” the first vowel appearing in the expanded name of the Hebrew letter. For example, the natural vowel associated with *lamed* (לָ) was “a,” shown by the *qamets* point (ָ) under the ל. In other cases he considered all five vowels, the equivalents of our “o,” “a,” “e,” “i” and “u.”<sup>27</sup> Since the five vowels alone could be permuted in 120 different ways,<sup>28</sup> the total number of permutations of a “word” consisting of both vowels and consonants could be quite large. Abulafia was not concerned whether the composite word had linguistic meaning. He believed that each Hebrew letter was a distinct divine entity, and combinations of letters assembled with sacred intent automatically acquired spiritual value.

Abulafia may have experimented with random permutations of letters, but more generally he favored highly structured permutations. In fact deviations were considered so serious that a seeker who made a mistake was instructed to begin a whole section over again. Noting that the *Sefer Yetzirah* correlated letters with parts of the body, Abulafia warned darkly:

[O]ne has to be most careful not to move a consonant or vowel from its position, for if

he errs in reading the letter commanding a certain [bodily] member, that member may be torn away and may change its position or alter its nature immediately and may be transformed into a different shape so that in consequence the person may become a cripple.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly the letters had power on physical as well as higher levels.

Two of Abulafia's structured meditation procedures call for special note. The first, described in a text entitled *Light of the Intellect*, focused on the four letters of the divine Name, YHVH. Each of these letters was combined and permuted in a prescribed order with each letter of the alphabet and also with the five vowels. Table 1 shows the sequence for the letter *alef* (A), as provided by Kaplan.<sup>30</sup> The sequence begins: AoYo, AoYa, AoYe, AoYi, AoYu; AaYo, AaYa... AaYu; and so forth.<sup>31</sup> After all combinations are exhausted, producing a 5 x 5 matrix,<sup>32</sup> the order of the consonants is reversed: YoAo, YoAa, etc., etc., producing a second 5 x 5 matrix. Two hundred "words" are formed for *alef* alone, or 4,400 for the complete alphabet.

One may ask why Abulafia felt comfortable pronouncing the sacred Name, complete with vowels, when Jews had avoided doing so, at least since the Exile. Abulafia's answer was that a new millennium had now dawned; the Jewish year 5000 began in 1240 CE—which just happened to be the year of his own birth!

The second procedure, described in *Life of the Future World*, focused on the 72 Names of God. Fortunately, from the standpoint of economy, he did not combine those names with all five vowels. Instead, he confined himself to the natural vowel associated with each consonant. Thus the first name is expanded from VHV to VaHeVa, the second from YLY to YoLaYo, and so forth.

In the final list provided by Kaplan (Table 2), "el" or "yah," alternative root words for "God," are appended to the names.<sup>33</sup> Kaplan does not disclose the origin of that convention, but the same appendices appear in an annotated translation of *Occult Philosophy* by the 16th-century occultist Cornelius Agrippa.<sup>34</sup>

## States of Ecstasy

In the methods he developed for attaining ecstatic states, Abulafia emphasized not only the words to be used but also the preparations for meditation and the procedures to be followed during the meditation session. Recitation was to be combined with controlled breathing and gestures, particularly head movements.

Whereas some other authorities insisted that ecstatic meditation only be attempted in the presence of an experienced teacher, Abulafia recommended that the seeker retire to a private location where he would not be disturbed. After bathing, the seeker was told:

Drape yourself in your prayer shawl and put *Tefillin* on your head and your arms. This will increase your respect and your thrill before the Shekinah that visits you at this time. Wear clean clothes. If possible, all your clothes should be white. This is of great help for the concentration on awe and love. If this is done at night, light many candles so your eyes are illuminated. Then take in your hand a tablet and ink. They serve you as you will observe that you are going to serve God with joy and good heart.<sup>35</sup>

The seeker then began to recite the sacred names:

Begin then to interchange a number of letters. You can do this to a few or to many. Transpose them and interchange them quickly, until your heart is warmed as a result of these permutations, their movements and what follows. As a result of these permutations, your heart will become extremely hot. Through the permutations, you will gain new knowledge that you would never have learned by human traditions or intellectual analysis. When you experience it, then you are prepared to receive an Influx of Divine Light. The Influx will be conferred on you. It will come to you as many words, one after another. Prepare then your inner thoughts to reveal the Name and the highest Angels. Think of them as being in your heart, like human beings sitting or standing around you. You

are among them as an apostle to whom the kingdom and its Servants want to entrust a mission.<sup>36</sup>

Instructions regarding head movements and breathing could be quite specific; for example:

When you come to the *cholem* [a vowel point corresponding to the sound “o”] with the letters *Yod* and *Qof*, turn your head to the right. Do not incline your head right or left, or down or up. Keep your head straight, as if you were facing a person of the same height as yourself. Then, while you make the sound of the letter, start moving your head upward toward to the sky. Close your eyes, open your mouth, and let the words come forth. Clear your throat so that the sound is clear and does not disturb your pronunciation. While you exhale, continue to raise the head so that you end the exhalation and the movement of the head at the same time.<sup>37</sup>

Initially, the seeker wrote the names on his pad. But, as the ecstatic state heightened, the pen and tablet might fall from his hands and he would recite or chant the names. Or the seeker might simply allow them to flow through his mind. In due course, he would experience profound physiological and psychological effects:

The blood within you will begin to vibrate because of the living permutations that loosen it. Your entire body will then begin to tremble, and all your limbs will be seized with shuddering. You will experience the terror of God, and will be enveloped with fear of Him.<sup>38</sup>

Elsewhere Abulafia explained:

Your whole body starts to shake until you think you are going to die. This is because your soul separates from your body as a result of the Great Joy that you experience when you perceive and acknowledge these things. In your mind, you choose death rather than life. Because death only involves the body and as a result, the soul lives forever when it is resurrected. You know when you've reached a level where you get the Divine Influx.<sup>39</sup>

The experience of uncontrollable convulsions was viewed as an essential demonstration that the seeker had attained the desired state of consciousness. If the physical symptoms of the ecstatic experience call to mind epileptic seizures, we must remember that, from earliest times, epilepsy was regarded as a sign of exceptional mystical or prophetic potential. Parallels can also be drawn with the *kriyas* exhibited by certain yogis when the kundalini rises up the spine.

When the convulsions ended, the seeker was left in a state of inexorable peace:

You will then feel as if an additional spirit is within you, arousing you and strengthening you, passing through your entire body and giving you pleasure. It will seem as [if] you have been anointed with perfumed oil, from head to foot.<sup>40</sup>

The seeker might gain a profound sense of enlightenment. One of Abulafia's students reported experiencing an all-pervading light:

I noticed that the candle was about to go out [and] rose to put it right... Then I saw that the light continued.... I noticed that it issued from myself... I walked to and fro all through the house and, behold, the light is with me; I lay on a couch and covered myself up, and behold, the light is with me all the while.<sup>41</sup>

The seeker might gain insights of revelation like that acquired by the prophets of biblical times. A common experience was for the seeker to see a figure in human form facing him and speaking words of wisdom. The figure might be recognized as a revered teacher or a *maggid*, an angelic messenger. Alternatively, the seeker might recognize the figure as himself. In the words of another of Abulafia's disciples:

When an individual completely enters the mystery of prophecy, he... becomes totally unaware of his own essence, as it were concealed from him. Then he sees his own image standing before him, speaking to him, and telling him of the future. It is regarding this mystery that our sages say, “Great is the power of the prophets, since they liken a form to its Creator.”<sup>42</sup>



Seeing oneself in a vision has come to be interpreted as a confrontation with one's higher self, the Holy Guardian Angel.<sup>43</sup>

## Reflections

Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum*<sup>44</sup> makes numerous references to Abraham Abulafia. Its leading characters invent fictitious occult societies by permuting names in a personal computer fondly called "Abu." In Myla Goldberg's novel *Bee Season*<sup>45</sup>—made into a movie starring Richard Gere—Saul Naumann, a professor of Judaic studies, teaches his daughter Eliza Abulafia's methods, propelling her to national fame in spelling bees. At the end of the story Eliza achieves the ecstatic state, complete with convulsions and subsequent "enlightenment," which had eluded Saul throughout his life. Why does Abulafia's work hold such fascination in the popular imagination, as well as among advanced students of the western esoteric tradition?

One reason may be a widespread fascination with perceived patterns in letters, numbers, and other entities, even—or perhaps especially—in random or chaotic patterns. From time immemorial, people gazed at flights of birds or at the stars and saw significance in what lay before them. Mathematicians frequently report similar fascination when they contemplate patterns in topology, algebra and number theory, though rarely do they experience convulsions. Another reason is an interest in exotic spiritual practices of the past, practices that might have relevance to our own times.

The early Kabbalah, represented by the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Bahir*, and other texts, could have

developed in any of several different ways. As it turned out, the theoretical Kabbalah soon became dominant, eclipsing the ecstatic Kabbalah of Abulafia and his disciples. Significantly, the enormously influential *Sefer ha-Zohar*, which was compiled at roughly the same time Abulafia wrote his books, does not discuss meditation.<sup>46</sup> It was on the *Zohar* that the Safed scholars of the 17th century built their vast edifice of Kabbalistic theosophy,

Perhaps Abulafia's work was considered too dangerous. Perhaps his own personality and prophetic ambitions soured contemporary rabbinic opinion to the point where his approach

to Kabbalah was doomed. Perhaps his ecstatic mysticism was linked too closely with the more sensational and bizarre aspects of Ashkenazic Kabbalah, even though Abulafia tried to distance himself from them. In any event, the growth of Hassidism in the 17th and 18th centuries channeled the ecstatic Kabbalistic impulse of northern Europe into popular pietism.

Modern interest in the ecstatic Kabbalah is based in large measure on the juxtaposition of intellectual and mystical

elements that Abulafia managed to capture. The intellectual dimension of his work, which may have been stimulated by respect for the philosophy of Maimonides, is evident in Abulafia's use of the term "Active Intellect" for God.<sup>47</sup> It is still more evident in the structure and precision of his meditation procedures and in his interpretations of the experiences that resulted from them.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, Abulafia's work makes no reference whatever to the sefirot, which feature so prominently in other branches of Kabbalah, and there is virtually no appeal to symbolism.<sup>49</sup>

Interest in Abulafia's work is also motivated by a desire to see how the broad and popular field

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of Kabbalah might have evolved under different circumstances, along with curiosity as to its continued relevance.

Ecstatic religious rites with some similarity to the methods of Abulafia date back to pre-history; and certainly they were not confined to Judaism.<sup>50</sup> Abulafia did not even invent the ecstatic Kabbalah. Nor was he the first or last to explore the mysticism of letters and numbers.<sup>51</sup> However he created a distinctive system of meditation that was impressive in its scope and detail, and the ecstatic Kabbalah cannot be understood without reference to him. His “divine names” resembled mantras, but a conspicuous difference between his methods and conventional mantra meditation is the avoidance of repetition. Even during hours of meditation, every spoken, chanted or mentalized word was unique—like a melody that never repeats itself. Abulafia’s system can also be compared with the practice of glossolalia, or “speaking in tongues,” in charismatic Christianity. But glossolalia is essentially unscripted, whereas the structured permutation of letters was central to Abulafia’s ecstatic Kabbalah.

Any type of meditation can produce altered states of consciousness. Ecstatic meditation is distinguished by the intensity of the experience and its effects on the physical, emotional and mental vehicles. What special character did Abulafia’s system have that could produce such intensity? How essential to the process was the permutation of letters in divine names? How reliable were the procedures in producing the desired psychological states?

Short of running extensive trials, we can only offer tentative answers. We can surmise that the controlled breathing may have induced hyperventilation, and the repetitive gestures may also have played a role. Recitation of long lists of words, with heavy emphasis on following the precise sequence, was a powerful exercise in concentration. Perhaps the divine significance attached to the words had a bearing on the outcome.

With regard to reliability, Abulafia and his students testified that the procedures could work, but we do not know how often they tried

and failed. Nor do we know whether the procedures could be applied successfully in a modern environment.

Today, relatively few people seek to attain ecstatic states, and they have options ranging from the use of hallucinogenic drugs,<sup>52</sup> to various types of yoga, to the Hesychastic practices of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, to the ecstatic experiences of Pentecostal Christianity. Even fewer people would probably be willing to commit to the kind of discipline Abulafia demanded of his followers, even though his methods were less extreme in their asceticism than were other forms of mysticism.<sup>53</sup>

Whether seekers could gain insights of any validity or would experience spiritual growth from ecstatic meditation depends heavily on the purity of their lives and the intent with which they approach the work. We have seen that even in the 16th century concerns were expressed that humankind might have lost the necessary purity to meditate safely on the names of God. Whether that remains true is a question each of us can ponder, recognizing both the potential and the responsibilities involved in pursuing such a path.

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<sup>1</sup> Saladin conquered Jerusalem in 1187, and the last crusader stronghold of Acre fell to Muslim forces in 1291.

<sup>2</sup> Reportedly Abulafia wrote 26 Kabbalistic and 22 prophetic works. See: Gershom Scholem. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Schocken Books, 1946/1995, p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> The auspicious date of his birth will be mentioned later.

<sup>4</sup> The Christian scholastic Thomas Aquinas reportedly held Maimonides in high regard.

<sup>5</sup> Moshe Idel. *Kabbalah*. Yale University Press, 1988, p. 100.

<sup>6</sup> The folklore of golems goes back at least as far as the *Talmud*. However, the most famous golem story involved the 16th-century Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel of Prague. He is said to have created a golem to defend the Jewish community against anti-Semitic attacks. Unfortunately, the golem grew in power until it went on violent rampages around the city and eventually turned on its creator.

- <sup>7</sup> Aryeh Kaplan. *Meditation and Kabbalah*. Weiser, 1982, p. 60. See also: Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 124.
- <sup>8</sup> Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, p. 114.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57-114. Also: Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 118-155.
- <sup>10</sup> Moshe Idel. *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*. (Transl: J. Chipman.) State University of New York Press, 1988.
- <sup>11</sup> John F. Nash. "Origins of the Christian Kabbalah." *Esoteric Quarterly*, Spring 2008, pp. 43-58.
- <sup>12</sup> 2 Kings 2:11 (All biblical quotations in this article are taken from the King James Version.)
- <sup>13</sup> The notion of ascending through seven levels of reality was not unique to Merkabah mysticism. In particular it can be found in Mithraism and in certain Gnostic sects. See: Adela Yarbro Collins. *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*. Brill, 1996, p. 49.
- <sup>14</sup> Most modern academic historians continue to insist that it was a medieval composition, but in recent years attitudes have softened to some extent.
- <sup>15</sup> The roots of *Sefirah* may include: *sefer* ("text"), *sefar* ("number"), *sippur* ("telling"), and *sappir* ("sapphire," "brilliance"). The first three are mentioned in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, 1:1.
- <sup>16</sup> Since biblical Hebrew contained no vowels, the correct pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton (literally "name of four letters") is not known. In modern English texts it is written as *Yahweh*. The Hebrew alphabet is shown in Appendix 1, along with transliteration rules adopted in this article.
- <sup>17</sup> *Psalms* 33:6.
- <sup>18</sup> *Sefer Yetzirah* (short version), 2:2-6. (Transl: A. Kaplan.) Weiser, 1997, pp. 262-263.
- <sup>19</sup> Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, p. 111.
- <sup>20</sup> See the discussion in: J.H. Laenen. *Jewish Mysticism: An Introduction*. Westminster Knox Press, 2001, p. 123. Laenen erroneously spells both *Chayyim* and *Chayyei* with the letter *he* (ה), instead of *cheth* (ח), but the equivalence still holds.
- <sup>21</sup> For this purpose, distinctions between the regular and the final versions of Hebrew letters are normally ignored.
- <sup>22</sup> Greek and English forms of gematria have also been explored extensively.
- <sup>23</sup> Note that the Hebrew alphabet contains no vowels, so only consonants have numerical equivalents.
- <sup>24</sup> Laenen, *Jewish Mysticism*, p. 123. Combinations and permutations are closely related mathematical operations. The former, typically drawn from a larger population, do not attach significance to the order of sets of objects whereas permutations do.
- <sup>25</sup> Edel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 53-71.
- <sup>26</sup> The Masoretic system of vowel points was developed by Jewish scholars in Tiberias, Galilee, in the 9th and 10th centuries CE. Most prominent among those scholars was Aaron ben Moses ben Asher (died c.960).
- <sup>27</sup> At that time the precise number and order of vowels varied from one author to another. Other medieval writers considered six vowels. It may also be noted that ancient Egyptians used chants involving seven vowels "to give strong feeling of piety and humility." See the website: [www.coptic.org/music/copmusic.htm](http://www.coptic.org/music/copmusic.htm). (Accessed 29 July 2008.) See also the discussion in: Clement Salaman et al. *The Way of Hermes*. Inner Traditions, 2000, p. 84.
- <sup>28</sup> The number of permutation of *n* distinct objects is equal to "factorial *n*," customarily written *n!*
- <sup>29</sup> Quoted in: Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 138.
- <sup>30</sup> Kaplan, *Meditation and the Kabbalah*, pp. 90-91; *Sefer Yetzirah*, pp. 128-129.
- <sup>31</sup> For clarity's sake, vowels are shown in lower case and consonants as capitals (or diphthongs like Tz with a leading capital).
- <sup>32</sup> If the vowels were regarded as subscripts, the matrix would be defined by  $\{A_m Y_n; m, n = o, a, e, i, u\}$ .
- <sup>33</sup> *El* (אֱל) appears in the Hebrew Bible by itself and also in combinations such as *El Shaddai*. *Yah* (יָה) is the root of *Yahweh*. Our word "Hallelujah" is formed from *halal* ("praise") and *yah* ("God").
- <sup>34</sup> Cornelius Agrippa. *Occult Philosophy*, book III, ch. XXV, 1533. Donald Tyson (ed.). *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. Llewellyn, 1993, p. 540.
- <sup>35</sup> Abraham Abulafia. *Life of the World to Come*, §§10-18. Author's translation from a French version. See also Kaplan's translation of this text in his *Meditation and Kabbalah*, p. 96-106 *Tefillin*, usually inscribed with scriptural verses, are worn on the head or wrapped around the arm. Each branch of Judaism has rules governing who can wear tefillin and at what times.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, §§19-29.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, §§53-59.

- <sup>38</sup> Abraham Abulafia. *Treasury of the Hidden Eden*. (Transl: A. Kaplan.) Quoted in *Meditation and Kabbalah*, p. 85).
- <sup>39</sup> Abraham Abulafia. *Life of the World to Come*, §§38-42.
- <sup>40</sup> Abulafia. *Treasury of the Hidden Eden*. (Transl: A. Kaplan.) Quoted in his *Meditation and Kabbalah*, p. 85).
- <sup>41</sup> Anonymous. *Gates of Righteousness*. (Transl: M. Idel.) Quoted in his *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 79.
- <sup>42</sup> Anonymous. *The Rose of Mysteries*. (Transl: A. Kaplan.) Quoted in his *Meditation and the Kabbalah*, p. 109. See also: Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 139-140.
- <sup>43</sup> The Holy Guardian Angel plays a role in the western esoteric tradition similar to that of the Solar Angel of eastern theosophy. A procedure for invoking the Angel was developed by the early 15th-century Ashkenazic Rabbi Abraham of Worms. See: Georg Dehn (ed.). *The Book of Abramelin*. Ibis Press, 2006.
- <sup>44</sup> Umberto Eco. *Foucault's Pendulum*. Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1989.
- <sup>45</sup> Myla Goldberg. *Bee Season*. Anchor, 2001. *Bee Season* also deals with the shattering of the vessels, a Kabbalistic concept that gained momentum among the Safed scholars of the early 17th century.
- <sup>46</sup> Kaplan, *Meditation and the Kabbalah*, p. 160.
- <sup>47</sup> Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 13, 83, 89-90, and elsewhere.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.
- <sup>49</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 201-202.
- <sup>50</sup> We could also cite the Mithraic rite in which a candidate for initiation practiced controlled breathing while reciting a long sequence of meaningless words. See: Marvin W. Meyer. *The Ancient Mysteries*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987, pp. 214-215.
- <sup>51</sup> Moses Cordovero, the Safed scholar better known for his work on the theoretical Kabbalah, developed a system of meditation on the sefiroth, in which the seeker invoked the divine Name along with as many as nine distinct vowels. See: Kaplan, *Meditation and the Kabbalah*, pp. 179-186. In recent times, a vast literature has emerged to explore number symbolism. See also Note 27.
- <sup>52</sup> Use of hallucinogens is illegal in most jurisdictions, but clinical research on its therapeutic—and even its recreational—use has resumed after a generation in which such research was “off limits.” One study was conducted in 2007, (interestingly) at the prestigious Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City.
- <sup>53</sup> Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 143-144.

**Table 1. Permutations of the Divine Name with *Alef* (A) and Five Vowels**

<i>Yod</i> (Y)	AoYo	AoYa	AoYe	AoYi	AoYu
	AaYo	AaYa	AaYe	AaYi	AaYu
	AeYo	AeYa	AeYe	AeYi	AeYu
	AiYo	AiYa	AiYe	AiYi	AiYu
	AuYo	AuYa	AuYe	AuYi	AuYu
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	YoAo	YoAa	YoAe	YoAi	YoAu
	YaAo	YaAa	YaAe	YaAi	YaAu
	YeAo	YeAa	YeAe	YeAi	YeAu
	YiAo	YiAa	YiAe	YiAi	YiAu
	YuAo	YuAa	YuAe	YuAi	YuAu
<i>He</i> (H)	AoHo	AoHa	AoHe	AoHi	AoHu
	AaHo	AaHa	AaHe	...	
	AeHo	...			
	...				
-----					
	HoAo	HoAa	HoAe	HoAi	HoAu
	HaAo	HaAa	HaAe	...	
	HeAo	...			
	...				
<i>Vav</i> (V)	AoVo	AoVa	AoVe	AoVi	AoVu
	AaVo	AaVa	AaVe	...	
	AeVo	...			
-----					
	VoAo	VoAa	VoAe	VoAi	VoAu
	VaAo	VaAa	VaAe	...	
	VeAo	...			
	...				
<i>He</i> (H)	AoHo	AoHa	AoHe	AoHi	AoHu
	AaHo	AaHa	AaHe	...	
	AeHo	...			
	...				
-----					
	HoAo	HoAa	HoAe	HoAi	HoAu
	HaAo	HaAa	HaAe	...	
	HeAo	...			
	...				

**Table 2. The Seventy-Two Names of God  
with the Natural Vowels  
(after Kaplan)**

1	VaHeVa [yah]	37	AaNuYo [el]
2	YoLaYo [el]	38	CheEaMe [yah]
3	SaYoTe [el]	39	ReHeEa [el]
4	EaLaMe [yah]	40	YoYoTza [el]
5	MeHeShi [yah]	41	HeHeHe [el]
6	LaLaHe [el]	42	MeYoKa [el]
7	AaKaHe [yah]	43	VaVaLa [yah]
8	KaHeTha [el]	44	YoLaHe [yah]
9	HeTzaYo [el]	45	SaAaLa [yah]
10	AaLaDa [yah]	46	EaReYo [el]
11	LaAaVa [yah]	47	EaShiLa [yah]
12	HeHeEa [yah]	48	MeYoHe [el]
13	YoTzaLa [el]	49	VaHeVa [el]
14	MeBeHe [el]	50	DaNuYo [el]
15	HeReYo [el]	51	HeCheShi [yah]
16	HeQoMe [yah]	52	EaMeMe [yah]
17	LaAaVa [yah]	53	NuNuAa [el]
18	KaLaYo [el]	54	NuYoTha [el]
19	LaVaVa [yah]	55	MeBeHe [yah]
20	PeHeLa [yah]	56	PeVaYo [el]
21	NuLaKa [el]	57	NuMeMe [yah]
22	YoYoYo [el]	58	YoYoLa [el]
23	MeLaHe [el]	59	HeReChe [el]
24	CheHeVa [yah]	60	MeTzaRe [el]
25	NuThaHe [yah]	61	VaMeBe [el]
26	HeAaAa [yah]	62	YoHeHe [el]
27	YoReTha [el]	63	EaNuVa [el]
28	ShiAaHe [yah]	64	MeCheYo [el]
29	ReYoYo [el]	65	DaMeBe [yah]
30	AaVaMe [el]	66	MeNuQo [el]
31	LaKaBe [el]	67	AaYoEa [el]
32	VaShiRe [yah]	68	CheBeVa [yah]
33	YoCheVa [yah]	69	ReAaHe [el]
34	LaHeChe [yah]	70	YoBeMe [yah]
35	KaVaKo [yah]	71	HeYoYo [el]
36	MeNuDa [el]	72	MeVaMe [yah]

## Appendix 1. Hebrew Alphabet (including rules for transliteration)

Letter*	Type	English Equivalent	Transliteration	Numerical Value	
alef	א	mother	a	A	1
beth	ב	double	b or v	B	2
gimel	ג	double	g	G	3
daleth	ד	double	d	D	4
he	ה	single	h	H	5
vav	ו	single	v or w	V	6
zayin	ז	single	z	Z	7
cheth	ח	single	ch (guttural)	Ch	8
teth	ט	single	t	T	9
yod	י	single	i or y	Y	10
kaf	כ	double	k	K	20
lamed	ל	single	l	L	30
mem	מ	mother	m	M	40
nun	נ	single	n	N	50
samech	ס	single	s	S	60
ayin	ע	single	a or e	E	70
pe	פ	double	f, ph or p	P	80
tzaddi	צ	single	ts or tz	Tz	90
qof	ק	single	q or k	Q	100
resh	ר	double	r	R	200
shin	ש	mother	sh	Sh	300
tav	ת	double	t or th	Th	400

\* Certain letters take alternative forms when they appear at the end (i.e., the far left) of a word.