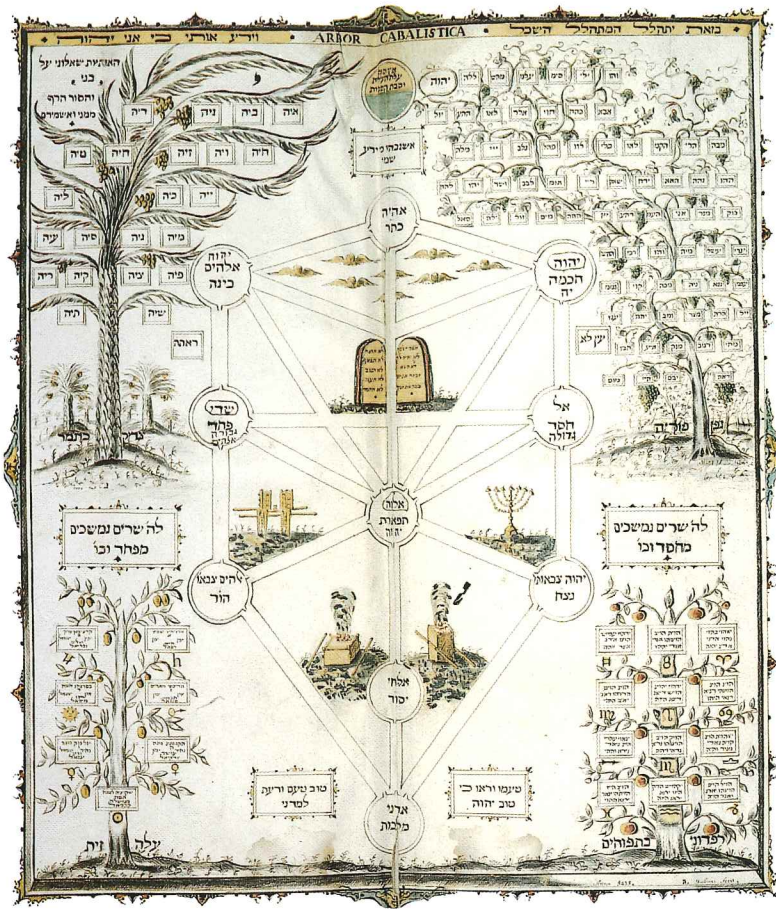


The Spiritual Adventure of the Kabbalah

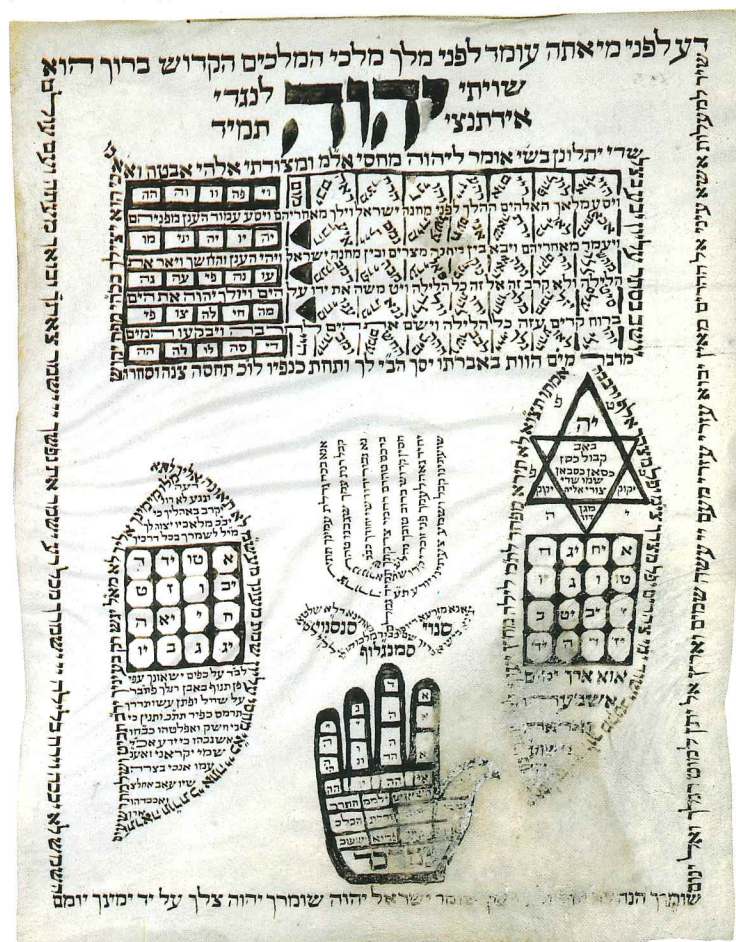


1. Ilan Sefirot ("Tree of Divine Emanations") in a book by the Kabbalist Abraham Cohen Herera (c. 1570–c. 1635). Copy of 1675.

The Kabbalah (Hebrew for "handed down by tradition") made its appearance in the twelfth century in Provence, southern France, which at the time was the scene of the Cathar heresy. It reached maturity, however, in thirteenth-century Spain, with the composition of *Sefer ha-Zohar* ("Book of Splendor"). Henceforth, the Kabbalah became the main trend of Jewish mysticism, theosophy and esotericism, comprising many different, at times contradictory, approaches. Basically, kabbalists wanted to transform Judaism into a more profound inner experience; an experience, so they believed, that could not be attained through a rational and intellectual approach to religion. For them Judaism was a system of mystical symbols reflecting the mystery of God and the universe, and their aim was to discover keys to the understanding of this symbolism. The *Zohar*, generally attributed to Moses de Leon, sought to revive a "communion" between the faithful and divinity. The Divine manifests itself in ten *Sefirot* (emanations) representing an intermediate stage between God and creation. Just as these emanations are contained within the Godhead, so they impregnate all beings outside it. Man is capable, by practising precise rites, of influencing the *Sefirot* which determine the span and progress of the world. The theory of *Sefirot* became the backbone of Spanish kabbalist teachings, represented by a great number of images.

In time, two attitudes emerged: one esoteric, which tried to restrict the secrets of kabbalist wisdom to a small circle of initiates; and a second which insisted that it should be widely-spread, benefitting everyone. Rabbinical Judaism received the Kabbalah with mixed feelings: some rabbis regarded the kabbalists as brave defenders of tradition, whose insistence on a meticulous observance of the commandments was more than praiseworthy; others saw in them dangerous innovators, whose introduction of non-Jewish elements must be arrested at all costs.

The expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian peninsula destroyed one of the most important kabbalist centers. The dispersion of kabbalists in three continents, however, soon led to the establishment of new schools. Four new centers emerged during the sixteenth century. In North Africa refugees from the peninsula preserved the Spanish tradition in its original purity. In Italy the encounter between the Kabbalah and the Renaissance led to its infusion with strong neoplatonic elements. In the Ottoman Empire Spanish kabbalists came into contact with earlier kabbalistic trends, giving precedence to ecstatic components of the Kabbalah, to theories relating to the transmigration of souls, cosmic cycles, and calculations of the End of Days. And finally, in Palestine, where the Kabbalah had two successive centers – first in Jerusalem, where there existed from the thirteenth century an ecstatic tradition with strong messianic tendencies; then in Safed, which witnessed in the mid-sixteenth century a great revival of mysticism.



Provençal Kabbalah

12th century.

Early 12th century: Beginnings of the Kabbalah in southern France, contemporary with the Ashkenazi pietist movement of the *Hasidim*. The vocabulary of the Kabbalah proper, however, would emerge only in the following century.

Middle of 12th century: Extensive kabbalist activity in Provence: Abraham ben Isaac of Narbonne, his son-in-law Abraham ben David of Posquieres (today Vauvert), Jacob Nazir of Lunel, and others. This circle was influenced by Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*, in the Hebrew translation of Judah ibn Tibbon.

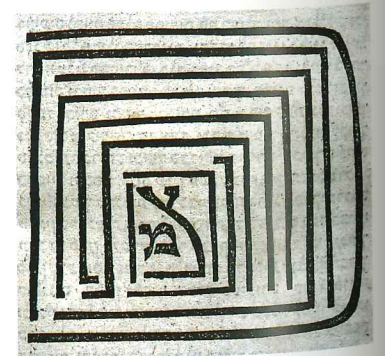
Early 13th century: Emergence of the kabbalist center in Gerona, Catalonia: its most illustrious member is Nahmanides (c. 1194–1270) who will become the greatest rabbinical authority of his generation.

c. 1280–1286: Moses de Leon composes the bulk of the *Zohar*. Intense kabbalistic activity in the region of Toledo.

Spanish Kabbalah

13th–15th centuries.

Early 14th century: Appearance of *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* ("The Order of God"), an anonymous work which was to exercise a

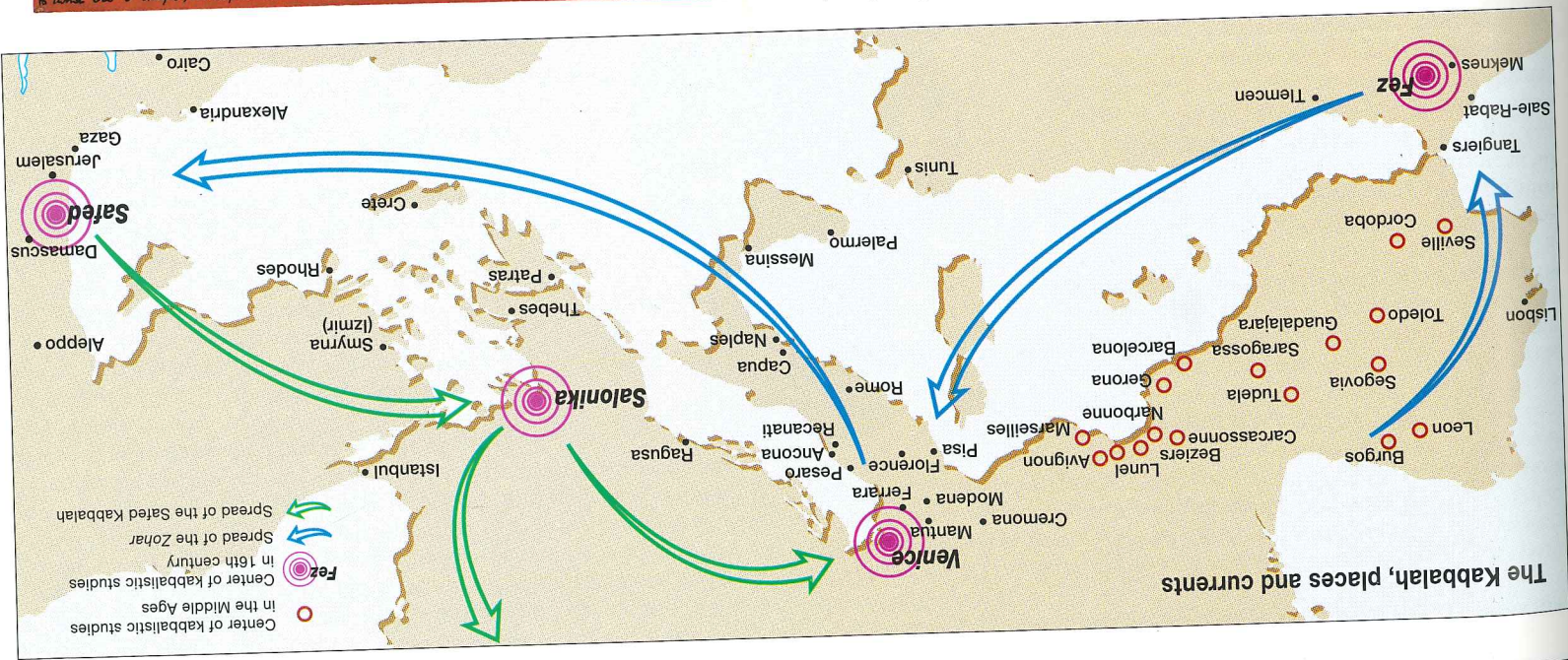


3. Diagram of the ten Sefirot, composed of the initial letters of their names. From Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, Cracow, 1592.

2. Kabbalistic amulet. Ink on parchment. Palestine, 18th century.

12th-17th Centuries

The Kabbalah, places and currents



The doctrine introduced by Moses Cordovero was a concise synthesis of the trends prevalent up to his time, whereby he sought to construct a speculative kabbalistic system which he later presented in his works, particularly in *Pardes Rimonim* ("Garden of Pomegranates"). Then, after Cordovero's death, Isaac Luria Ashkenazi founded his own school, teaching extremely complicated theories intended only for a small circle of initiates.

The study and teaching of Lurianic Kabbalah continued throughout the seventeenth century in Jerusalem and Damascus. The form in which we know it today was presented in Luria's greatest disciple. This version of the Kabbalah was disseminated in Italy at the end of the sixteenth century by Israel Sarug, and from there spread to the rest of Europe. By the end of the following century, this corpus of teachings, edited by Vital and his successors, was a major influence on kabbalists everywhere.

Lurianic Kabbalah, mostly as a philosophical system, became known to the Christian world in a Latin translation, *Kabbala demudata* (1677-1684), by Christian Knorr von Rosenroth. Meanwhile, in the Jewish world, the Kabbalah broke out of the narrow circles of mystic intellectuals and became the property of ever growing numbers of people, affecting the behavior, attitudes and beliefs of a large part of the Jewish nation.

16th century. Safed Kabbalah

16th century: profound influence on the Kabbalah till the 17th century; spread of the Spanish communities; throughout the Kabbalah

1500-1502: Asher Lemlein, an ecstatic Kabbalist active in northern Italy, presents himself as the Messiah and stimulates the movement of repentance among the Jews. 1510-1532: Treatises and letters by the ha-Levi, predicting the coming of the Messiah in 1540, are circulated in Jerusalem and Italy. David Reuben, presenting himself as an oriental Jewish prince on a mission in Europe to raise an army against the Turks, meets Solomon Molicho, a Portuguese Marrano who returns to Judaism, studies the Kabbalah and regards himself as a messiah. 1522-1570: Moses ben Jacob Cordovero, founder of the kabbalistic school in Safed, a disciple of the mystic poet Solomon Alkabez and of the great codifier Joseph Caro, and teacher to Isaac Luria.

Middle of 16th century: fierce disputations over the publication of the *Zohar*, printed for the first time in Mantua and Cremona simultaneously (1558). Both editions are disseminated throughout Europe and contribute to the acceptance of the Kabbalah as normative literature. The kabbalists of Safed begin interpreting the *Zohar* which becomes the canonical text of the discipline.

1570: *Sefer Reshit Hokhma* ("Book of Initial Wisdom") by Elijah de Vidas, disciple of Cordovero; published in Venice, the book was aimed at a popular audience and accepted as one of the most important kabbalist works.

1592: Arriving in Venice from Egypt, Israel Ostropoler and Nathan Shapira of Cracow, were deeply concerned with demonology and messianism.

1620: After leaving Safed and serving as rabbi in Jerusalem, Hayyim Vital dies in Damascus; he bequeaths to his son, Samuel Vital, the largest collection of Lurianic teachings, written as annotations to the principal representatives, Samson ben Pesah Fano.

Early 17th century: A special brand of the Kabbalah begins to emerge in Poland; its founder of the kabbalistic school in Safed, a kabbalist of the time, Menahem Azarah

1665: Shabbetai Zevi's messianic mission is connected to the Lurianic Kabbalah.

4. Michail Grobman. Gate of Heaven, 1977.



master's lessons.

c. 1630: Leone (Judah Aryeh) Modena, rabbi of Venice, writes *Arí Nohem* ("Growing Lion") - the first comprehensive polemic against the Kabbalah; although he does not dare publish it, his work provokes bitter polemics.

c. 1665: Shabbetai Zevi's messianic mission is connected to the Lurianic Kabbalah.