

KABBALAH IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The first evidence of Kabbalistic activity in the Romanian lands dates back to the 16th century. It started with the connection between Rabbi Joseph Caro (1488-1575) and the Wallachian Jews of Bucharest, followed by reports on the Kabbalistic schools run by Rabbi Solomon ben Aroyo (ibn Aravi) (1549-1629) and Rabbi Nathan Neta Hanover (1620?-1683) in medieval Moldavia (at Iași and Focșani respectively) and the Kabbalistic school run by Rabbi Aron Chorin (1766-1844) in Transylvania (at Arad). It continued with the influence exerted by Moldavian hesychasm on Baal Shem Tov's thought during the time he spent in the Romanian Carpathians and the birth and development of the Hassidic courts and dynasties of Bukovina, Northern Moldavia and Maramureș (Bohush, Botoshan, Faltishan, Shtefanesht, Szatmar, Spinka, etc.) Modern Romania, too, witnessed a growing preoccupation with the Kabbalah, widely reflected in the local Jewish journals, which published anything, from informative pieces to historical novels, in a perspective that evolved from antagonism to admiration. Not last and not in the least, the first half of the 20th century brought a revival of the Kabbalistic practices and schools, with several such initiatives attracting public attention. The presentation follows this long and complex history providing a comprehensive overview of its stages and of the outstanding cultural personalities who were involved in it.

Key words: *Kabbalah, Kabbalistic schools, Romanian Jewish history, Jewish cultural heritage, Romanian Jewish personalities.*

Medieval encounters between the Kabbalah and the Romanian lands

The first encounter between the Romanian lands and the Kabbalah can be traced in a rabbinic responsa issued in mid-16th century. In 1559, a number of Ottoman Sephardic Jews living in Bucharest, at the time a town of the Danubian Principality of Wallachia,² addressed the Rabbi of Nikopolis, to whose rulings they seem to have been subjected, in relation to the murder of one of their coreligionists by a gentile in a nearby village. The respective rabbi authenticated the witnesses' testimonies and forwarded the document for a definitive decision to the Rabbi of Salonica, Samuel de Medina, and to the

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¹ Although some princes started using Bucharest as a royal residence from as early as mid-15th century, the capital of Wallachia would still be at Târgoviște for another almost two centuries to come.

famous Kabbalist Joseph Caro, head of the Rabbinical Court in Safed at the time.³ Even if not related to the Kabbalah, Caro's responsa is very important for Romanian Jewish history because it is one of the first pieces of evidence of a Jewish presence in Bucharest within a hundred years from the town's first documentary attestation, in 1459.⁴

A similarly interesting Kabbalistic link can also be found not much later in the other Danubian Principality, Moldova. From a 1618 travel account of the great scholar Joseph Solomon Delmedigo (1591-1655), a former disciple of Galileo Galilei, we find out that from about 1580⁵ the Jewish community of Iași was led by the rabbi, physician and Kabbalist Solomon ben Aroyo (ibn Aravi) (1549-1629), a Sephardic Jew of Italian origin (a possible descendant of the Arbib family from Salonica), born apparently in Yemen, with whom Delmedigo studied for eleven years.⁶

According to the story,

Rabbi Joseph S. Del Medigo, the illustrious and phenomenal scholar, was born on 6/16 July 1591 (28 Sivan 5351 from the creation). At the age of 27 he left Constantinople for Poland, crossing Wallachia on his way. Upon entering the town of Jassy, he found there the erudite and holy Rabbi Solomon Ben Arayo (or Arowi), a distinguished physician, who had been studying the Kabbalah for over 40 years and who had written various works. Del Medigo therefore remained there for 11 years, acquiring science over science and becoming a profound Kabbalist. Then he left for Poland, settling in Lithuania, where he became the physician of Prince Radziwil.⁷

Another link between the Romanian lands and the Kabbalah was the presence in Iași and Focșani, between 1656 and 1670, of the famous mystic, historian, Talmudist and lexicographer, Nathan Neta Hannover (1620?-1683). Hannover arrived here after having studied the Kabbalah with Chaim Cohen, Moses Zacuto, and Samuel Aboab in Venice, after a brief stopover in Prague, where he took refuge from the 1648-1649 massacres of Bogdan Chmelnitzky,

³ The document bearing Caro's signature was found by the Romanian Jewish historian Mayer Abraham Halevy in a collection of Caro's responsae (XII). See Halevy, 1931.

⁴ Although there are some earlier references to the existence of a fortress on the ground, the first document mentioning the existence of a town called Bucharest was issued by Vlad the Impaler in 1459.

⁵ 1589 in other sources.

⁶ The information appears in several sources and in some of them the year is given as 1619. This is the case with the version published by Samuel Ashkenazi, for instance, in his foreword to Solomon Delmedigo's book *Matzreflahohma*, second edition, Odessa, 1865.

⁷ The text was taken from R. Moses Mita, *Noveloth Hohma*, Basel, 1628, by Joseph Brociner, who published it in Romanian translation in *Chestiunea Israelitelor Români*, vol. 1, Bucharest, 1910, p. 132. See Eskenasy, 1986: 88.

which he described in his famous book *Yeven Mezulah*, published in 1653, which seems, in its turn, to have influenced Shabbatai Zvi's decision to declare himself the Messiah in 1665 (Elior, 2016: 87). According to Romanian Jewish historian Itzhak Kara, it was in fact in Iași, where he served as rabbi of the local community, that Hannover wrote two of his best known works, *Safa berura* and *Shaarei Zion* (Kara, 1997: 16). He, too, had a circle of disciples and followers who later dissipated after his departure for Moravia. He is particularly remembered for his habit to keep in close contact with important rabbinic figures from abroad, which he would invite to preach in the synagogue of Iași. We thus know that there were genuine Kabbalistic schools in Iași at the end of the 16th and throughout the 17th century, but we unfortunately have no idea for how long they functioned and who (else) attended them.

Last but not least, a link can also be found in late 18th century and early 19th century between the Kabbalah and Transylvania, the third Romanian Principality, where precursor of reformed Judaism and Kabbalist Aaron Chorin (1766-1844) served as rabbi of the small Jewish community of Arad (at the time a Hungarian town) from 1789 until 1844, after having been exposed to the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the Kabbalah during his studies at Rabbi Ezekiel Landau's yeshiva in Prague. It was in Arad that Chorin apparently wrote his famous controversial book *Emek ha-shaveh*, published in Prague in 1803, in which he strongly condemned Sabbateanism (despite his friendship with some Sabbateans living in the Czech capital at the time) and attacked various customs derived from popular Kabbalah, such as kapparot and childbirth amulets, but also made it clear that he viewed theoretical Kabbalah as a worthy philosophical system of symbols that needed to be decoded (Silber, 2025). He also established his own yeshiva in his new hometown, gathering disciples and spreading his novel ideas.

Further multiple Kabbalistic links can be traced at the end of the 18th century, throughout the 19th century, and at the beginning of the 20th century, particularly in Northern Moldova, Bukovina, Transylvania and Maramureș, where important Hassidic dynasties and courts (Bohush, Botoshan, Faltishan, Shtefanesht, Szatmar, Spinka, and many others) were established and flourished before being wiped out by World War II and the Holocaust. In fact, as Moshe Idel has demonstrated, there is evidence that Baal Shem Tov himself (Israel Ben Eliezer, the founder of the movement, 1698/1700-1760) was born and lived for a while in Little Wallachia (as Moldova was sometimes called in the Middle Ages), where he meditated in the mountains and prayed in the synagogue existing at the time in Piatra Neamț, before starting to preach his new ideas in Poland (Idel, 2008: 189). Thus, it is worth considering "the possible religious and cultural bearing of this Romanian context on Hassidism's spiritual founder" (Idel, 2011: 71). This is an indication that the relation between Romania and the Kabbalah went both ways: not only did the Kabbalah

have some influence on the Romanian lands but the Romanian lands also exercised some sort of influence on the Kabbalah.

Popular preoccupations with the Kabbalah in modern Romania

The end of the 19th century saw the emergence of an interest in the Kabbalah as a topic of general culture in the Jewish magazines of what was by now modern Romania.⁸ One such magazine was *Egalitatea* [Equality], a weekly publication issued in Bucharest from 1890 to 1916, and again from 1919 to 1940, under the directorship of the reputed journalist Moses Schwarzfeld.⁹ Among its contributors were famous figures like Jacob Isaac Niemirower, Avram Steuerman-Rodion, Leon Feraru, S. Lazar (Lascăr Șaraga), and Isaac Peltz, as well as Schwarzfeld himself under various pen names.

The texts on the Kabbalah that one could read in *Egalitatea* ranged from informative pieces to historical novels. It is interesting to note that in the beginning most authors expressed a negative view of it. For instance, a quite scholarly article on the life and work of Maimonides published in the issue of March 5, 1893 provided Arminiu Dux (most likely the pen-name of Moses Schwarzfeld himself, or perhaps of one of his similarly erudite brothers) with the opportunity to observe that:

His unstained devotion and high morality brought him the respect of his fellow coreligionists, while his interpretation of the law and the philosophical observations accompanying it brought him a lot of enemies, who attacked him quite passionately. One of his most fierce opponents was the head of the school of Pasquieres, in Southern France, Abraham ben David, the most significant disciple of Mezulhane ben Jacob of Lunel, who, besides several criticisms of *Alfasi* and *Zerahiel*, also wrote a legal work similar to Maimonides' book *Yad hahazaka*. After the volume's publication, he read it and annotated it with insulting observations. And these observations (comments) were printed in most cases next to Maimonides' text, a few centuries later. But our hero treated his literary opponent with nobility. Not only did he refrain from any response, but he also spoke highly of him, as it transpires from a letter he wrote to Samuel Tibbon. The Provencals hated Maimonides particularly because he was against all secret sciences, and implicitly against the Kabbalah, which enjoyed a high regard among the Jews of Provence. In one of his letters addressed to the members of the Jewish community in Marseille, he urged: "You should only give credit to the true things, entirely conceived by reason, that is, to the

⁸ Through the unification of Wallachia and Moldova in 1859.

⁹ *Egalitatea* was the longest-enduring Jewish periodical in Romania. It started out as an emancipationist newspaper, "dedicated exclusively to Israelite interests within the country," and reflected the main political and social orientations of Romanian Jews. While it defended Zionism, it also supported integrationist organizations such as Uniunea Evreilor Pământeni [Union of Native Jews], later called Uniunea Evreilor Români [Union of Romanian Jews].

rational truths, and to the sayings of the prophets, who were inspired by God. Any other belief can be counted as taking God's word lightly. Thus, astronomy is a useful science, which strengthens our belief in an almighty God, while astrology must be disregarded, because it can only lead us to superstition (*Egalitatea*, no. 10, March 5, 1893: 80).

A similarly negative view on the Kabbalah as a secret science could be found in an article on the "Religious Controversies between the Jews and the Christians in the Middle Ages" by Isidore Loeb, published one month later, in the issue of April 30, where one could read that, despite his conviction that the Law was simple and the Jewish religion was in close connection with reason, Hayyim ibn Musa still believed "that Jesus operated his miracles through Kabbalistic means, just as did, after him, the Spanish rabbis Jacob Alcorsono, Moses Botarol, Moses b. Nahman, Asher b. lehiel, Joseph Gikatilla" (*Egalitatea*, no. 17, April 30, 1893: 134).

As if to complete this troublesome image, on October 8, the magazine published another article by Isidore Loeb, called simply "The Jews," which further informed the readers that:

In the South of France especially, Jews seem to have revived mystical philosophy, already widespread in Babylonia. The main monument of Israelite Kabbalah, which so preoccupied Christians throughout the Renaissance, and which created such dangerous movements among the Jews, in several instances (Shabbatai Zvi in Smyrna, Frank in Poland), is the Zohar, a work attributed to a 2nd century rabbi but which is actually from the 13th century, and was also written in Spain, by a swindler, probably Moses de Leon. But the Kabbalah has no roots in Judaism, for it is the enemy of the Talmud, and could only find adepts among the weak and lost souls. The glory and light of medieval Judaism is a Spanish rabbi, Moses Maimonides, who was born at Cordova in 1135, and was exiled from his country because of the Almohads' fanaticism, taking refuge in Egypt, where he died in 1204. Maimonides is the greatest metaphysical thinker of Judaism. With his theological treatise called *The Guide for the Perplexed* (translated by Munk, Paris, 1856-1866), and especially with his *Mishne Torah* (the second law), in which he systematically groups all the materials of the Talmud and rabbinic literature in a beautiful and imposing coordination, he made it possible for the spirit of philosophy to fully penetrate the innermost folds of Judaism, he gave Jewish speculation a previously ignored greatness and strength that was later passed on to Spinoza. This new spirit invaded even the Talmudic schools, at a time when Jewish philosophers were treading in the footsteps of the Arab philosophers, translating Averroes, writing new comments to his comments on Aristotle, and getting lost in the fine details of Arab scholarship (Renan, *Averroes et l'averroïsme*, Paris, 1852; Munk, *Melanges de philosophie juive et arabe*, Paris, 1859). Maimonides' figure dominates the entire Jewish Middle Ages: he imprinted his seal on all of Judaism (*Egalitatea*, no. 39, October 8, 1893: 310).

A new diatribe against the Kabbalah could be found in the issue of June 8, 1901, where in an article entitled "The Israelite woman," I. Gottlieb wrote:

For almost a century [from the 1492 expulsion, a.n.], the voice of Jewish women could no longer be heard. The persecutions, the sufferings, the ghetto, all prevented the Jews from evolving, not just physically but also culturally. Groaning under the weight of the Christian peoples' hatred and disdain, instead of devoting themselves to the healthy study of the Bible and the Talmud, they fully immersed themselves in the study of an occult, unhealthy science, the Kabbalah, which prevented the development of the soul, but which fed the Jews with the sweet hope in the coming of a Messiah, a supernatural savior. This study thus forced the Jews to be in a permanent state of excitement (*Egalitatea*, no. 22, June 8, 1901: 172).

But not everyone who contributed to *Egalitatea* was determined to condemn the Kabbalah. In 1896, for instance, readers could find in the magazine an opposite perspective. James Darmesteter's "A Look at the History of the Jewish People," published in several subsequent issues, mentioned, among the benefits of the Renaissance and the Reformation for the Jews, the fact that "Kabbalah opened to dreaming its vast and splendid mystical alleys, on which Spinoza's thought would often wander during his youth" (*Egalitatea*, no. 35, September 13, 1896: 278), and that "Kabbalah emerged out of its secrets and encompassed the zealous, whom it intoxicated with its fumes but also emancipated from all boldness, 'for the Jews only know the name of God' (Reuchlin)" (*Egalitatea*, no. 36, September 30, 1896: 286). Such a quotation from Johannes Reuchlin is quite unexpected for a 1896 popular culture publication. It indicates the high cultural level not just of the magazine's contributions, but also of its readership, whose interest in the topic is further proved by the fact that in 1901 an entire novel dealing with the Kabbalah was published in sequels ("Rabbi Elchanan" by Dr. M. Lehmann). Incidentally, the quality of the magazine's readers can also be inferred from the announcements published in its various sections. For instance, we know from the March 16 issue of the same year that on the next day Mr. Sigismund Cohl, student in medicine, was going to give a lecture on "The philosophy of the Kabbalah" to the "Association of Jewish university students" at the "Jacob and Carolina Loebel" School (*Egalitatea*, year XII, no. 11, March 16, 1901, p. 86).

In fact, it seems that from 1901 onward the perspective changed for the better, because in the following years no negative view of the Kabbalah could be found in the magazine any longer. Nevertheless, not all contributions were equally well documented. For instance, the March 7, 1903 issue hosted an interesting but inaccurate account on "The Inquisition and the Jews" by a Dr. Sigmand (very likely another pen-name of Moses Schwarzfeld or one of his brothers), in which the author related:

they say that the family of a famous Jew, the Kabbalist Simon Maimi, who refused to be baptized, were all (himself, his wife and their children) buried in a wall up to their waist and kept like that for three days. They could not survive such torture and died, all but Simon Maimi himself. As he continued to refuse to be baptized, he was eventually tied up to the legs of a horse and dragged throughout the city until he expired (*Egalitatea*, no. 10, March 7, 1903: 75).¹⁰

Still, the magazine's endeavor for high standards is undoubtful, as it appears from the publication on April 2, 1904 of an article entitled "Against antisemitism," written by none other than Anatole France himself, from which readers found out that: "In all branches of human science one can find Jews who are very far from the gold trade, such as Abulassia, the Kabbalist, who immersed himself in the most tiring calculations, not in order to evaluate his wealth, for he had none, but in order to discover in a scholarly manner the numerical value of God's name" (*Egalitatea*, no. 13, April 2, 1904: 97).

But the main defender of the Kabbalah in *Egalitatea* was clearly the reputed historian Rabbi Dr. Jacob Isaac Niemirower.¹¹ From as early as March 21, 1903 he made it very clear that "our mysticism, the poetry that can be found in the Kabbalah, which has encompassed the ideas, laws and traditions of Judaism in a popular manner, is a significant part of our culture" (*Egalitatea*, no. 12, March 21, 1903: 90).

Two years later, in the issue of December 2, 1905, in an article dedicated to Menasseh ben Israel (Manoel Dias Soeiro (1604-1657), also known as Menasheh ben Yossef ben Yisrael, the Portuguese rabbi, Kabbalist, writer, diplomat, printer and publisher who founded the first Hebrew printing press, named Emeth Meerets Titsma'h, in Amsterdam, in 1626), Niemirower would inform his readers that:

¹⁰ The true story, as Heinrich Graetz mentions in his *History of the Jews*, was that "There were some Jews who had refused baptism with all their might. Among them was Simon Maimi, apparently the last chief rabbi (Arrabi mor) in Portugal, a scrupulously pious man; also his wife, his sons-in-law, and some others. They were closely imprisoned, because they would not forswear Judaism, nor observe the rites of the church. To bring them to conversion, Simon Maimi and his fellow sufferers, official rabbis, were most inhumanly tortured. They were immured up to the neck in their prison, and left for three days in this fearful position. When they nevertheless remained firm, the walls were torn down; three had died, among them Simon Maimi, whose conversion was most important, because his example would have influenced the others." (Graetz, 1894: 253-254).

¹¹ Niemirower was not just a press contributor but also the author of several scholarly books, including two dealing with the Kabbalah: *Chassidismus und Zaddikismus* (Hassidism and Zadikism), Baer Publishing House, Bucharest, 1913, and *Contributions à la philosophie historique juive*, 1914.

His belief in the predictions of the Kabbalistic book *Zohar* made him await with certainty Messiah's arrival during his lifetime; and his only concern was to find the means by which to speed up this arrival. His theological fantasy gave him the solution that as long as the Jews were not spread throughout the world, and there still existed a country – England – where there were no Jews, the end of the galut (diaspora) could not come. In close connection with the Christian mystics and enjoying the trust of the Judeophile puritans who wanted to give England the Biblical seal, he started his propaganda for the return of the Jews to England (*Egalitatea*, no. 46, December 2, 1905: 363).

An article dedicated to "The Month of Av" published on July 15, 1911 provided Niemirower with the perfect opportunity to remind his audience that "on the 5th of Av [we commemorate] the death of the reputed Kabbalist Itzhak Luria, famous under the name of Ari, who raised, through his rich fantasy, moral strength, and depth of feeling, our entire science, our whole life, to the level of an eternal divine service" (*Egalitatea*, no. 27, July 15, 1911: 210). But, continued the Rabbi with a piece of advice, "in the galut, such a conception should not take root; in practical life it becomes dangerous; we must tackle science with religious holiness but without turning everything into a mystical, fantastic sanctuary" (ibidem).

That Niemirower was particularly preoccupied with medieval philosophy and the Kabbalah is also obvious from another article, "Nachmanides, Rajba, Moshe de Leon and Crescas," published on January 11, 1913:

Being a strong spirit and recognizing, on the other hand, the absolute value of every word in the Bible, and every passage in the works of the Talmudic sages, [Nachmanides] could not content himself with the simple meaning of the Bible and found refuge in the mystical world of the Kabbalah. To him, every letter in the Torah was a spring of divine revelations." [...] "Shlomo ben Aderet, Rashba, of Barcelona (1235-1310), was a high ranking Talmudic authority. [...] Ben Aderet stood out through his kindness, and through the balance he knew how to maintain between philosophy and the Kabbalah. He also had the merit of being an apologist, a defender of Judaism under attack (*Egalitatea*, no. 2, January 11, 1913: 11).

The same is also visible in a follow up material published one month later, on February 1, 1913, under the title "The Works of the Spanish Age:"

Mysticism is the philosophy of fantasy, the poetry of spirit, the sublime conscience lost in the depth of the souls. The Spanish age counts a long series of Kabbalistic writings, but it is only the *Zohar*, published by Moses de Leon, that became a first-hand celebrity. If the Kabbalah beautifies the prose of thought through poetic forms, true Jewish poetry found in the Spanish age enlightened our masters: the Poems of Shlomo, Moses Ezra, Yehuda Halevy Alcharizi, Bedarsi and Iedaia Hapenini elicit our attention (*Egalitatea*, no. 5, February 1, 1913: 35).

Revisiting the topic on June 21, 1913, in an article called "The Literature of the Spanish Age," the Rabbi devotes an entire section to the Kabbalah (*Egalitatea*, year XXIV, no. 24, June 21, 1913: 190).

Incidentally, not all references to the Kabbalah that appeared in *Egalitatea* were related to the history of Jewish thought. Some were quite unexpectedly related to current political developments. Two such bewildering pieces of information could be found, for instance, in the subsequent issues of November 2 and 9, 1912. The first announced the readers that:

In the case of the blood libel accusation in Kiev those tasked with demonstrating that either the Talmud or the Kabbalah contain some allusions to ritual killings were Theology Professor Troitzky and Priest Panaitis, a well-known antisemite. Both stated they could not find any trace allowing for the supposition that Jews would kill for a ritual purpose. Nevertheless, Maschkewitsch will not give up and has started looking into the Kabbalistic manuscripts at the Academy of Petersburg to try and see if he could find anything that can be imputed to the Jews (*Egalitatea*, no. 42, November 2, 1912: 335).

The second was even more outstanding: "the ancient Kabbalistic book called Zohar, in the chapter Wajera, in the verse related to Ishmael, foretells for the year 5673 a great war against Turkey and a gathering of several kings in the conquered city of Constantinople" (*Egalitatea*, no. 43, November 9, 1912: 342). Considering the outcome of the 1912-1913 Balkan War, this was a very interesting forecast indeed.

The interest in the Kabbalah seems to have faded after that, because only few other mentions of it appeared in the following years, mostly related to lectures. Meyer Thenen, the rabbi of the Jewish community in Iași, gave a short quotation from the Zohar in a speech on the "Importance of An Instructive School" delivered on February 6, 1915 (*Egalitatea*, no. 6, February 6, 1915: 42). Historian Joseph Kaufmann published an article on Shabbatai Zvi and Nussen Azuzi ("False Messiahs") on May 21, 1926 (*Egalitatea*, no. 21, May 21, 1926: 74). Carol Drimer spoke about Kabbalah's influence on Spinoza on March 4, 1927 (*Egalitatea*, no. 10, March 4, 1927: 33).

Not by chance, perhaps, the last reference that can be found in *Egalitatea* is an article on the Shavuot published by Carol Drimer on May 21, 1931:

Kabbalists put great emphasis on the festival of Shavuot. The Zohar calls Torah bride and the people of Israel its groom (Zohar Emor 98). Kabbalists organized a special reading on the night of the Shavuot called "Tikkun Shavuot" or "Tikkun Leil Shavuot." Its content: fragments from the Bible, Talmud and the Zohar, prescriptions of the 613 commandments. "Tikkun Shavuot" is divided in 13 parts and after finishing each part – in the synagogue – a Kaddish di-Rabbanan is to be read. On Shavuot day one should read the book of Ruth, the heroine who

converted to Judaism embracing the Jewish law, which was given on this day (*Egalitatea*, no. 21, May 21, 1931: 71).

(Incidentally, the same issue informed its reader about the death of Cantor D. Orenstein from Iasi, an “appreciated Talmudist and Kabbalist” (idem: 124). Unfortunately we have no information about his Kabbalistic endeavors.)

Scholarly interest in the Kabbalah in 19th and 20th century Romania

Although undeservedly almost forgotten nowadays, Moses Gaster (1856-1939), the Romanian Ashkenazi rabbi who ended up as the leader of the Sephardic congregation in London following his 1885 expulsion from Bucharest due to his fight for the emancipation of the local Jews, was one of the first true scholarly researchers of the Kabbalah. As Moshe Idel puts it, by neglecting him, modern Judaic scholarship actually

neglected someone who was a real genius. He was the one who initiated the study of the Samaritans, who have lived since antiquity in the land of Israel. He corresponded with them in Hebrew. He had a private collection of thousands of manuscripts, tens of thousands of fragments of manuscripts, in 15 languages, which are now at the University of Manchester. He was able to see a picture that no other figure in Jewish studies had seen. I showed in 2007 that in his early twenties, Gaster already had theories about the Zohar,¹² which he had written in Romanian. These things were ignored in the scholarship of the Zohar for 40 years. It is hard to explain why. Gaster’s writings were in Scholem’s library, which meant that Scholem knew about them (Idel, 2009: 48).

Indeed Scholem knew about them, as he quoted them in *Origins of the Kabbalah*:

Among more recent scholars, the only one who held that the book [Bahir] was ancient and therefore evidently of Oriental origin was, as far as I know, Moses Gaster, who declared in 1881—without, however, offering any arguments—that it perhaps “went back further than the tenth century” (Scholem, 1987: 44).

Moreover, Scholem admitted, in regard to “a possible relationship between the emergence of the Kabbalah and Catharism in the middle of the twelfth century” that “the only scholar who, to my knowledge, has raised the problem—albeit in a rather aphoristic style—was Moses Gaster in his programmatic *The Origin of the Kabbalah* (Ramsgate, 1894)” (Idem: 234).

¹² Gaster considered the Zohar to be not a book but a collection of diverse sources put together along the time.

While it is true that Gaster's interest in the Kabbalah was actually a side effect of his preoccupation with folklore, which is much better known, it is no less true that his contribution to the field remains seminal to this day. A non-exhaustive list of his books includes *Jewish Folk-Lore in the Middle Ages* (1887), *The Sword of Moses from an ancient manuscript book of magic, with introduction, translation, and index* (1896), *Studies and Texts in Folklore, Magic, Medieval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha and Samaritan Archaeology*, 3 Vols. (1925–28), *The Asatir: The Samaritan Book of the "Secrets of Moses"* (1927), *Samaritan Oral Law and Ancient Traditions*, Vol. I, *Eschatology* (1932), *Conjurations and the Ancient Mysteries* (1932), *Ma'aseh Book – Book of Jewish Tales and Legends Translated from the Judeo-German* (1934).

Still, if little is remembered today about his English works, even less is known about his Romanian writings on the subject, including several of his articles dealing with the Kabbalah that were published in *Anuarul pentru israeliți* [The Yearbook for the Israelites], headed by the same omnipresent Moses Schwarzfeld. Although only one of these articles was specifically devoted to the Kabbalah, the others also need to be taken into account, as they brought important information to the end 19th century readers' attention.

Thus, with "Lilith and the Three Angels," Gaster proposed a comparative study on Jewish and Romanian folklore, finding similarities between the story of the Talmudic character and the local legend of Avestitza, a demon who posed identical threats to women in childbirth and newborn babies as Lilith, and who could be kept at bay through the same magical incantations and formulae (the verbal invocation of the three angels' names) (Gaster, 1880-1881: 73-79). Gaster explained this similarity through a Bogomilic mediation. His extensive quotes from the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* and *Sefer Raziel*, on the other hand, prove a good familiarity with relevant Kabbalistic texts.

In 1884 he decided to devote an entire article to "Cabbala, its Origin and Development," a precursor of the book he would publish at Ramsgate ten years later. His description of the movement is worth quoting:

Among all sciences, among all philosophical theories gathered into systems, there is only one which claims that it has solved the eternal question of life, that it has penetrated the mysterious inner folds of the mechanism that connects the beings of this world among themselves, and with the supernatural world. This theory is the Cabbala, which has therefore exercised an enormous influence along the centuries, unto this day; its name is identified with a secret power that can unveil everything to man, including the future (Gaster, 1883-1884: 25).

In his analysis Gaster rightly observed that the Kabbalah was born as a reaction to Moses Maimonides' attempt to introduce Aristotelian philosophy in Judaism, a theory later developed, among others, by Moshe Idel. Gaster thus noted that the confrontation led to the emergence of a new understanding of

Judaism, one that revealed a previously unseen connection between the Biblical precepts and human actions, and between the natural and supernatural beings, which proved on the one hand that philosophy was not the enemy of religion, and on the other that the Jewish religion was in no way disconnected from reason. His incursion into the history of the Kabbalah was very scrupulous and, although he was heavily indebted to Heinrich Graetz, whose line he followed, he did come up with new perspectives that were quite revolutionary for his time, including, for instance, Kabbalah's connections with the neo-Platonic, gnostic and Cathar ideas.

Gaster revisited the topic in "A look at Hebrew Literature," this time approaching it from the perspective of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, whose adept he was, remarking that the Kabbalistic literature of the 17th and 18th century was characterized by "compilation rather than original contribution" (Gaster, 1885-1886: 98), a subject he would later develop in his theory about the Zohar, whose originality was acknowledged first by Moshe Idel, and subsequently by other experts as well. On the other hand, in this text Gaster made it very clear he held the Kabbalah responsible for the emergence of the two most important Jewish heresies, Sabbateanism and Frankism, because it led to a "period of cultural instability" (*ibidem*) that also allowed for the emergence of Hassidism, whose "miracle making rabbis" he deeply resented. (It is interesting to note, though, that in 1893 Gaster already knew that Baal Shem Tov was of Romanian origin, as he would mention in an article on the "Judeo-Spanish Folk Literature" published in the same magazine, in which he traced Isaac Luria's influence on the founder of Hassidism [Gaster, 1892-1893: 107]).

Another forgotten Romanian Jewish researcher of the Kabbalah was Bukovinan philosopher, editor, and journalist Isaac (Iosif) Brucăr (1888-1960).¹³ Brucăr's main interest was in Spinoza's philosophy, but precisely in order to understand what made Spinoza tick, he immersed in the study of the Kabbalah, to be able to evaluate its influence on his subject's thought. Thus, in his very first book, *Încercări și studii* [Sketches and Studies], published in 1919 at Cercul Libertatea in Bucharest, Brucăr wrote extensively on the Kabbalah and the connections between the Kabbalah and Spinoza's thought. He also wrote entire chapters on *Sefer Yetsirah*, and the Zohar. In fact, it is to him that we owe the first translation into Romanian of the Zohar, from the less known

¹³ Brucăr studied philosophy in Bucharest, Jena, and Leipzig, taking his PhD in 1930 with a thesis on the philosophy of Spinoza under Constantin Rădulescu-Motru's supervision. He then taught at the department of psychology of the University of Bucharest and, after World War II, at the Institute of Philosophy of the Romanian Academy. He headed the Romanian Jewish journal *Lumea Evree* (1919-1920) and fought for the naturalization of the Jews. He also contributed to other leading journals of his time.

German version of a Zoharic excerpt published by philosopher Hugo Bergmann in the journal of the Jewish Student Association in Prague, "Vom Judentum: ein Sammelbuch" (Leipzig, 1913: 274-281) (Cernătescu, 2015). He also referred to the Lurianic conception of Tzimtzum (contraction) as the first act of the creation process, but he simply called it "Spinozian pantheism," (Brucăr, 1930: 38) without any reference to its original author.

Although Brucăr's approach was purely philosophical (he never attempted to tackle the practical aspects of the Kabbalah), his preoccupation with it remained constant along the years, as proven by his return to the Zohar in his later book *Filosofia lui Spinoza* [Spinoza's Philosophy], in which he defined the Kabbalah as "a philosophy of the Jewish religion," using Adolph Franck's expression (idem: 37).¹⁴ His intention was to put Spinoza back into his rightful place in Jewish culture, using the Kabbalah as a "hermeneutical instrument endowed to authenticity and consecrated by the transcendent dimension of Jewish mysticism" (Cernătescu, 2015).

While in thinking that pantheism was an idea taken by Spinoza from the Kabbalistic philosophy of the late Middle Ages (which he wrongly attributed to Jewish converts to Christianity¹⁵) Brucăr only followed a line already open 200 years earlier by Leibniz (Leibniz, 1734: 228), he was nevertheless original in tracing the roots of this notion in a controversial passage from the Zohar (1b), which he quoted in *Sketches and Studies*, (Brucăr, 1919: 271-273) under the title "On Object and Subject" (a literal translation of Hugo Bergman's "Subjekt und Objekt der Welt").

Through this, he [Spinoza] only reiterated an idea taken from the book of Zohar, which explains the antinomy between subject and object: who and what. Who [mi in Hebrew – a.n.] is the beginning of everything, it is and is not, and is deeply concealed in the name of God [Elohim – a.n.]. But, because God wanted to reveal Himself and be called by His name, he took off the precious and bright dress of the world and created these [eleh in Hebrew] or what [ma in Hebrew]. Therefore, "who" united with "what", i.e. mi united with eleh, and formed the name of God, Elohim. The Creator and his creation are one (Brucăr, 1925: 13).

This relates to the dialog between Rabbi Simon Bar Yochai, the supposed author of the Zohar, and his son Eleazar, on the name of Elohim, which Kabbalists thought to contain the highest mystery. According to the Zohar, the word *elohim* is a syntagm composed of a perpetual question and an essential answer: *elehi-mi*, read in reverse *mi eleh*? 'who [created] these [things]?', a

¹⁴ He quoted from Adolph Franck's *La kabbale ou la philosophie religieuse des Hébreux*, Paris, 1843. In fact, Brucăr's presentation of the Kabbalah was based exclusively on Frank's book.

¹⁵ Brucăr thought that "most kabbalists were Jews converted to Catholicism" (Brucăr, 1930: 50).

direct reference to the question of *Isaiah*, 40: 26: „Who created these things? (*mi bara eleh?*).” In Brucăr’s view, *mi* and *ma* are the two attributes of the divinity, spirit and matter, and their equality proves the theory of the divine immanence encapsulated in the adagio *deus sive natura* (Cernătescu, 2015).

Last but not least, a researcher of the Kabbalah whose interest in the topic stemmed from his devotion to religion, not from an academic preoccupation, but which nevertheless resulted in a highly scholarly approach to the subject, was Alexander Safran.

Safran published two books on the Kabbalah. The first, *La Cabale*, (Payot, 1960), in which he presented the essential Jewish mystical doctrines, commenting on their fundamental topics, as they are experienced by the believer, “the traditional man,” was drafted in cooperation with his daughter, Esther Starobinski. The second, *Sagesse de la Kabbale* (2 vols., Stock, 1986/1987), brought together numerous passages from the vast Jewish esoteric literature, which Safran translated and explained, so as to best present his readers with the works and authors that marked the evolution of Jewish mysticism. The volume thus included quotations from Yehuda HaLevi (1080-1145)’s *Sefer HaKuzari*, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204)’s *More HaNevuhim*, *Mishne Torah* and other works, Eleazar of Worms (1165-1230)’s *Sefer HaRokeah*, Moses Cordovero (1522-1570)’s *Pardess Rimonim*, Löw ben Bezalel (1525-1609)’s *Derech Hayim* and *Netsah Israel*, Isaac Luria (1534-1572)’s *Likutei Torah*, Eliyahu, the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797)’s *Divrei Eliyahu*, *Kol Eliyahu* and *Kol Eliyahu HaShalem*, Na’hman of Bratslav (1772-1811)’s *Likutei Moharan*, Joseph Hayim of Bagdad, Ben Ishe Hai (1832-1909)’s *Hassdei Avot*, Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook (1865-1935)’s *Orot HaKodesh*, and, naturally, extensive theosophical and cosmogonic references from the *Zohar* (such as I, 201a, II, 12a, 55b, 59b, etc.).

Safran taught his readers that:

There is not one letter, and one word, of the *Torah*, which does not contain important and precious mysteries, roots, branches, hints, explanations, paths that man can pursue, and trust. Happy are those who know it! (Safran, 1987: 9).

HaShem [God], blessed be He, established the order of the world according to the order of the *Torah*, for everything comes from the *Torah*. This is what they (our sages) say: ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, watched the *Torah* and created the world (*Genesis*, R. 1, 2; *Zohar* I, 5a).’ And this is what the *Mishna* says: ‘Turn it on all sides (examine the *Torah* attentively, in all senses), for everything is contained in it;’ this means: when you understand the *Torah*, you will understand the whole of reality, for the ways of this world come from the ways of the *Torah*, and the ways of the world are connected to the ways of the *Torah*, everything comes out of the *Torah*, which is the order of man; this means that everything is to be found in the *Torah* (Maharal, *Derech Hayim*, and *Avot* V, 23, p. 105b-106a) (idem: 10).

The Holy One, blessed be He, introduced all his hidden works in the Holy Torah; the Torah contains all. That which is concealed, the Torah reveals; but the Torah immediately puts on another garment, hides under it, revealing itself no more; nevertheless, the penetrating eye of the sages sees, through the garment, that which is hidden. The moment that which is hidden reveals itself, and before it has disappeared again behind its garment, (the sages) scrutinize it with the depth of their look; though it almost instantly disappears, their look manages to retain it (*Zohar* II, 98b) (*ibidem*).

Safran's book speaks of the open word and the hidden word; the written Torah and the oral Torah; the four ways of interpreting the Holy Script: literal, allegorical, homiletical and mystical; the logical rules for interpreting the Torah; totality and personality; the *mitzvot* (commandments) of the Torah, which can only be accomplished in their entirety by all of Israel acting together; the active commandments (*mitzvot asse*) and the defensive commandments (*mitzvot lo taasse*); the names of God ("The Holy One, blessed be He, is called *Ein-Sof*, the Infinite" and "His Greatness is fathomless," no thought could perceive Him);" (*idem*: 120) the *Shema!* (Listen!), the Jewish profession of faith; the act of eating and the benediction of food; the study of the Torah; prayer as a *mitzva*; the ten *sefirot* through which the divine will manifests itself; the "breaking of the vessels;" God and God's transcendence; the *Shekhinah* or the Divine Presence ("In all the lands of the Exile, in the *Galut*, where the children of Israel went, the *Shekhinah*, the "Divine Presence," accompanied them. It is together with Israel that the divine *Shekhinah* will leave the *Galut*, to return in the Land of Israel);" (*idem*: 204) the levels of the human soul; the *devekut* or the attachment to God, which is given pride of place in Lurianic Kabbalah; the *Teshuva* or the "return" to God, which "does not concern the sinner only, but any human being, when his soul desires to return to the source;" (*idem*: 191) the three realities linked to each other: God, Torah and Israel...

As historian Carol Iancu put it, "this dense volume shows that ethics is the main constant value of the Kabbalists' doctrine, which insists on the importance of the *sefirot* or the various levels of manifestation of the divine. Unlike Gershom Scholem, who devoted a great number of works to the history of Jewish mysticism, approaching it from a critical distance, Alexander Safran gets submerged in it with all his faith, speaking to us about the *wisdom* of the Kabbalah, as most Kabbalists added to the study and knowledge of the Torah their love for it. Thus, Kabbalah allows for an original spiritual development of the believer, for a renewal and enrichment of his inner life" (Iancu, 2008: 307).

In recognition of Rabbi Safran's contribution to the field, an "Alexander Safran Chair in Kabbalah" was opened at Bar Ilan University in 1981.

Practitioners of the Kabbalah in 19th and 20th century Romania

Besides those who took an interest in the Kabbalah as a popular culture or scholarly subject, there were, of course, also those who attempted practicing it. Naturally, less is known about them because they did not advertise their

preoccupation, so the little information we have is mostly indirect, from their disciples or even hearsay. A non-exhaustive list includes historian Meyer Abraham Halevy (1900-1972), who apparently taught Isaac Iosif Brucar, (Brucar, 1930: XXXVI); Dr. Emanuel Stein (1889-1946),¹⁶ who wrote a book called *Secrets of the Kabbalah* (which was, however, never published) and who apparently ran a Kabbalah school in Bucharest for a while (Idel, 2012); and Marcel Avramescu (1909-1984), a Jewish convert to Christianity, former surrealist writer and an admirer of Rene Guenon, who took his PhD in theology with a thesis on the Kabbalah after World War II and who gave Kabbalah lessons to a small circle of adepts, but who, much like Raymond Lull, used Kabbalah as a means to convince (some of) his Jewish disciples to follow his example and convert to Christianity as well.¹⁷

Elie Wiesel, too, mentions in his autobiographical novel *Night* that despite his father's conviction that there were no Kabbalists in Sighet (although he came from a Hassidic family himself), at the age of 12 he found a private teacher in Moishe the Beadle, "the jack-of-all-trades in a Hassidic house of prayer, a shtibl," who "spoke of divine suffering, of the Shekhinah in Exile, where, according to Kabbalah, it awaits its redemption linked to that of man," and started learning about the secret tradition (Wiesel, 2006: 3).

Conclusion

This study is by no means an attempt to draw an exhaustive list of all those who took a marginal or central, popular or scholarly, interest in the Kabbalah in Romanian Jewish history, or who tried to practice it. Of course there were others, who were not mentioned here. This is just an attempt to show that the connection between the Kabbalah and the Romanian lands goes way back in time, up to the 16th century, and includes important Kabbalists of international repute who ran famous Kabbalistic schools (such as Solomon ben Aroyo and Nathan Neta Hannover), as well as journalists (such as the Schwarzfeld brothers), philosophers (such as Isaac Iosif Brucăr) and rabbinic scholars (such as Jacob Isaac Niemirower, Moses Gaster or Alexander Safran), but also figures that are less known to the international world as Kabbalists (such as historian Meyer Abraham Halevy) as well as figures of genuine Kabbalists who are not known abroad at all (such as Rabbi Emanuel Stein or Marcel Avramescu). This goes to prove that not only did the Kabbalah have an influence on Romania but Romania also played a significant role in the evolution of the Kabbalah.

¹⁶ The descendant of a long rabbinic family that included Jehezkel Paneth, the chief rabbi of Transylvania.

¹⁷ According to Cora Lia Ascher Moisesescu Bujes, one of his Jewish students, who did follow his example and converted to Christianity (interviewed by the author in 2003). Incidentally, Avramescu was a friend of Mircea Eliade.

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