

SOLITARY MEDITATION IN JEWISH AND ISLAMIC MYSTICISM IN THE LIGHT OF A RECENT ARCHEOLOGICAL DISCOVERY

PAUL B. FENTON
University of Strasbourg

It is an oddity that hitherto, students of comparative mysticism have paid little attention to the possibility of Islamic influence on the development of Qabbalistic doctrine and practice. This neglect is all the more surprising when it is borne in mind that, following its eastward migration from its Spanish cradle and up until the culmination of the Shabbataian movement, Jewish mysticism developed predominantly in the Islamic Orient. The research devoted to this period by the founder of the modern critical study of Qabbalah, Gershom Scholem, is disconcertingly parsimonious in its treatment of Islamic phenomena. Scholem himself rightly observes regarding the Qabbalists of the East:

A great upsurge of mystical religion occurred in Palestine during the 16th century, accompanied by parallel developments in Egypt and Syria. It would therefore be logical to look for documents of Kabbalistic thought coming from these parts which might enlighten us about a possible impact of Sufi ideas and concepts on some Kabbalists. Jews living in the Orient could scarcely escape acquaintance with the existence of the many orders of dervishes in those countries and their practices and rituals, many of which were common knowledge.

However, he concludes:

the absence of such traces is all the more remarkable in the 16th century when the creative heart of Kabbalism had been transplanted to the Orient itself. One wonders why the Kabbalists of Safad, Jerusalem, Damascus or Cairo who lived all their lives in immediate proximity of great centres of Sufic circles and masters, never took any notice of them in their writings.¹

As we hope to show, this observation henceforth calls for revision, especially in the light of the recent archeological discovery to be discussed in the present study. In our humble opinion, short of postulating direct Sufi influence on the writings and ritual of the Eastern Qabbalists, of which there is a real possibility, the Sufi environment of these Qabbalists,

¹ G. Scholem, 'Note on a Kabbalistical Treatise on Contemplation', in *Mélanges Henry Corbin*, Teheran, 1978, p. 666. Curiously, after having examined the Vatican manuscript Heb. 456 of the *Megillat 'emet we-'emúnáh*, which forms the actual subject of Scholem's article, we can say quite categorically that it has not the slightest connection with Sufism.

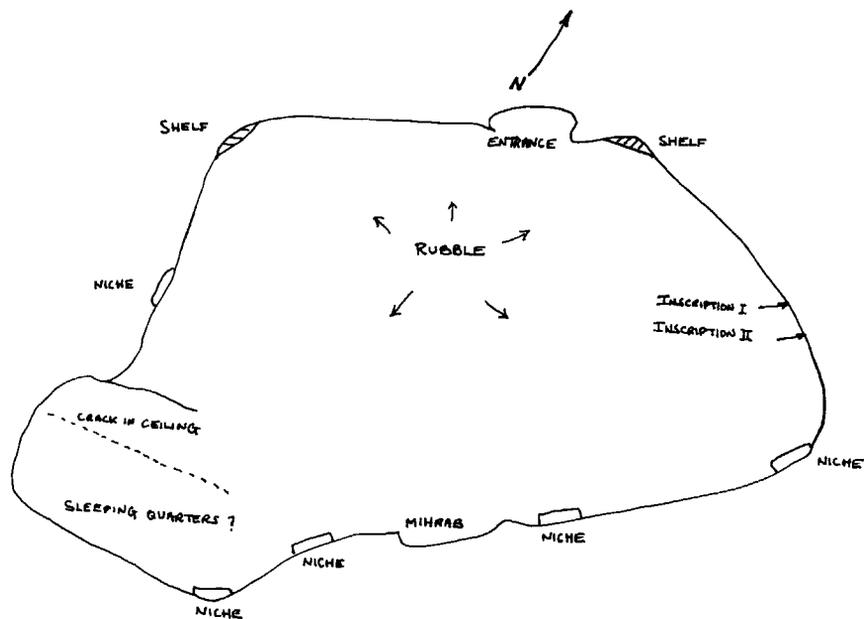
certainly facilitated the assimilation of Sufi-like rituals, such as those practised by the members of the school of prophetic Qabbalah. We propose to illustrate this supposition by examining a specific theme—the Qabbalistic practice of *hitbodedût*, or “solitary devotion”, and in particular, its attendant techniques and associated rituals.

Hitbodedût

Seclusion for purposes of meditation is a universal, religious phenomenon shared by all spiritualities. Attributed, par excellence, to Moses and Elijah in Jewish tradition, it has been practiced in ancient Judaism at least since the Essenians and Therapeuts, who were no doubt the monastic models of the Christian anachorettes. However, it is impossible to establish that either this practice or its accompanying techniques were transmitted uninterrupted within the Jewish tradition. On the contrary, the emphasis placed on the communal character of Jewish prayer during the consolidation of the liturgy in talmudic times, probably discouraged individualistic forms of worship.

Symptomatically, the adepts of the Jewish pietist movement in XIIIth century Egypt, imbued with a Maimonidean-type, intellectualist mysticism, drew their inspiration from Muslim models in their reintroduction of the practice of spiritual retreat, which became a fundamental ritual in their system.² This telling piece of evidence testifies quite clearly to the fact that even in the heartland of monachism, the Jewish practice of reclusion had fallen into desuetude. Consequently, rather than connect the reemergence amongst the XIIIth century Eastern Qabbalists with a subterranean Jewish tradition, which supposedly survived through unaccountable channels, for one thousand four hundred years since the time of the Therapeuts, it would be more realistic to study this phenomenon against its immediate spiritual backdrop, i.e. Sufism. With the XIIIth century Qabbalists of the Holy Land, and later the mystics of Safed, *hitbodedût* became one of the most conspicuous Jewish mystical rituals as a means to the contingent state of *debêqût*, or “conjunctio mystica”. Its practice, in different forms, was later perpetuated by the

² See our *Deux Traités de mystique juive*, Lagrasse, 1987, pp. 58-66 and our ‘La “hitbodedut” chez les premiers qabbalistes en orient et chez les soufis’, in R. Goetschel (ed.), *Prière, mystique et judaïsme*, Paris, 1987, pp. 133-157. A particular meditational technique practiced during this retreat has been studied in our articles ‘“La Tête entre les genoux”’: contribution à l’étude d’une posture méditative dans la mystique juive et islamique’, *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses*, LXXII (1992), pp. 413-426, and ‘The Head between the Knees’, *Daat XXXII* (1994), pp. 19-29. See also M. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Albany, 1988, ‘Hitbodedut as Concentration in Ecstatic Kabbalah’, pp. 103-169.



Plan of Mameluk Zāwiyya in Safed

mekhavvenim brotherhood of the Bet El Yeshivah, and ultimately by the Central European, especially the Brazlawer, *ḥasidim*.³

Definition

The term *hitbodedūt*, as also its Arabic equivalent *khalwa*, may signify according to context either spiritual retreat to a secluded place, most often a cave or a cell, or, by extension, the meditational technique practiced during such a retreat, or else the psychological state resulting therefrom, i.e. oblivion to the sensual world.

In Muslim mysticism, reclusion is presented as a spiritual exercise going back to the origins of Islam, whose archetype was the Prophet

³ For this doctrine in Hasidism, which exceeds the framework of the present study, see the articles of G. Weiss, 'The Kavvanoth of Prayer in Early Hasidism', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, IX (1958), pp. 163-192 (= *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, Oxford, 1985, pp. 95-125) and R. Shatz, 'Contemplative Prayer in Hasidism', in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion presented to G. Scholem*, Jerusalem, 1967 and idem, *Quietistic Elements in 18th Century Hasidic Thought*, Jerusalem, 1968. See also *infra*, note 25. It is interesting to note that for the disciples of Naḥman of Braslaw, the all-important practice of *hitbodedūt* took on an 'Ishmaelite' character. Indeed, as a form of supererogatory prayer (*baqqāshāh*), *hitbodedūt* is considered as a reparation of the *qelippah* of Ishma'el. See *Ya'alat Hen*, (Liqqutey Moharan with the commentary *ʾŌr zôrêah*), Jerusalem 1954, p. 7b.

Muhammad's sojourn in the cave of Hira. Apparently, the ritualistic notion of *khalwa* originally percolated into Sufi usage from the Christian monastic tradition, being derived from the cognate Syriac *hulla*, designating the monk's cell.

The philosophical content of the term also has a history in the Arabic Neoplatonic tradition associated in turn with the mystical connotation of the verb *khala* occurring in the pivotal passage of the *Theology of Aristotle*: "Oftimes being alone (*khalawtu*) with my soul", quoted by numerous Muslim and Jewish mystics throughout the ages.⁴

In the Hebrew tradition, the verb *hitbôded* is first encountered in Midrashic literature, where it has the neutral meaning of "to segregate". Interestingly, it also appears with what seems to be a ritual sense in the mystical *Heykhâlôt* literature, but the curtness of the context does not allow a proper appreciation of its connotation.⁵ However, the term occurs for the first time with the technical meaning of intellectual meditation in philosophical texts translated or inspired from the Arabic, such as the writings of Abraham Ibn Ezra, Maimonides' *Mishneh tôrah*, Abraham Ibn Hasday's translation of al-Ghazali's *Me'ôzney sêdeq*, and the anonymous Hebrew translation of Ibn Bajja's *Hanhagat ha-mitbôded*.⁶

It was notable through the intermediary of Al-Ĥarizi's translation of the above-mentioned passage of the *Theology of Aristotle* that the term penetrated into the writings of one of the first Spanish Qabbalists, Moses de León (circa 1240-1305).⁷ However, in the foregoing writings the term

⁴ This passage, ultimately based on Plotinus, *Enneads* IV:8:1, is to be found in *Die sogenannte Theologie des Aristoteles*, ed. Dieterici, Leipzig, 1882, p. 8. For its impact on Arabic and Jewish literature, see our article 'The Arabic and Hebrew Versions of the *Theology of Aristotle*' in J. Krayer, W. Ryan and C. Schmitt (eds.), *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages*, London (Warburg Institute), 1986, pp. 241-264.

⁵ *Midrash 'Eykhâh Rabbati*, Introduction: 20, ed. Warsaw, 1867, fol. 3d. P. Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, Tübingen, 1984, p. 165: 'isolate himself in his house, fasting the whole day.'

⁶ Bahya Ibn Paquda, *Hôbôt ha-lebâbôt*, translation Ibn Tibbon, I:VIII. Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Exodus*, XX:8 (perhaps the meaning here is simply 'detached from active life'), ib. on Michah II:1 ('to be alone'), ib. *Yesôd Môrâ'* VIII, Pseudo-Ibn Ezra, *Sefer ha-ʿasamim*, London 1901, p. 13 (as in several philosophical texts, the term here designates 'state of neutralisation of the physical senses'). Maimonides, *Hilkhôl Yesôdey ha-Tôrâh* VII:4, Maimonides, *Môreh Nebûkchim*, III:51, translation Ibn Tibbon. Al-Gazzali, *Me'ôzney Sêdeq*, translation Abraham Ibn Hasday, ed. J. Goldenthal, Leipzig-Paris, 1839, p. 48-49 (describes the phenomenon among the Sufis).

⁷ Moses de León, *Mishkan ha-ʿêdût*, MS Berlin fol. 32a was influenced by al-Ĥarizi's translation of Ibn Ezra's *ʿArugat ha-bosem*, where the Plotinus passage is quoted (Cf. P. Fenton, 'Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera and the *Theology of Aristotle*', *Daat* XXIX (1992), p. 28, n. 8). The quotation in the *Mishkan ha-ʿêdût* is still familiar to Hayyim Vital, who quotes it in the fourth chapter of his *Sha'arey qedûshshâh*, in *Ketâvim Ĥadashim me-Rabbenu Hayyim Vital*, Jerusalem, 1988, p. 20.

is used descriptively to depict philosophical and intellectual meditation as practiced by the Ancients of the past.

R. Abraham Abû l-^çAfiya

It is, however, only at the end of the XIIIth century that *hitbôdedût* first denotes an actual form of individualistic worship, notably in connection with the doctrine of prophetic Qabbalah taught by the Catalonian mystic, R. Abraham Abû l-^çAfiya (1240-circa 1291). In contrast to the theosophical speculations and the preoccupation with the theurgical implications of the Divine precepts, characteristic of mainstream Spanish Qabbalah, Abû l-^çAfiya's teachings were concerned with mystical revelations and the spiritual techniques conducive to an ecstatic experience of union with the Divine. The mystical discipline propounded by this school constitutes a major departure from Qabbalistic norms and assumes certain aspects, both in its means and its ends, more akin to Sufism than to Qabbalah. One such aspect was the devotional practice of *hitbôdedût*, which also represents a departure from conventional forms of Jewish worship. Apparently, Abû l-^çAfiya was the first to have actualized this ritual, by giving it a practical content involving, as in the case of the Sufi *khalwa*, the meditation of Divine Names, called *sod ha-hazkârâh*, an appellation again evoking the specific term *dhikr* used by the Sufis to denote solitary meditation.⁸

In addition to the mental exercises of articulation of the Divine names (*hazkârâh*), letter combination (*sêrûf*) and permutation (*temûrâh*), *hitbôdedût* included a number of practical techniques such as respiratory control and head movements. Of singular significance is the fact that these techniques were to be carried out in a special place reserved for this purpose—a sort of cell. This is how Abû l-^çAfiya describes this method in his *hayyey ha-^çôlâm ha-bâ*:

Prepare yourself by uniting your heart and unifying your body. Then choose a special place where nobody in the world can hear your voice. Retire to the most complete isolation and attain the state of solitude (*hitbôdedêd*). Sit yourself in a particular place, in a room or a cell and disclose your secret

⁸ See M. Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, Albany, 1987 and P. Tocci, 'A Sufi-Type recitative and respiratory technique in Abu l-^çAfiya's 'Or ha-sekhel', *Annals of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures of Cà Foscari*, XIV (1975), pp. 221-236. The verb *hizkir*, attested since Talmudic times with the meaning of 'mentioning in prayer', is often employed in connection with 'the Name of God'. However, here it has a technical meaning not dissimilar to the term *dhikr* as used amongst the Sufis. It would be interesting to speculate whether it already had this meaning in mediaeval Hebrew poetry in Islamic lands. See on this subject A. Parnas 'Evocation of God in the poetry of Solomon Ibn Gabirol', *Knesset* VII, (1942), pp. 280-293 (in Hebrew).

to none. If possible practice this method in the daytime in a house, even if it be for an instant. However the most propitious moment is at night. Take heed that all vanities of this world be emptied from your mind at the time you prepare yourself to converse with your Creator, if you desire that He manifest His greatness to you. Wrap yourself in your prayer-shawl and adorn your head and arms with the phylacteries, so that you may be smitten with reverence in the presence of the *shekhinâh* (Divine Presence), which henceforth encompasses you. Take care that your garments be clean and clad yourself in white if possible, for such preliminaries heighten concentration in love and fear.⁹

Now some of these recommendations are encountered in a text by a Muslim contemporary of Abû l-ʿAfîya, Ibn ʿAṭā Allah al-Iskandarî, a XIIIth century Sufî shaykh of the Shadhilite order and one of the first Sufi masters to whom a systematic *dhikr* manual is ascribed. In his *Miftâh al-falâh* (Key of worship), the *shaykh* describes the place of *khalwa* in the following terms:

When you desire to enter into the state of solitude (*ʿuzla*), accomplish your ablutions, then draw near to God. Here is a description of the place of retreat (*khalwa*). Its height should be that of yours, its length that of your prostrated body, its width that of your posture. It must not have a crack which allows daylight to enter and it should be out of reach of men's voices (...) One of the conditions is that no one should know that you practice solitude. However if that is impossible, then (inform) only your relatives thereof but they should not be aware of the nature of your practice and the object of your quest.¹⁰

Al-Iskandari specifies that the only person with whom the Sufi can communicate is his *shaykh*. In order to provide him with advice concerning the results of his meditations, the *shaykh* remains in constant contact with the recluse throughout the period of his retreat, lasting up to forty days.

A further passage from Abu l'-Afîya's text describes the technical modalities involved in *hazkârâh*:

⁹ Text first published by A. Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabbala*, Leipzig 1854, pp. 44-45. Cf. also G. Scholem, *ha-Qabbâlâh shel sefer ha-Temûnâh we-shel Abrâhâm Abû l-ʿAfîya*, Jerusalem, 1976, pp. 210-211 and ib., *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1961, pp. 136-137. A XIVth century oriental Qabbalist, Isaiah b. Joseph of Tabriz, already knows the connection between seclusion in a state of purity in a special place and prophecy. See his *Hayey ha-nefesh* ed. S. Musayyof, Jerusalem 1892, *ʿÔsar ha-hôkkmâh*, fol. 61b: 'Know that whenever the prophet desires to prophesy, he must beforehand seek isolation (*yitbôdêd*) for a limited period. Then he undergoes ritual immersion which behoves him, settling thereafter in a special room. Thereupon, he summons musicians who play before him with instruments, while chanting spiritual hymns'.

¹⁰ Ibn ʿAṭā Allah al-Iskandari, *Miftâh al-falâh, Bab fi dhikr al-khalwa*, (on the margin of Shaʿaranî, *Latâʿif al-minan*, Cairo (n.d.), vol. II, p. 147. See also M.-A. Danner, *The Remembrance of God in Sufism: A Translation of Ibn ʿAta Allah's Miftâh al-Falâh*, Ph. D., Indiana University, 1988.

Prepare yourself as indicated and concentrate your heart, your soul and your intellectual thoughts. In the beginning, each consonant of the Divine Name must be articulated with complete devotion. Each vowel must be pronounced with a uniform and melodious sound according to the vocalisation appropriate to each consonant (...) to the rhythm of eighteen breaths, until you come to the end of the first series, unless your breath forces you to interrupt the exercise. Indeed, according to our tradition (*qabbâlâh*), inspiration pours forth upon the Perfect Man (*ha-'adam ha-shalem*)¹¹ the moment he arrives at the conclusion of the first series (...) Thereupon, he will visualize the form of a young boy or a *shaykh*, for this Arabic word means 'old man', who is none other than Metatron, who is also a young man whose name is Enoch or Hermes.¹²

A second text describes certain physical movements accompanying *hazkârâh*:

And when you begin to pronounce the consonant, begin to move your thought and your head. Thought, by representing it (in the mind) for it is internal, whereas the head is moved physically, for it is external. Move your head in such a way that it describes the vowel which vocalizes the articulated consonant. Here is the detail of the movements. Know that the vowel *hôlem* is (...) the first. When you pronounce it accompanied by a *yûd* or a *qôf*, at first neither move your head to the right nor the left, neither upwards nor downwards, but maintain it in a horizontal plane like the equilibrium of the scale, as if you were conversing face to face with a man of the same height. Next, when prolonging the vowel of the consonant, direct your head upwards towards the sky. Then close your eyes, open your mouth so that your words become illuminated and clear your throat of all saliva so that the pronunciation is not obstructed. The upward movement will follow the length of your respiration so that the head's movement terminates with the end of your breath. If a moment of sound remains after the end of the expiration, do not lower your head before having completed the formula. Between lines it is permitted to tarry, in order to prepare by breathing one period equal to three expirations of the exercise (...).

As for the vowel *qâmes*, when you pronounce it together with a consonant, firstly direct your head towards your left shoulder and pronounce the consonant with a melodious sound. Then turn your head from left to right on

¹¹ This term, while recalling the celebrated Sufi notion of *al-insân al-kâmil*, (cf. R.A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, Cambridge, 1921), is probably intended in the Maimonidean sense of an individual having reached physical and spiritual fulfillment. Cf. *Guide*, I, 34.

¹² The mention of the young boy is reminiscent of a *hadith* often quoted by the Sufis 'I saw my Lord in the form of a beardless youth'. Alternatively, the vision of the *shaykh* may be an allusion to the Sufi ritual of *tawajjuh* or conjuring up a mental image of one's spiritual mentor prior to meditation. See our article 'Sufi Influences on the Qabbalah in Safed', *Mahanayyim* VI (1993), pp. 175-179 (in Heb.). The reference to Hermes, the Islamic equivalent of the Biblical Enoch, also identified in Muslim mysticism with the Perfect Nature, confirms the Islamic background to this passage. See *infra* note 29, and H. Corbin, *L'Homme et son Ange*, Paris, 1983, pp. 51-71.



1. Entrance to the cell (foreground) overlooking the Safed hills.

the same plane and in a straight line in imitation of the graphic form of the vowel. Then orientate your head to face eastwards. Next incline the head a little so that this downward movement corresponds to the point which is below the line of the *qâmes*. All this movement must be carried out in a single breath, as I have already explained.¹³

Scholars having studied these texts have underlined the similarity between the method here described and certain breathing exercises practised by the Indian Yogis as well as the Byzantine monks known as Hesychia, whom Abû l-ʿAfiya may have encountered during his wanderings in Greece.¹⁴ While these exercises do have Hindu roots, they may have been adopted by Asiatic Sufis who propagated them to other regions of the Islamic world. Thus in XIIIth century Egypt they were already an integral part of the *dhikr* ritual, in particular that of the Shadhilites. Moreover, Abû l-ʿAfiya's use of the Arabic term *shaykh* in describing the visionary experience is indicative rather of an Islamic background.¹⁵

Indeed, bearing in mind technical variations, the method described by Abû l-ʿAfiya is, broadly speaking, almost identical to that taught by the Sufis, as can be seen from a comparison with the following text derived from the *as-Salsabil al-muʿîn fi t-tarâʿiq al-arbaʿîn* ("The Flowing Streams concerning the Forty Orders"). In this work, written in 1843 but based on ancient sources, the author, Muḥammad b. ʿAli as-Sanûsî, himself the founder of a mystical brotherhood, describes the *dhikr* techniques of the forty principal Sufi orders, with the purpose of showing that they were all included in his personal method. Because of its rich detail, we have chosen his description of the Junaydiyya, a relatively late order, which, nonetheless, through a desire for authenticity rather than historicity, claims a pedigree going back to Junayd, a Sufi master of IXth century Bagdad. The respiratory techniques and the attendant head-movements practised during *dhikr* are outlined:

The (Junaydiyya) order is based on eight principles:

- 1) assiduous ablutions, for they contain a resplendent light
- 2) continuous solitude (*khalwa*): The individual enters thereunto as he

¹³ G. Scholem, *Kitbey Yad ba-Qabbâlâh*, Jerusalem, 1930, p. 27, and id., *Abraham Abû l'Afiya*, p. 212. Idel, *op. cit.*, ch. I, 5. Concerning the expression "your words become illuminated" cf. the description of the Qadiri *dhikr* given by Sanûsî (*infra*, note 16), p. 59: "He should place his hands on his knees, spreading his fingers in the form of the word Allah. He begins with the (initial letter) *lam*, sustaining it until his heart is opened and the Divine lights revealed." Cf. J. Spencer Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, London 1971, p. 202. It can be added that Abû l-ʿAfiya too prescribes in his *Sefer ha-hesheq* the special disposition of the fingers during *hazkârâh*, which resembles that of the priests at the time of the sacerdotal blessing. Cf. Idel, *op. cit.*, ch. I, 3c.

¹⁴ Scholem, *Abu l-ʿAfiya*, pp. 169-170, idem, *Major Trends*, p. 154. Idel, *op. cit.*, ch. I.3.

¹⁵ Spencer Trimmingham, *loc. cit.*, pp. 197-8.

would a mosque, invoking the name of God and imploring assistance from the spirits of his *shaykhs*. He should consider the cell like a tomb, entering therein on his way to God, abandoning in his heart all but Him. He should sit cross-legged, as he does while pronouncing the confession of faith, or enfolding his (knees). His mind should be at ease unhampered by the disturbance of bodily discomfort. He should face the direction of Mekkah, neither leaning against the wall nor being propped up. He should lower his head while glorifying God, closing his eyes and meditating the Holy *hadith*: "I am the Companion of him who invokes Me". He should conjure up a mental image of his *shaykh* before his eyes and concentrate on the meaning of the invocation *dhikr*, according to his spiritual standing (*maqâm*), requesting indulgence on account of his state. Then his mind should follow his tongue articulating with intent the word "Allah". He should bend his head in the direction of his navel, the source of breath, and dispel therefrom the words "no god", prolonging these words in direction of his right shoulder, meditating in his mind on the Divine greatness and majesty in contrast to the littleness of his person. He should then incline his head to the left, forcefully expediting the words "except Allah" in the direction of his physical kernel (heart), meditating in his mind that there is no being, nor aim, nor object of devotion besides Him.

3) continuous invocation (*dhikr*)

4) continuous fasting

5) continuous silence, except invocation

6) continuous shunning of thoughts, be they good or bad (...)

7) continuous bond of the mind with his *shaykh*

8) unchallenging the (decree) of God or his *shaykh*.¹⁶

The comparison of these two texts, reveals obvious technical similarities: closing of the eyes, breath-control and calculated movements of the head. It shall be later observed that Muslim *dhikr* also has recourse to the visualisation of the letters composing the Divine Name. Though there is no concordance, it is nonetheless instructive to compare in this respect Abû l-^çAfiya's mental representation of the vowels with the meditations on the graphic form of the component Arabic letters of the Divine Name developed, for example, in the second chapter of ^çAbd al-Karîm al-Jilî's *al-Insân al-kâmil*.¹⁷ It is worth emphasizing the abstract character of graphic forms used in both cases as meditational supports, since plastic representation is prohibited in worship by both Jewish and Muslim tradition. However, other modalities characteristic of Abû l-^çAfiya's method, such as automatic writing and letter combination (*şerûf*), are absent from Sufî manuals, though similar phenomena are to

¹⁶ Muḥammad b. ʿAlī as-Sanūsī al-Idrisī, *as-Salsabil al-muʿīn fī t-tarâʿiq al-arbaʿin*, Cairo (n.d.), pp. 56-57. See also pp. 84-85 on the Shadhilite *dhikr*, which involves similar respiratory exercises.

¹⁷ Al-Jilî, *al-insân al-kâmil*, Cairo, 1970, pp. 28-31. E.g.: "the circular form of the head of the *hâ*² is symbolic of the rotation of the two levels of Divine and creatural existence around man."

be found in the Arabic magical tradition.¹⁸ These are, it would seem, specifically Jewish meditative processes, relics, perhaps, of ancient incantatory rites inherited from the Geʿonic period, which are not attested in Islamic sources as far as is known.

On the other hand, the question of how Abû l-ʿAfiya gained knowledge of Sufi practices, remains something of a mystery. Though he did indeed travel to the East in 1260, where he may have observed Sufi practices, this journey took place prior to his mystical period. It has been suggested that he was initiated into these methods during his stay in Barcelona by his mentor, Barûkh Togarmi (the Asiatic), whose patronym indicates his oriental origin. Alternatively, he may have been introduced to these practices by the group of Qabbalists with whom he long associated in Sicily, a well-known cultural cross-road in this period. Among their number were R. Solomon b. Moses ha-Kôhên the Galilean, who returned to the Holy Land after 1287, and a certain Nathan ben Saʿadya Ḥaddad, who perhaps also hailed from the East.¹⁹ These scholars may have been responsible for propagating prophetic Qabbalah in Erez-Israel.

The Qabbalists of the Holy Land

Indeed, the remnants of the compositions of the first Qabbalists from the Holy Land who wrote at the close of the XIIIth century, pursue some of Abû l-ʿAfiya's teachings, though they betray too the traces of other influences. In determining the provenance of the latter, it must be borne in mind that shortly after the Mameluke conquest, Palestine played host to a certain number of centres of Sufi activity and it is highly feasible that Jews had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with Sufi practices. That this was indeed the case is borne out by the testimony of the anonymous author of *Shaʿarey sodeq*, written in the Holy Land (Hebron?) in 1290 or 1295. Indeed, in this interesting work, close in spirit to Abû l-ʿAfiya's school, the author gives an eye-witness account of the ecstatic performance of a Sufi *dhikr*, relating it to the Qabbalistic method of *hit-bôdedût* in the spirit of Abû l-ʿAfiya's system, which he goes on to evoke:

This method consists, first of all, in the cleansing of the body itself, for the physical is symbolic of the spiritual. Next in the order of ascent is the cleansing of your bodily disposition and your spiritual propensities (...) On this account seclusion in a separate house is prescribed, and if this be a house

¹⁸ See G. Vajda, 'Sur quelques éléments juifs et pseudo-juifs dans l'encyclopédie magique de Buni' in *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume*, I, Budapest, 1948, pp. 387-392.

¹⁹ See M. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Albany, 1988, 'Ecstatic Kabbalah and the Land of Israel', pp. 91-101.



2. Entrance to the cell.

where no (external) noise can be heard, the better. At the beginning it is advisable to decorate the house with fresh herbs in order to cheer the vegetable soul which a man possesses alongside his animal soul. Next, one should have recourse to musical instruments or to the chanting of liturgical verse through love for the Torah in order to arouse the animal souls which all men possess alongside the rational soul. Then one can resort to the visualisation of the intelligibles and contemplation. Next one will proceed with the pronunciation of consonants which (in permuted form) are unintelligible in order to detach the soul and purify it of all forms formerly within it.²⁰

The recurrence of similar stipulations in the Sufi and Qabbalistic texts can be noticed: physical purification as a preliminary to the retreat—ritual immersion in Judaism, ritual ablution in Islam—insistence on the cleanliness of apparel, absence of light in the retreat, which should be isolated and remote from external disturbances.

During *khalwa*, often compared to the sojourn of the body in the tomb, the meditational techniques may be accompanied in Sufi practice by expedients such as narcotics, colours, perfumes, charms, incantations, music and even drugs.²¹

²⁰ Pseudo-Shem Tob de León, *Sha'arey Sedeq*, ed. Y. Parush, Jerusalem, 1989, pp. 26-27. This passage was first discussed by G. Scholem, *Kiryath Sefer* I, (1923), p. 138 and id., *Major Trends*, pp. 153-155.

²¹ Spencer Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*, p. 199.

Isaac b. Samuel of Akko

Elements from Abû l-ʿAfiya's doctrine are to be found in the writings of another Qabbalist from the Holy Land, Isaac ben Samuel (circa 1270-1350), whose wanderings brought him from Akko to Spain and even Avila. The latter's writings speculate on how to obtain the gift of prophecy through solitude. Amongst the conditions Isaac prescribes for the latter, *hitbodedût* is again associated with letter permutation:

Let us practise the conditions of solitary meditation by sitting in a clean cell, surrounded by books, myrtle branches, ink, pen, paper and a board in order to occupy ourselves with the permutation of letters and to attract through their intermediary, the Divine Intelligence.²²

However, Isaac introduces novel elements into his mystical system which are absent both from Abû l-ʿAfiya's writings and the author of *Shaʿarey sodeq*. We refer to the sentiment of equanimity—indifference in the presence of blame or praise—as a preliminary to *hitbodedût*. In his *Meʿirat ʿaynayim*, he enumerates three stages which are conducive to the Holy Spirit:

He who attains the mystery of cleaving (*debêqût*), will attain that of equanimity (*hishtawwût*), and if he receives this mystery then he will also know the mystery of solitude (*hitbodedût*) and will receive the Holy Spirit and thereafter prophecy.²³

The notion of equanimity was possibly absorbed by Isaac from Sufi sources, with which he may have familiarized himself while still a resident of the East. For instance, equanimity is also envisaged as a prerequisite to solitary meditation by the great Sufi theologian, al-Ghazâlî (ob.1111) in his *Ihyâʾ ʿulûm ad-dîn*. It is noteworthy that al-Ghazâlî refers to the cell as a *zâwiyya*:

The path to illumination consists initially of detaching one's self from wordly fetters and emptying the heart of such things (...) to such an extent that the worshipper's mind becomes indifferent (*yastawi*—from the cognate Semitic root of *hishtawwût*) to the existence and non-existence of things. Then he will isolate himself in a cell (*zâwiyya*) (al-Ghazâlî specifies elsewhere that this must be a dark place) in order to meditate (...) He will endeavour to fix his thought on nought else but the word *Allah*. Then, after having settled in his retreat, he will continuously repeat the word *Allah*, concentrating to such a degree that he ceases to pronounce the word which will henceforth flow upon his tongue (...) Then the word's form, its letters and its writing will be absorbed into his mind, only the meaning remaining (...) If his will and intention be pure and he continue to persevere, without allowing

²² E. Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbalah Literature*, 1976, p. 243.

²³ Isaac of Akko, *Meʿirat ʿaynayim* ed. H. Erlanger, Jerusalem 1975, pp. 281-2 (pericope *ʿeqeb*). Cf. also Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 96-97.



3. Interior of cell with view of inscriptions (far left) and niches.

himself to be disturbed by physical desires and material thoughts, the Divine light will eventually illuminate his heart. At first it will be transient, like an effulgence, but later it will tarry.²⁴

According to Isaac, *hibôdedût* is above all a mental state in which the adept empties his mind of all else but God,²⁵ whereas cleaving with God is obtained by the constant visualisation of the letters of the Divine Name “as if they were written before him in Hebrew script, each letter appearing to him in gigantic dimensions.”²⁶

This specific manner in which the letters were visualized is also attested in Sufi sources. Here is the testimony of a modern mystic, the shaykh al-ʿAlawi, who describes the contemplative method traditionally followed in his brotherhood:

The method (*sîr*, lit. initiatory Way) practised most often by the (Master) and to which we also resorted, consisted in having the disciple practise the

²⁴ Al-Ghazâlî, *Ihyâʾ ʿulûm ad-dîn*, (Cairo n.d.) III:1, p. 19 (*kitâb sharḥ ajâʾib al-qalb*).

²⁵ Isaac of Akko, *loc. cit.* Cf. also E. Gottlieb, *op. cit.*, p. 239. In fact this definition is that employed by the Sufis, cf. al-Ghazâlî, *Ihya*, II:6, p. 227: ‘internal solitude consists in evacuating from the heart and spirit all else but Allah and filling them with Him’.

²⁶ Ed. cit., pp. 208-9 (pericope *ʿeqeb*), Isaac’s formulation of this doctrine and its *locus probans* (Ps. XVI:8) are certainly the source of Ḥayyim Vital, *Shaʿarey qedûshshâh*, III:7, ed. Aleppo 1866, fol. 46b, in turn the probable source of the XVIIIth century *Hasidim*. Cf. Israel Baʿal Shem Töb, *Šawwaʾôt ha-Ribash*, New York, 1981, p. 6. On letter visualisation as a meditational technique, see Idel, *op. cit.*, ch. III, 6.

invocation (*dhikr*) of the Unique Name (*al-ism al-mufrad*, i.e. Allah) while concentrating on the letters until they became engraved in his imagination. He then recommended to the disciple to extend them and enlarge them until they filled the whole horizon. The invocation proceeded thus until the letters were transformed into light.²⁷

At one point, Isaac mentions that the Divine Intelligence inhabits the human soul²⁸ and that at certain ecstatic moments “through the intense absorption of the soul into the Divine spirituality, after having separated from all physical objects, the individual’s body (*haykhal*) will visually perceive his very own form standing before him, talking to him just as a man converses with his neighbour. At this point he will become oblivious of his own self, as if his body were no longer of this world”.²⁹

Isaac’s source is possibly Islamic for this motif is also known in the writings of the Sufis with whom he may have had direct contact when he lived in Akko, prior to 1291. Alternatively, some of Isaac’s Sufi traits may be due to the contacts he possibly had with the Jewish Sufi pietists through one of their foremost representatives, R. David ben Abraham Maimonides (1222-1292), who too lived for many years in Akko before returning to Cairo in 1289.³⁰

Significantly, a later author of the Safed school, Eliyahu de Vidas, refers in several instances in his *Re’shit hōkhmah* to Isaac’s theories on *hit-bōdedūt*. One particular reference, lacking in Isaac’s preserved writings, takes the form of a typical Sufi tale. The latter, whose literary source remains to be located, recounts the spiritual transformation of a commoner who, enamoured of a princess, becomes a saint through his infatuation for a woman who becomes a model for Divine love.³¹ It is

²⁷ ‘Udda b. Tunis, *Kitāb ar-rawḍa as-saniyya*, Mostaghanem, 1354H, p. 14. On letters of light, see *supra*, note 13.

²⁸ Gottlieb, p. 245.

²⁹ *Oṣar ḥayyim*, Ms Moscow Ginsburg 775, fol. 163a and Gottlieb, *op. cit.*, p. 247. On the vision of the ‘sister soul’, see G. Scholem, ‘Eine kabbalistische Deutung der Prophetie als Selbstbegegnung’, *MGWJ*, LXXIV (1930), pp. 285-290 and Idel, *op. cit.*, ch. III, 5. The Arabic background of this text is further indicated by the term *haykhal* (lit. ‘sanctuary’), often employed by Isaac in his *Oṣar ḥayyim* to designate the body. This term is evidently modeled on the Arabic *haykhal* used with the same significance by Arab Neoplatonic and Sufi texts. On the vision of Perfect Nature, see *supra* note 12. Isaiah b. Yosef of Tabriz also speaks of the prophet’s vision of a human form, *Sefer gan ‘eden*, Jerusalem, 1892, fol. 30a: “Since the imaginative faculty is a physical one, (the prophet’s) vision will necessarily be tainted with corporeity which is the reason why inspiration appears as an individual standing opposite him, speaking to him and informing him.”

³⁰ See Fenton, *Deux traités*, p. 101.

³¹ Eliyahu de Vidas *Re’shit hōkhmah*, II:3-4 (ed Venise 1613, fols. 82b and 93a, ed. Munkac 1895, fols. 59a and 63a), who derives this story from a collection of ‘tales of the ascetics’ composed by Isaac. Another tale, about a hermit, quoted from ‘a manuscript of stories of the pious’ is mentioned in chapter III:3 (ed. Munkac fol. 133a-b). On woman

possible that Isaac, who had a good knowledge of Arabic,³² dealt more fully in one of his works, which has now been lost, with the question of *hitbôdedût* in the spirit of the Sufis. It is interesting to observe that in his *Me'irat 'aynayim*, Isaac claims that with the renewal of divine inspiration at the end of days, anachoretēs will increase and consequently spread abroad.³³ This is perhaps one of the reasons for the interest later Qabbalists, craving for redemption, had for the doctrine of *hitbôdedût*, for which Isaac of Akko was one of their principal sources.

Judah al-Buṭṭînî

Isaac's influence is to be felt a century and half later in the work of Judah al-Buṭṭînî, a Spanish exile who settled in Jerusalem. In his *Sullam ha-ʿaliyâh* ("Ladder of Ascension"), written in 1501, this author also emphasizes the importance of equanimity. However, in contrast to Isaac, "cleaving" constitutes the final stage of al-Buṭṭînî's spiritual itinerary, whereas the preliminary stage, according to him, is equanimity. Nonetheless, the anecdote which he quotes in order to illustrate the significance of equanimity was probably borrowed from Isaac. As we have shown elsewhere,³⁴ this anecdote, variations of which are subsequently quoted by other Qabbalists, ultimately originates in al-Makki's *Qût al-qulûb*, a celebrated Sufi manual.

Al-Buṭṭînî's tenth chapter, which betrays the influence of Abû l-ʿAfiya and the author of *Sha'arey sêdeq*, deals with solitary meditation and the means of obtaining Divine inspiration. After having enumerated the preliminary physical and moral purification conducive to the sentiment of equanimity, he describes the solitary retreat, in which are encountered the Sufi elements already discussed:

The adept will choose a room in which to isolate himself, preferably one whence his voice will not be heard from outside. Firstly, he should adorn it with his most beautiful objects, plants and odiferous herbs. It is suitable to furnish it also with shrubs and plush plants, so that during his retreat, his vegetable soul may enjoy the pleasures together with his vital soul. It is also good to play an instrument if he possess one and is capable.³⁵ Other-

as a model of the Divine Love, a common Sufi concept, see *Deux Traités*, p. 104, note 218. See also Idel, *Studies*, pp. 115-116.

³² On Isaac's knowledge of Arabic see our edition of Judah ben Nissim Ibn Malka, *Judaeo-Arabic Commentary on the Pirqey Rabbi Eli'ezer with A Hebrew Translation and Supercommentary by Isaac b. Samuel of Acco*, Jerusalem, 1991. Furthermore, in his *ʿÔsar ḥayyim*, Isaac makes numerous references to Arabic and Islam, with which we intend to deal elsewhere.

³³ *Me'irat 'aynayim*, ed. cit., pp. 307-8 (pericope *niṣṣabim*.)

³⁴ P. Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, London, 1981, p. 63.

³⁵ Abraham Abû l-ʿAfiya makes no specific mention of the use of musical instruments during the retreat. However, the important role of music in the *dhikr* ceremony, which

wise let him intone liturgical verses and chant Torah study in order to stir the vital soul so that it associates at the same time with the rational and intellectual soul. There is no objection to practicing this ritual during daytime, on condition that the room be a little dark. However the most propitious moment is at night-time. He should be surrounded by numerous candles³⁶ and be decked with beautiful, clean clothes. They should be preferably white in colour, for the latter encourages the meditation of the fear and love of God. After having accomplished all these preparations and the moment he is ready to commune with his Creator, he must empty his mind of all thought of the vanity of this world. Thereafter he must enshroud himself in his prayer-shawl and, if possible place upon his arm and forehead the phylacteries, in order that he be smitten with trepidation in the presence of the *shekhina* which now encompasses him.³⁷

The Qabbalistic School of Safed

After a hiatus of two generations, a renewed interest in *hitbodedût* reemerged in the writings of the XVIth century Safed school Qabbalists, which, partially reviving the doctrines of Abû l-^çAfiya and Isaac of Akko, also betray the adjunction of external influences. Here, again, the possibility of Sufi influence is not to be excluded. As we shall see presently, Safed continued to be a centre of Sufi activity during this period, and it is therefore plausible that this renewal of interest in seclusion was also motivated by the observation of similar practices in the surrounding Muslim milieu. Incidentally, this is not the only instance of possible Sufi influence on Qabbalistic ritual in Safed, and we hope to deal elsewhere with other aspects of such influence on phenomena such as visitation of saints' tombs, wanderings (*gerushin*), as well as the spiritual concerts, known as *baqqashôt*.³⁸

Among the authors having perpetuated the doctrines of Abû l-^çAfiya, was R. Isaac Luria's teacher, Moses Cordovero (1522-1570), who, though having used them in his chapter on invocation, does not however expressly mention Abû l-^çAfiya:

often preludes *khalwa*, is well known in Sufism. Al-Buṭṭīnī, already writing in the Holy Land, may have been influenced by Sufi practices. See our article 'A Jewish Sufi on the Influence of Music', *YUVAL* IV (1982), pp. 124-130. See also Idel, *op. cit.*, ch. II, 'Music and Prophetical Kabbalah'.

³⁶ See *infra*, note 60.

³⁷ Yehudah al-Buṭṭīnī, *Sullam ha-^çaliyah*, ed. Y. Parush, Jerusalem, 1989, pp. 72-73. Extracts from the manuscript were first published by G. Scholem, *Kitbey yad ba-Qabbâlâh*, Jerusalem, 1930, p. 227. See also id., *KS*, XXII (1945), pp. 161-171. An English translation of these extracts is to be found in D. Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism—a Source Reader*, vol. II, New York, 1982, pp. 37-79, in part. p. 72.

³⁸ See our studies: 'Les baqqashôt d'orient et d'occident', *REJ* cxxxiv (1975), pp. 101-121 and 'Influences sufies sur le développement de la Qabbale à Safed: le cas de la visitation des tombes' in R. Goetschel (ed.), *Actes du colloque Méditation et mystique dans le judaïsme*, Paris, 1994 (forthcoming).



4. The inscriptions.

Here is the mystery of invocation (*hazkârâh*). When you desire meditating this revered Name, adorn your body and retire to an isolated place where no one can hear your voice. Purify your heart and soul of all wordly thoughts and imagine that at this very moment your soul is about to leave your body and abandon this world.³⁹

Another adept of Isaac Luria's circle, Eliezer Azikri (1533-1600), promotes *hitbodedût* as a religious value in his ethical work, *Sefer ha-ḥaredim*, considering its practice to be superior to mortification destined to atone for sin. Though no mention is made in his work of Abû l-ʿAfiya's techniques, nevertheless there is much evidence to suggest that they exercised a fundamental influence on the content of the Lurianic meditations known as *yihûdîm*:

He will desist from his study one day in the week and retire from men's company. There in the solitude between him and his Creator, he will attach his meditation to the latter as if he were standing before Him on the day of judgement, softly entreating Him as a servant his master or a son his father (...) Moreover, it is mentioned in several writings of the Ancients that solitude (*hitbodedût*), abstinence (*perishût*) and cleaving (*debêqût*) were practised by the pictists (*hasidim*) of Israel, who during their retreats would

³⁹ *Pardes Rimmonim* ch. XXI:1 (ed. Munkac, 1906, fol. 97a). Cordovero's source is Abu l-ʿAfiya, *ḥayyey ʿôlâm ha-bâʿ*?. See the extract published by A. Jellinck, *Philosophie und Kabbala*, Leipzig, 1854, p. 40.

detach their minds from worldly preoccupations and attach their meditation to the Master of the world. Our master R. Isaac (Ashkenazi) taught that this discipline was far more beneficial for the soul than study. Consequently, each individual in accordance with his faculties and possibilities, should retire and devote himself to solitary meditation one day a week, or fortnight or at least one day a month (...) This recalls the teaching in the *Mishnah Berákhôt* (5, 1) concerning the ancient *ḥasidim* who would prepare themselves for an hour prior to prayer in order to direct their hearts to God. The commentators explain that in this manner they detach their thoughts from profane preoccupations and direct their minds towards the Master of the universe in fear and love. They interrupt their studies for nine hours in order to devote themselves to solitary meditation and cleaving. They imagine the light of the Divine Presence above their heads as if it were being diffused around them while they were seated amidst this light. I have found similar speculations in the writings of the ancient ascetics (*perúshim*).⁴⁰

Of particular interest is Azikri's affirmation according to which, his mentor, R. Isaac Luria ascribed to *hitbôdedût* a virtue sevenfold greater than that of Torah study. In a similar spirit, the Muslim theologian, al-Ghazâli, claimed that the spiritual benefits of solitude could exceed those of canonical prayer.⁴¹

Eliezer Azikri also draws on the writings of Isaac of Akko. He remarks in the final chapter of his *Sefer ha-Ḥaredim*: "The third remedy (for the sickness of the soul) is solitude (...) At moments of grace, it behoves the worshipper to isolate himself in a particular place in order that men should not see him (...) Thus I learned from my master, the saintly and pious rabbi Joseph Sagis,⁴² for he was accustomed to practise this. I have found (in the writings of) Rabbi Isaac of Akko, that several *ḥasidim* had this practice in his time."⁴³

Another Safed Qabbalist to have been inspired by Isaac of Akko was none other than R. Ḥayyim Vital (1542-1620), Luria's foremost disciple. His teachings concerning solitary meditation are developed in the fourth part of his *Sha'arey Qedushshah*, entitled *Ma'amar hitbôdedût* (Discourse on Solitude). The latter is primarily an eclectic anthology of

⁴⁰ *Sefer ha-ḥaredim, teshûbâh*, ch. III ed. Lublin 1912. p. 42b. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, London, 1971, pp. 207-208, identified the 'ancient ascetics' with Azriel of Gerona. See the Hebrew text attributed to the latter published by Scholem in *MGWJ* LXXVIII (1934), pp. 511-12, which has now been translated into English in G. Scholem, *The Origins of the Kabbalah*, Princeton 1987, pp. 417-419. It is noteworthy, however, that the term *hitbôdedût* is absent from this text. On the practical implementation of these prescriptions in the Safed school, see the testimony of Yehudah ha-Kohen, *Seder we-tiqqûn qeri'at shema*^c, Prague 1615, fol. 13a, quoted by M. Benyahu, *Toledôt ha-Ari* 1967, pp. 360-1.

⁴¹ Al-Ghazâli, *Ihyâ' 'ulûm ad-dîn*, Beirut, n.d., III, p. 19.

⁴² On this personality, see M.D. Ga'on, *Yehûdey ha-mizrah*, II Jerusalem, 1938, p. 475.

⁴³ Azikri, *loc. cit.*, fol. 51a.

earlier Qabbalists on the themes of achieving heavenly inspiration and prophecy. This interesting collection includes extracts, inter alia, from R. Abraham Abû l'-Afiya, R. Moses de León, R. Elijah de Vidas and the passage of Isaac's *Me'irat 'Aynayim*, enumerating the preliminaries to *hitbodedût*. The latter is taken here not in the sense of solitude but in that of meditation carried out during the solitary retreat: cleaving, equanimity, meditation. Vital also mentions the anecdote of Sufi origin concerning equanimity, referred to previously.⁴⁴

In addition to the gleanings from older mystics, Vital's chapter also contains original material setting forth his own method of mystical meditation:

(This is) the second way of the practical methods to achieve the three types (of inspiration) mentioned above. And I will not record any practical activity (accomplished) by means of magic formulae and Holy Names (*hazkarôt shémôt*)—other than by means of meditation and thought alone, through devotion to God in the (traditional) manner of prayer.

You already know that all types of inspiration require a man to seclude himself in a house so that his mind will not be distracted. There he must isolate himself in his mind to the farthest limits and divest his body from his soul as if he did not feel that he was clothed in matter at all—as though he were only soul. The further his remoteness from matter, the greater will be his inspiration. If he senses any voice or movement that disturb his concentration, or if any material thought comes to him of his own accord, this will stop his soul's concentration upon cleaving to the upper realms, and he will not gain any inspiration whatsoever because the supernal holiness does not rest upon a man while he is (still) clinging to matter, be it even a hairsbreadth (of attachment to matter). Therefore prophecy or the Holy Spirit are called "deep sleep", or dreams or visions (i.e., states free from distraction). The end of the matter is that one who wants the Holy Spirit to rest upon him, if he does not become adept at completely divesting his soul from his body, the Holy Spirit will not rest upon him.

And this is the secret (meaning of): "the sons of prophets with a timbrel and pipe before them, etc." (I Sam. 10, 5). For by means of the sweet voice of the melody, solitude (*hitbodedût*) descended upon them with the pleasantness of the voice, and they divested their souls (of worldly sensation) and then the musician stopped the melody and the sons of the prophets remained cleaving to the upper realms and prophesied. This is the first condition.

The second condition is that a man should annul all those things which cause solitude to be interrupted. For in the first condition we mentioned only the material things of a natural character (i.e., things external to him) which cause the interruption of solitude, whereas those (pertaining to the second condition) are the powers of impurity which are derived from (...) sin (...).

And after (having accomplished) all this he should begin with the

⁴⁴ See *supra*, note 34.

activities that bring about (lit. draw down) the (state of) cleaving to the upper realms as I recorded with the help of God, according to that which I was able to find in the words of the sages and the words of the practitioners of solitude (...).

I will now consider the activities which are designed to cause the power of a man's soul to cleave to the upper realms (...).

Seclude yourself in an isolated house, as mentioned above, wrap yourself in a prayer-shawl, and sit and close your eyes, divesting yourself of the material world, as if your soul had left your body, and was ascending to heaven. Following this abstraction (from matter), recite whichever single *mishnah* you wish, many times in uninterrupted succession. Concentrate your mind upon attaching your soul to the soul of the *tanna*² mentioned in this *mishnah*. And this is what you should concentrate your mind on: That your mouth is an organ which articulates the letters of the text of this *mishnah* and that the voice that you produce from the mouth's organ consists of the sparks of your inner soul which emerge and recite this particular *mishnah*. The (soul) becomes a recipient in which there may be invested the soul of his *tanna*², the author of the *mishnah*, and so that his soul will be invested within your soul. When you become exhausted from reciting the text of the *mishnah*—if you are worthy—it is possible that the soul of this *tanna*² will abide in your mouth, and he will become invested within it while you are reciting the *mishnah*. And then while you are reading the *mishnah* he will speak with your mouth and offer you a salutation of peace. Everything that you then think of asking him, will he answer you. He will speak with your mouth, and your ears will hear his words. It is not you yourself speaking, but he is the one who speaks. This is the meaning of “The spirit of the Lord speaks through me and His word is upon my tongue (II Sam. 23, 2).⁴⁵

Though Vital's instructions for attaining Divine inspiration closely resemble those of Abû l-ʿAfiya, in the opening sentence to his passage, he apparently rejects the latter's use of Holy Names in favour of his own meditative technique based on the communion with the soul of a departed saint through the recitation of *mishnayôt*.

Now the first component at least of this mystical formula may have been inspired by the Sufi practice of *murâqaba*, in which deceased saints play an important role. Vital's method is a mental equivalent of Lurya's doctrine of communion with departed souls through *yihûdim*, which involved physical prostration on the tombs of saints.⁴⁶ Thus Vital's ritual comes close to the Sufi notion of *istihdâr* “calling forth the shaykh's

⁴⁵ *Shaʿarey qedûshshâh*, IV, ed. cit., pp. 5-6. These meditational techniques, particularly the recital of the *mishnâh*, have been studied by L. Fine, *Techniques of Mystical Meditation for Achieving Prophecy and the Holy Spirit in the Teachings of Isaac Luria and Hayyim Vital*, PhD Dissertation, Brandeis, 1975, pp. 135-173, and idem, ‘Recitation of Mishnah as a vehicle for mystical inspiration: A Contemplative Technique taught by Hayyim Vital’ *REJ*, CXLI (1982), pp. 183-199.

⁴⁶ See L. Fine, *op. cit.*, ch. II-III, ‘The practice of *yihudim*, pp. 43-76.

presence”, which consisted in concentrating on the mental image of the spiritual guide, notably as a preliminary to *dhikr*. The scriptural justification for this practice, often denounced as idolatrous by the adversaries of Sufism, was the verse recommending to ‘be with the *ṣaddiqin*’ (Qur’ân 9, 119). This practice also took the form of a quest for mental communion (*murâqaba*) with the souls of departed *shaykhs*, which were believed to linger about their tombs.⁴⁷ Indeed, in the period of the expansion of institutionalized Sufism, convents and tomb-*zâwiyas* were often established alongside the mausoleums of famous saints, which eventually comprised in their compounds lodgings and a mosque. Symbolically perceived as a material aid to meditation and a source of spiritual power, these shrines were unceasingly visited, especially on the anniversary of the saint’s demise, called *‘urs* (marriage, cf. *hillûlâ*²) in certain orders.⁴⁸ Pilgrims came not only for purposes of *murâqaba* but also in search of *baraka*, intercession and grace. These phenomena afford a remarkable parallel to Vital’s technique, and the Qabbalists’ visitation of tombs, especially that of R. Simon b. Yoḥay in Meron.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Vital, like certain other authors belonging to the Safed milieu,⁴⁹ attributes the practice of *hitbôdedût* to the ancient *ḥasidim*, a theme which is not encountered, as far as we know, in the writings of the Abû l-‘Afiya school. As has already been pointed out, Islamic mysticism too assigns the origin of *khalwa* to the prophet Muhammad. Alternatively, this tendency may stem from a desire to authenticate the *hitbôdedût* ritual by projecting its renewed practice into the traditional past. It may be pointed out in passing that such attempts are most often made in cases of ritual revival or innovation, suggesting once more not only the absence of a continuous tradition of *hitbôdedût*, but also the possibility that this renewal was inspired by external elements, perhaps of Islamic origin.⁵⁰ Interestingly, in the case of Vital it is known for a fact

⁴⁷ Spencer Trimmingham, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-212, where the eastern type Naqshabandi method is quoted according to Sanûsi’s *Salsabil*: “whereby the devotee concentrates his whole being upon the spirit of the saint or of his present director with the aim of achieving communion or even union with him, and possession by the spirit of the saint or shaikh. See also M. Chodkiewicz, “Quelques aspects des techniques spirituelles dans la *ṭarîqa naqshabandiyya*”, *Naqshabandîs*, Varia Turcica XVIII (1990), pp. 69-82. We have also discussed the techniques involved in the visitation of the tombs of the saints in our article ‘Sufi Influences on the Qabbalah in Safed’, *Mahanayyim* VI (1993), pp. 170-180 (in Heb.) and in that mentioned above in note 38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁴⁹ Vital, *Sha‘arey qedûshshâh*, ed. cit., Introduction fol. 1a and fol. 46a. Eliyahu de Vidas, *Rê’shit hôkâmâh* III:6 (ed. Munkac, fol. 140 c-d).

⁵⁰ For a similar usage, see our ‘A Mystical Treatise on Prayer and the Spiritual Quest’, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 1993, p. 142, n. 14.

that he did have direct, personal contacts with Muslim religious dignitaries, as he himself relates in his spiritual diary.⁵¹

In determining the share of possible influence on the practices which have been exposed in the foregoing pages, an important new factor will have to be taken into consideration. A recent archeological discovery in Safed, the very capital of Jewish mysticism, has profoundly modified the perspectives of the subject by bringing to light a physical witness to the existence of Sufi practice of *khalwa* in Safed precisely during the period when the first Qabbalistic texts on the subject of *hitbodedût* were composed in the Holy Land.

Discovery of a Zawiya in Safed

Hitherto, very little account has been taken by historians of Qabbalah of the amount of Sufi influence present in the Holy Land precisely at the time of the early flowering of Qabbalistic activity. And yet Adolf Jellinek, one of the pioneers of the historical study of Qabbalah, published in the periodical *Orient* as early as 1851 an article entitled "Sufismus in der Kabbala", in which he suggested the possibility of Sufi influence upon the prophetic doctrine of Isaac of Acco, one of the first Palestinian Qabbalists.⁵² However, since that publication, this area of comparative study has received little attention. To what degree were the Jewish mystics able to observe and directly borrow ascetic practices current among their Muslim contemporaries? In short, what do we know about Sufi activities in the important urban centres of the East, where there were sizeable Jewish communities, such as Jerusalem, Hebron and Safed?

Now it must be borne in mind that at the time of the inception of Qabbalistic activity in the Land of Israel in the last quarter of the XIIIth century, Safed, the cradle of Palestinian Qabbalah, was in no way the provincial backwater it was later to become, but was a vibrant centre of Muslim commerce and culture. At the same time, Sufism had evolved into a wide movement of institutionalized brotherhoods which were implanted in all the main cities of the Near East. Already during the Ayyubid period, Saladin (ob. 1193), having wrenched Palestine from the Crusaders, encouraged Asiatic Sufis to settle in Syria, establishing in Jerusalem in 1189 the famous Sufi monastery which to this day still bears the name *al-Khanqa aš-šalâhiyya*.⁵³ In the ensuing centuries, tens of *zâwiyas*

⁵¹ Vital, *Sefer ha-hezyônôt*, ed. A. Aeshkoly, Jerusalem, 1954, pp. 12, 37, 86, 243.

⁵² *Orient* XX (1851), pp. 577-578, later reprinted in his *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Kabbala*, Leipzig, 1852, pp. 45-47.

⁵³ Ibn Khalikan, *Wafayât al-aʿyân*, II, Cairo, 1275H, p. 183.

belonging to the principal brotherhoods sprung up in the main urban centres through the astounding momentum imparted by Sufism.⁵⁴ Now it is important to recall that after its capture in 1266 by the Mameluke Sulan Rukn ad-Din Baybars, Safed was chosen as the Northern capital of Palestine and could therefore not have failed to have its contingent of Sufi adepts. Moreover, local tradition favoured its development as a privileged spiritual sanctuary. Indeed, according to Muslim legend, the Galilee in general and Safed in particular were the resting-place of numerous Biblical saints, such as Jacob, Jethro and Jonah, whose shrines were the object of pious pilgrimages on the part of Jews, Muslims and Christians alike.⁵⁵

An interesting testimony regarding Rifâ'î activity in the area is provided by the small *History of Safed*, written by Muḥammad b. 'Abd ar-Raḥmân al-'Uthmânî, chief qâḍî of Safed. In his work, composed presumably in the latter part of the 14th century, al-'Uthmani mentions that in his time there existed a Rifâ'î *zâwiya* in nearby Nazareth in which mystical concerts were held.⁵⁶ The Rifâ'î order, notorious for its extravagant practices, was founded by Ahmad ibn ar-Rifâ'î who lived in southern Iraq between 1106-1182. The school spread into Syria in the XIIIth century mainly through the activity of Abû Muḥammad 'Ali al-Ḥarîrî (ob. 1248), and it is known that *zâwiyas* existed at this time both

⁵⁴ Mujir ad-Din al-'Ulaymi (ob. 1521) in his work *al-'Uns al-jalîl bi ta'rikh al-Quds wal-khalîl*, Cairo, 1283H (transl. H. Sauvaire, *Histoire de Jérusalem et d'Hébron*, Paris 1876) gives an enumeration of *zâwiyas*, of which 23 in Hebron (pp. 221-225) and 19 in Jerusalem (pp. 118, 140-167, 199). He also describes the biographies of tens of Palestinians, Sufi shaykhs (vol. II, pp. 487-527).

⁵⁵ See al-'Uthmânî's 'History of Safed' quoted in B. Lewis, 'An Arabic Account of the Province of Saved I', *BSOAS* XV (1953), pp. 477-488. Al-'Uthmânî mentions in particular a Jewish pilgrimage to a cave in Meron in mid-Iyyar (p. 481). Furthermore, he specifically describes (Mount?) Kana'an as being a place inhabited by saints (*awliyâ*). Al-'Ulaymi also affords a host of details concerning Muslim pilgrimages to tomb-sites in Erez-Israel in the XVIth century. Interestingly too, the Qabbalist Samu'el b. Ḥayyim Vital includes in his account of holy places supplemented to chapter XXXVII of *Sha'ar ha-gilgûlim*, Jerusalem, 1989, p. 182, the location of two underground caves in the very area where the Sufi cell to be discussed was discovered: "When leaving Safed by the route *bayn jabalayn* ("Between the Two Mounts"), ascend by way of the mount on your right side, above the Muslim Hârat al-karât (leg. al-akrâd) ("the Kurdish quarter"), all the way up to the summit of the mount from the north southwards. There is to be found a sort of grotto (*hajîrâh*), beneath the rock to your right. There Antignos of Socho is buried, and a little further south there is also another grotto beneath the rock, on the right hand side. There Nathan of Susita is buried."

⁵⁶ Lewis, *art. cit.*, pp. 483-484: "Within the church (of the Annunciation in Nazareth), below the basilica, two great pillars are to be found. The place has been transformed into a cell attached to the shrine (*zâwiyyat al-maqâm*) for the Aḥmadi Sufis. When they hold a prayer-meeting here and perform a spiritual concert (*samâ'*), the pillar begins to ooze and humidity appears upon it." Aḥmadi is another term for Rifâ'î, recalling the forename of the founder.

in Damascus and Jerusalem.⁵⁷ An indication of the continued importance of Safed as a Sufi centre is the presence there in the XIVth century of the outstanding saint ‘Abd al-Qâdir ibn Habîb as-Şafadî (ob. 1508). Interestingly, this Sufi shaykh, well known through his mystical poem the *Ta’iyya*, was a devoted admirer of Ibn ‘Arabi.⁵⁸ Of particular interest to the later period is the description devoted to Safed by the Turkish traveller Evliya Chelebi who visited the city in 1648, i.e., when it was still a thriving Qabbalistic centre. He enumerates seven *zâwiyas* and includes among the holy sites “the House of Tears”, which, according to Muslim tradition, was used for more than forty years by the Patriarch Jacob and his sons, following the disappearance of Joseph, as a cell for spiritual retreat. Chelebi relates that each Monday and Friday evening the Sufis of the Qadiri order would visit this holy place in the company of their shaykh in order to hold a *samâ’*, or ‘spiritual concert’.⁵⁹

A local archeological discovery which has recently come to light now confirms that Safed was also a centre of Rifâ’î Sufi activity. A few years ago, Y. Stepanyk, a cave-explorer, uncovered by chance on Mount Kana’an, a hill standing opposite the modern entrance to the city of Safed, what was first believed to be the mouth of a cave.⁶⁰ Superficial excavations revealed a hollowed-out cavity, which, according to an inscription found within, had been used as a Sufi cell (*zâwiya*) at least from the time of the Mamelukes. Although as yet not entirely excavated, the cave measures approximately four square metres and rises to about the height of a man. On the southern wall, facing Mekkah, a *mihrab* (prayer niche) has been carved into the rock, containing in its centre and on both sides small niches, probably used for placing lamps. In all there

⁵⁷ J. Spencer Trimmingham, *loc. cit.*, pp. 37-40.

⁵⁸ See M. Winter, “Sheikh ‘Ali ibn Maymun and Syrian Sufism in the Sixteenth Century”, *Israel Oriental Studies* VII (1977), pp. 288-291.

⁵⁹ *Evliya Tshelibi’s Travels in Palestine (1648-1650)*, transl. St. Stephan, Jerusalem, 1980, pp. 24-25: “The (Sanctuary of the shrine of Ya’qûb in Safad) is also a tekké (Sufi monastery) of the Prophets of Allah. In its garden, all round it, several thousand great saints, pious and godly people, sheikhs and notables, are buried. (...) (within) is a huge cave used as a mosque (...) On Monday and Friday nights, as well as on every other holy night, all the sheikhs of the town and the Sheikh (sc. of the order of) ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Gilani (who is *serçeshme*), would come with all their dervishes at nightfall to this mosque. They would play the tambourines and perform the *zikr*, thus enflaming the hearts of all those who love Allah, leaving them amazed. Such is the time-honoured ceremony.” Chelebi also mentions Mount Kana’an as very special site upon which “seven hundred prophets are venerated” (p. 28).

⁶⁰ Y. Stepanyk, ‘Archeological News concerning Caves in Eastern Galilee’, *Niqrôt Sûrim—A Speleological Review*, XVII (1990), 21-34, part. pp. 25-29 (in Hebrew). A brief preliminary description was given by Stepanyk in *Hadashôt arkiv’ologiyôt* (Archeological News), LXXIII (1980), pp. 11-12, after he had first discovered the cave by chance in September 1980.

are five niches which at once recall to mind the use of candles during the spiritual retreat as mentioned in the Qabbalist al-Buḥīnī's text.⁶¹ In addition, there are two ledges, as well as a body length horizontal surface, carved in the south-western corner of the cave. The latter, it seems, may have been a sleeping area for the solitary devotee. The purpose and dating of the cave are incontrovertibly attested by two artistic Arabic inscriptions discovered on the wall in Naskhi script. The first of these, measuring about one metre in length and thirty centimetres in height is engraved in the rock and informs us that the *zâwiya* was established some twenty years after the Mameluke conquest of the city:

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم صهه فتح هذه الزاوية المباركة
خليل الصامت خادم احمد بن الرفاعي سنة اربع وثمانين وستائه

In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate, Khalil the silent, servant of al-Mahdi belonging to the Rifâ'î Sufi order, opened this blessed retreat (*zâwiya*) in the year 684 (of the Hijrah, i.e. 1284 C.E.).

The second inscription, which is just drawn, bears the name Muḥyî d-Dîn Maḥmûd Şadr ad-Dîn the dervish (of) Aḥmad the Rifâ'îite, and confirms the use of the place by Rifâ'î Sufis.⁶²

سیدی محی الدین بن سیدی محمود
صدر الدین الفقیر احمد الرفاعیہ

The discovery of this Rifâ'î retreat now provides palpable evidence of the fact that Safed was a privileged spiritual centre not only for Jewish but also for Muslim mystics. Cohabitation with the Muslim majority no doubt lead to cultural exchange and emulation on the part of the Jews. The newly discovered *zâwiya* sheds light on the spiritual context of a specific Qabbalistic practice, providing, at the very least, a remarkable example of a parallel, devotional ritual, which was shared by two great mystical traditions at the same time and at the same place in the Land of Israel. Going beyond this, the new evidence opens up wider vistas, concerning the larger issue of the possibility of real and profound Sufi influence on the development of the theory and practice of Qabbalah in the East.

⁶¹ See *supra*, note 36.

⁶² We have been unsuccessful so far in locating these names in the more common Rifâ'î hagiographical anthologies such as Abû l-Hudâ Muḥammad ar-Rifâ'î, *Tanwîr al-absâr fî ṭabaqât as-sâdât ar-rifâ'îyya*, Cairo, 1306H.