

# The *Kuzari* and Early Kabbalah: Between Integration and Interpretation regarding the Secrets of the Sacrificial Rite\*

Avishai Bar-Asher

*The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; avishai.bar-asher@mail.huji.ac.il*

## ■ Abstract

The proper place of Judah Halevi's thought in the initial emergence and subsequent development of medieval kabbalah has been the subject of debate for centuries. The general consensus has it that the *Kuzari* was not much more than a convenient repository of terms. This study measures the extent of Halevi's impact on early kabbalah by using the *Kuzari*'s reasons for the sacrificial rite as a test case.

Halevi offered an exoteric, more rationalistic explanation and alluded to an esoteric one. Catalonian kabbalists in fact engaged for generations with these two reasons offered by the *Kuzari*, displaying a shared yet variable approach to Halevi's thought. Unsurprisingly, some grabbed the low-hanging fruit by interpreting

\* This research is supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant number 727/19). The text of the Judeo-Arabic transliterations from the *Kuzari* is from *Kitab al-radd wa'l-dalil fi'l-din al-dhalil (alkitab al-khazari)* (ed. David H. Baneth and Haggai Ben-Shammai; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977), whereas the page numbers are from *Das Buch al-Chazarî des Abu-l-Hasan Jehuda Hallewi; im arabischen Urtext sowie in der hebräischen Übersetzung des Jehuda ibn Tibbon* (ed. Hartwig Hirschfeld; Leipzig: O. Schulze, 1887). The text from Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation is based on MS Munich, Bavarian State Library, Cod. hebr. 264 (with the assistance of the Ma'agarim online database of the Academy of the Hebrew Language). Hirschfeld's translation was consulted for translation of brief excerpts.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the President and Fellows of Harvard College. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

HTR 116:2 (2023) 228–253

Halevi's esoteric reason, which he refused to disclose, in terms of theosophical kabbalah. More unexpected, however, is the possible conceptual indebtedness of the earliest Catalonian kabbalists, like Ezra of Gerona, to Halevi's theurgic conception of the commandments and doctrine of the Godhead. Of particular interest, too, is the fact that later generations of kabbalists interpreted the *Kuzari* using paradigms they also employed in their conceptualization of theosophical kabbalah, such as astral magic or neoplatonic psychology and spiritual eschatology.

Halevi's work was not simply scavenged for its well-wrought nomenclature. If one looks closely, evidence for the *Kuzari*'s significant and lasting imprint can be found throughout kabbalah: in the doctrine of the Godhead, in the theurgic conception of religious ritual, in the development of an esoteric interpretation of religious praxis, in the establishment of an esoteric reading of *Sefer yezirah*, and more.

## ■ Keywords

*Kuzari*, early kabbalah, Judah Halevi, sacrifices, Ezra of Gerona, astral magic, *Sefer yezirah*, Nahmanides, divine matter

## ■ Introduction

Going on eight hundred years, scholars both traditional and academic have tried to ascertain where the thought of the venerated medieval philosopher Judah b. Samuel Halevi (1075–ca. 1141) fits in the unfinished puzzle of kabbalah's emergence. Interest in the question intensified during the Italian Renaissance, when the seminal figures Judah Moscato and Azariah de Rossi documented parallels between the *Kuzari*, Halevi's magnum opus, and medieval kabbalistic literature,<sup>1</sup> but thereafter it reduced to a simmer.<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century, the question became a burning one again, as scholars of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* assembled their sweeping histories of Judaism that perforce encompassed kabbalah's appearance.<sup>3</sup> While they were mostly dismissive of any perceived connection between Halevi's thought and early kabbalah,<sup>4</sup> a minority was receptive to the possibility that medieval kabbalah

<sup>1</sup> Judah Moscato's main activity in this regard can be found in his lengthy commentary on the *Kuzari* titled *Kol Yehudah*, published in the Venice 1594 edition of the *Kuzari*. See esp. Adam Shear, *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 135–69; Moshe Idel, "On Kabbalah in R. Judah Moscato's *Qol Yehudah*," in *Rabbi Judah Moscato and the Jewish Intellectual World of Mantua in the 16th–17th Centuries* (ed. Giuseppe Veltri and Gianfranco Mileto; Leiden: Brill, 2012) 57–78. The pioneering analyses of de Rossi were an extension of his investigation into the *Zohar*'s antiquity in Azariah de Rossi, *Sefer me'or 'enayim* (Mantua, 1574) pt. 4, ch. 51, 158b.

<sup>2</sup> Notably, Jacob Emden thought that the authors of later Zoharic corpora (according to his understanding) used Halevi's works; see Jacob Emden, *Mitpaḥat sefarim* (Lviv, 1870) 19 and 38.

<sup>3</sup> Especially noteworthy is the treatment of Elijah Benamozegh, who amassed considerable evidence in support of his argument that Halevi was familiar with kabbalah; see Elijah Benamozegh, *Ta'am le-shad* (Livorno, 1865) 143–44.

<sup>4</sup> See esp. *Sefer ha-kuzari* (ed. Gedaliah Brecher; 4 vols.; Prague, 1838–1840) 1:2a–4a (introduction)

owed some debt to Halevi.<sup>5</sup> Slightly later, a handful of scholars resuscitated the older, opposite theory that the *Kuzari* contains kabbalistic ideas that must have preceded it.<sup>6</sup>

In the mid-twentieth century, Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) staked out a middle position. In his highly influential scholarship, he affirmed a general connection between Halevi's thought and kabbalah but judged its impact negligible.<sup>7</sup> The *Kuzari*, Scholem claimed, was familiar to the esotericists of Provence ("the first kabbalists") and was actively used by the Geronese kabbalists ("their successors").<sup>8</sup> This fit his broader position on the inception of kabbalah: little of the light from the luminaries of Muslim Spain—Halevi included—was absorbed by kabbalah, and both late antique (and mostly "Gnostic") material and the roughly contemporary, anonymous circles of Provence made a much larger contribution to its development. To use Adam Shear's characterization, Scholem and his disciples viewed the *Kuzari* as contributing to kabbalah in mainly a terminological capacity.<sup>9</sup> His was the predominant view until the 1990s, when several studies presented conceptual

---

and 36b–37b (notes on IV:25); Samuel David Luzzatto, *Ha-'Vikkuah'*: 'al ḥokhmat ha-kabbalah ve-'al kadmut Sefer ha-Zohar ve-kadmut ha-nekuddot ve-ha-te'amim (ed. Yonatan Baši; Jerusalem: Karmel, 2013) 57–60; Heinrich Graetz, *Divrei yemei Yisra'el* (trans. Shaul Phineas Rabinowitz; 8 vols.; Warsaw, 1890–1899) 5:387–88 n.3. See also Sefer Ha-kuzari le-Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, *The Kosari of Yehuda Halevi* (trans. Yehudah Even Shmuel; Tel Aviv: Devir, 1972) 19–20 nn. 7–8, and 392–95 (Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelm Bacher, "Judaean-Christian Polemics in the Zohar," *JQR* 3 (1890) 781–84; David Neumark, *Toledot ha-pilosofiyah be-Yisra'el* (2 vols.; New York and Philadelphia: A. I. Shtibel, 1921–1929) 1:166–92 (it does not appear in the earlier German source material, *Geschichte der jüdischen Philosophie des Mittelalters*).

<sup>6</sup> See Yehuda Leib Avida, *Ma'amarim mi-Sefer Midrash ha-Melizah ha-'Ivrit* (Jerusalem: 'Alumah, 1938/9) 5–16; Israel Weinstock, *Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1969) 108, 114 n. 26 (Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> Gershom Scholem articulated this position already in his popular monograph, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (3rd ed.; New York: Schocken, 1954) 24.

<sup>8</sup> On the possibility of Rabad's circle being familiar with the *Kuzari* in Ibn Tibbon's translation, see Gershom Scholem, *Reshit ha-kabbalah (1150–1250)* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1948) 83–84; idem, *Ha-kabbalah be-Gironah: perakim be-toledot ha-kabbalah bi-Sefarad* (ed. Yosef Ben-Shlomo; Jerusalem: Mi'fal ha-Shikhpul, 1964) 109–10. While Scholem also noted similarities between ideas in the *Kuzari* and formulations in the *Bahir*, he did not take this as evidence of the former being an important source for the latter but of the *Bahir*'s final stratum having been edited by the anonymous esotericists of Provence; see idem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky; trans. Allan Arkush; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987) 64. He even went so far as to put the date of Ibn Tibbon's translation of the *Kuzari* around the time when the final editors of the *Bahir* would have been active (*ibid.*, 78) and its place of dissemination somewhere in the vicinity of Rabad's circle (*ibid.*, 221). He made a similar argument with respect to the 'Iyyun circle, which he believed numbered some Provençal esotericists (*ibid.*, 300 n. 200). For Scholem's remarks on rare expressions in 13th-cent. Spanish kabbalah that seem to come from the *Kuzari*, see idem, *Major Trends*, 173, and additional studies in the notes below.

<sup>9</sup> See Shear, *Kuzari*, 31–36 and 71–76. For a history of the treatment of the *Kuzari* in kabbalistic literature, see the sources noted in Moshe Idel, *Angelic World: Apotheosis and Theophany* (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot Aharonot, 2008) 30–33 (Hebrew); and see also idem, *The Gate of Intention: R. Isaac of Acre and Its Reception* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2020) 96–99.

(and in some cases textual) affinities between early kabbalah and medieval Jewish philosophical literature, including the *Kuzari*.<sup>10</sup> Although more research is required on this, the *Kuzari* might have been a source for the kabbalistic notion of theurgy, the influence of humankind on the Godhead.<sup>11</sup> This deserves consideration especially given Shlomo Pines's (1908–1990) famous supposition that Halevi drew deeply from hermetic thought, via Arabic magical material that included Isma'ili works, in order to explain core Jewish rituals theurgically, particularly in terms of drawing forth the *ruhaniyyot* ("spiritual beings").<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Merkavah Traditions in Philosophical Garb: Judah Halevi Reconsidered," *PAAJR* 57 (1990–1991) 179–242, reworked somewhat in idem, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 163–87; Mark B. Sendor, "The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind's Commentary on *Sefer Yezirah*; Translation and Annotation" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1994), esp. 1:67–69, 244–54; Warren Zev Harvey, "Judah Halevi's Synesthetic Theory of Prophecy and a Note on the *Zohar*," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 12 (1996): 13–15 (Hebrew); Diana Lobel, "A Dwelling Place for the *Shekhinah*," *JQR* 90 (1999) 103–25; Adam Afterman, *Devequt: Mystical Intimacy in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2011) esp. 101–73 (Hebrew); Jonathan Dauber, *Knowledge of God and the Development of Early Kabbalah* (Leiden: Brill, 2012) 128–33, 229–43; Haviva Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001) 274–79 (Hebrew); Mordechai Pachter, "'The Root of Faith Is the Root of Heresy' in the Teaching of R. Azriel of Gerona," *Kabbalah* 4 (1999) 315–41 (Hebrew).

<sup>11</sup> For comments on the possible connection between Shlomo Pines's theories and the possible ground for theurgy in theosophical kabbalah (in connection with the sacrificial rite), see Sara Sviri, "Spiritual Trends in Pre-Kabbalistic Judeo-Spanish Literature: The Cases of Bahya Ibn Paquda and Judah Halevi," *Donaire* 6 (1996) 81–83, and eadem, "Jewish–Muslim Mystical Encounters in Middle Ages with Particular Attention to al-Andalus (Muslim Spain)," in *Jews in the Medieval Islamic World* (ed. Phillip I. Lieberman; CHJ 5; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Yehuda Liebes, *Cult of the Dawn: The Attitude of the Zohar towards Idolatry* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2011) 88–89 (Hebrew). See too Amos Goldreich, "The Theology of the 'Iyyun' Circle and a Possible Source of the Term *Ahadut Shava*," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6.3–4 (1987) 141–56 (Hebrew); Moshe Idel, "Hermeticism and Kabbalah," in *Hermeticism from Late Antiquity to Humanism* (ed. Paolo Lucentini, Ilaria Parri, and Vittoria Perrone Compagni; Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) 385–428; idem, "Judaism, Jewish Mysticism, and Magic," *Jewish Studies* 36 (1996): 25–40 (Hebrew); and see also Ehud Krinis, "The Arabic Background of the *Kuzari*," *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 21 (2013) 1–56, esp. 40–44; idem, *God's Chosen People: Judah Halevi's "Kuzari" and the Shī'ī Imām Doctrine* (trans. Ann Brener and Tamar Liza Cohen; Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), esp. 189–223. See now Michael Epstein, "Human Action, God's Will: Further Thoughts on the Divine Command (*amr*) in the Teachings of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī (560–638/1165–1240)," in *Intellectual Interactions in the Islamic World: The Ismaili Thread* (ed. Orkhan Mir-Kasimov; London: I. B. Tauris, 2020) 171–90, esp. 173–75.

<sup>12</sup> Shlomo Pines, "On the term *Ruḥaniyyot* and Its Origin and on Judah Halevi's Doctrine," *Tarbiz* 57 (1988) 511–40 (Hebrew). See further, idem, "Shī'ite Terms and Conceptions in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*," *JSAI* 2 (1980) 165–251, esp. 192–210 and 247–51. Likewise, Dov Schwartz has hypothesized that the esoteric layer of the *Kuzari* should be identified with astral magic; see Dov Schwartz, *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999) 31–61 (Hebrew), and idem, *Central Problems of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) 160–70; see also Ronald C. Kiener, "The Status of Astrology in the Early Kabbalah: From the *Sefer Yezirah* to the *Zohar*," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6.3–4 (1987) 1–42.

The present study reassesses the question of Halevi's relationship with Spanish kabbalah by using the *Kuzari's* reasons for the sacrificial service as a test case. Halevi offered an exoteric, rationalistic explanation of the sacrifices and alluded to an esoteric one. Kabbalists active in Catalonia treated this material in two different ways that are emblematic of their general approaches to the *Kuzari*. They either absorbed Halevi's formulations and ideas into their own speculation, even declaring so explicitly, or they interpreted them kabbalistically, especially the esoteric rationales he refused to disclose. The earliest kabbalists in Catalonia (and not, *pace* Scholem, in Provence) did not merely esteem Halevi's facility of expression and borrow some of his terminology for their own purposes but treated the *Kuzari* as a foundation for their esoteric doctrines. Their Geronese successors continued to engage with the *Kuzari* in new and interesting ways, and around the turn of the fourteenth century, the interpretation of the *Kuzari* according to the principles of kabbalistic theosophy was in full swing. Halevi's esoteric explanations of commandments like the animal sacrifices and veiled references attracted Catalonian theurgical kabbalists like moths to the proverbial flame.

This sustained kabbalistic engagement with the *Kuzari* over many generations should serve to reorient our thinking surrounding Halevi and the formation of early theosophical kabbalah. The varying and sometimes even contradictory approaches of kabbalists to his *Kuzari* point to its more significant role in the development of kabbalistic thought than previously believed. And if one dips beyond the verbal surface and scans the deep structures underneath, the lasting impact of Halevi's ideas can be seen throughout kabbalah: in the doctrine of the Godhead, in the theurgic conception of religious ritual, in the development of an esoteric interpretation of religious praxis, in the establishment of an esoteric reading of *Sefer yeẓirah*, and more. It is therefore time to write Halevi (back) into the narrative of kabbalah's formative period.

### ■ The *Kuzari* and the “Earliest Kabbalist”: Ezra of Gerona

One of the earliest kabbalistic writings in our possession is a brief but fascinating letter by Ezra b. Solomon of Gerona (fl. early 13th cent.) addressed to one Abraham. It is extant in partial or complete form in three manuscripts,<sup>13</sup> which preserve Ezra's abbreviated responsa to a range of questions put to him by this questioner.<sup>14</sup> The questions concern the connection between a series of theological, cosmogonical, and theurgical issues in kabbalah and the Judeo-Arabic philosophical legacy of al-Andalus—the writings of Solomon Ibn Gabirol (mid-11th cent.), Judah Halevi,

<sup>13</sup> MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 202, fols. 64r–66r; MS Parma, Palatina Library, Cod. Parm. 2704 (De Rossi 68, Richler 1202), fols. 76v–77r; MS New York—JTS Ms. 1777 (previously MS Enelau 699), fols. 9v–10v.

<sup>14</sup> Gershom Scholem, “A New Document Concerning the Early History of the Kabbalah,” in *Studies in Kabbalah [1]* (ed. Yosef Ben-Shlomo and Moshe Idel; Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘Oved, 1998) 25–31 (Hebrew). Scholem identified the questioner as R. Abraham Ḥazzan Gerondi.

and Moses Maimonides (1138–1204). In his response to the fifth question, which concerns the rationale behind commandments that have no overt reason in Scripture, Ezra enumerates the “divine (*'elohiyyot*) commandments,” which include the offering of sacrifices. His concise response can be divided into three parts, each of which draws on a distinct source:

The reason for the sacrifice has already been explained by the Khazarian rabbi.<sup>15</sup> When [Scripture] says *le-'ishay* (Num 28:2), everything difficult is resolved. It is the fire (*'esh*) that undergoes change according to its *davar*,<sup>16</sup> that is, the primordial elements, for everything (*davar*)<sup>17</sup> in accordance with its [degree of] rarefaction returns to its elemental source.

The Sages said in *Torat kohanim*:

“*Olah*, for the sake of *'olah*”—the light of the *Shekhinah* that ascends to the place whence it was hewn.

“*Isheh*, for the sake of *'isheh*”—these are the embodied *devarim*.

“*Reah*, for the sake of *reah*”—the spiritual (*ruhaniyyim*) within the embodied.

“*Niḥoah*, for the sake of *naḥat ruah*”<sup>18</sup>—the light of the intellect that descends<sup>19</sup> onto the attributes.

“*La-YY*”—for the sake of the one who made the world.”<sup>20</sup>

The priest would be exacting in his intention to draw forth the Will through oral and instrumental song, thereby bringing close (*le-qarev*) and unifying the spirit (*ruah*) with the attributes. This is the language of *qorban*, for the spirit descends to draw close (*mitqarev*) and become one with the holy forms.<sup>21</sup>

Ezra states explicitly that the first section (above) is taken from the beginning of the rabbi’s answer to the king’s question about the reasons for the sacrifices, the Hebrew coming from Judah Ibn Tibbon’s (1120–ca. 1190) masterful translation of *Kuzari* 2.26. Ezra’s contribution is to identify “the fire” undergoing change with the elemental fire. This is consistent with Halevi’s own view: he distinguishes between “visible, manifest fire” (*al-nār al-zāhirah al-mašhūrah*) and “ethereal,

<sup>15</sup> This figure is variously referred to as the *haver*, *hakham*, or *rav* in different sources. Since the referent is stable, for purposes of consistency the traditional translation of “rabbi” will be used throughout this article.

<sup>16</sup> Hebrew *davar* (pl. *devarim*) is a common term for divine emanations in early kabbalah, although that is not necessarily its only referent. It can be translated as “entities,” “essences,” or “words,” but it seems more prudent to transliterate.

<sup>17</sup> Here, the meaning of *davar* seems broader, but as we will see below, it is interpreted by theosophical kabbalists in terms of the *sefirot*.

<sup>18</sup> *Naḥat ruah* is usually translated idiomatically as “pride” or “satisfaction,” but here it is being used in its literal sense to mean “descent of the spirit.” The etymologies in the sources cited throughout this article assume that the *tav* of *n-h-t* is either not part of the root or need not be represented.

<sup>19</sup> Although the Hebrew has *ha-yoreh*, “that pours,” I have emended it based on context and parallels to read *ha-yored*.

<sup>20</sup> *Sifra* here is parsing the Hebrew formulation that appears in Lev 1:9 and elsewhere: *'olah 'isheh reah niḥoah la-YHWH*.

<sup>21</sup> MS Vat. ebr. 202, fol. 65v.

rarified fire” (*al-nār al-laṭīfah*) in the context of the sacrifices.<sup>22</sup> Instead of reading this as a mere translation of Halevi’s language into the terminology of theosophical kabbalah, I think it more accurate to say that he used this quote from the *Kuzari* in support of—or perhaps even as the basis of—his own kabbalistic interpretation of the sacrificial rite, which centers on the principle of returning the rarefied *devarim* to their “elemental source.”<sup>23</sup>

The second section is a running elucidation of the *Sifra*’s parsing of a biblical refrain concerning the sacrifices.<sup>24</sup> Here, Ezra further develops this principle of the *devarim* returning to their source. Another work written by Ezra, a commentary on Song of Songs (misattributed in certain manuscripts and in print to R. Moses Nahmanides), reveals that this elucidation originated in a tradition he attributed to “the *Hasid*,” an antonomasia for R. Isaac b. R. Abraham (Rabad) of Posquières (late 12th–early 13th cents.):

“*Olah*, for the sake of ‘*olah*’—the tenth attribute that ascends on high to the place of its origin.

“*Isheh*, for the sake of ‘*ishim*’—our master the *Hasid* of blessed memory explained, the embodied *devarim*.

“*Reah*, for the sake of *reah*”—the spiritual within the embodied.

“*Niḥoah*, for the sake of *naḥat ruah*”—the drawing forth (*hazmanat*) of *Teshuvah*, which is ‘the hiding place of His might’” (Hab. 3:4).

“*La-YY*, for the sake of the one who made the world.”<sup>25</sup>

It seems, then, that in his response to his questioner, Ezra combined a brief exegetical tradition attributed to Isaac the Blind<sup>26</sup> with the notion of the *devarim* returning to their point of origin, which is based on his reading of the *Kuzari*. This also would account for the change he made to that tradition, replacing “*Teshuvah*, which is the hiding place of His might” with “the light of the Intellect that descends on the attributes.”

The third section, which discusses drawing forth the divine spirit and unifying it with the *sefirot*, referred to as the “holy forms,” might in fact be the earliest unmarked quotation of the *Bahir* (§78): “Why is it called a *qorban*? Because it draws together (*meqarev*) the holy forms . . . as it is written: ‘he descended’ (Lev

<sup>22</sup> *Kuzari* 2.26: 96, 26; 98, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah*, 30 n. 100, suggested that Ezra was interpreting Halevi’s words to be about the *sefirah Gevurah*.

<sup>24</sup> *Sifra, dibbura di-nedavah*, 4.6.

<sup>25</sup> Ezra of Gerona, *Perush Shir ha-Shirim*, in *Kitvei rabbenu Moshe ben Nahman* (ed. Charles B. Chavel; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1964) 2:499 (corrected acc. to MS Vienna, Austrian National Library, Cod. hebr. 148, fol. 33r). See Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah*, 30 n. 101. Given where the attribution begins, the notion of the tenth attribute ascending might not have been part of the tradition.

<sup>26</sup> Although the application of this epithet (*sagi nehor*) to Isaac was a later development, this is his common scholarly designation.

9:22), which is translated in the Targum as *u-nehāt*. The spirit descends and becomes unified with those holy forms.”<sup>27</sup>

Returning to the first section, our proposal that Ezra mentioned the *Kuzari* because he was meaningfully incorporating its rationale, rather than treating it as a text for kabbalistic interpretation, may find support in his commentary on Talmudic *aggadot* preserved in manuscript. It opens with the same line from the *Sifra* but this time unaccompanied by Isaac the Blind’s explanation. It continues:

“To bring close (*le-haqriv*) to Me” (Num 28:2)—it does not say “to come close (*le-qarev*) to Me,” because it is the altar that receives first and returns each and every thing (*davar*)<sup>28</sup> to its elemental source. All the flora and fauna need the primordial powers to grow and flourish, and ultimately they return to them. This is [the meaning of] “they shall go up on [the] Will (*raẓon*), which is My altar” (Isa 60:7). Observe how settled this verse is according to kabbalah, and how confusing and disordered it is in the popular interpretation.<sup>29</sup> . . .

The priest knew how to direct his attention to draw forth the *devarim* during the service through vocal and instrumental song, for in them the soul (*ne-shamah*) derives pleasure and becomes more rarefied. This is clear. *Niḥoaḥ* is the language of descent; the Targum for “he descended” (Lev 9:22) is *u-nehāt*. By means of the sacrifice the spirit would descend and unite with the holy forms, drawing close (*mitqarev*) through the sacrifice. That is why it is called *qorban*.<sup>30</sup>

There is considerable overlap between this passage and the second and third sections of the letter. The middle portion of this commentary appears to be an elaboration of Ezra’s conception of the sacrificial rite, according to which the *devarim* return from the bottom of the sefirotic tree up to the top where the “primordial powers”

<sup>27</sup> I do not address here the interesting, and I think reasonable, possibility that the *Bahir*’s own conception of the sacrifice was formulated with the *Kuzari*’s theurgic one in mind. Of course, this is part of the broader debate on the dating and provenance of the *Bahir*. On this, see Avishai Bar-Asher, “The *Bahir* and Its Historiography: A Reassessment,” *JR* 103.2 (2023) (forthcoming). For other connections between the *Bahir* and the *Kuzari*, see also Giulio Busi, foreword to *The Book of Bahir: Falvius Mithridates’ Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version* (ed. Saverio Campanini; The Kabbalistic Library of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola 2; Torino: Nino Aragno Editore, 2005) 16–36.

<sup>28</sup> See above, n. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Compare Scholem, *Origins*, 403 n. 86; Jonathan Dauber, “Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona and the Sabians,” *JJS* 70 (2019) 276–97, at 279 n. 16.

<sup>30</sup> MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 441, fol. 27v. As pointed out by Isaiah Tishby (*Wisdom of the Zohar* [trans. David Goldstein; 3 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press for Littman Library, 1989] 3:880 nn. 102–3), it is likely that an opposition to Maimonides’s rationalization of the sacrifices (being a Mosaic reaction to pagan practices active in the time of the Torah) is also implied here in Ezra’s explanation of the sacrifices: “You should know the reason for the offering that Adam brought at a time when idolatry did not exist in the world”; MS Vat. ebr. 441, fol. 27r. See also Moshe Idel, “Maimonides and Kabbalah,” in *Studies in Maimonides* (ed. Isadore Twersky; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 49–50. On Ezra’s polemic against aspects of Maimonides’s reasons for the commandments, see Dauber, “Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona,” 276–97.



are located. The reader will recall that in the letter this idea is juxtaposed with the *Kuzari*'s reasons for the sacrifices, which I do not believe is incidental.

Yet a fourth iteration of this explanation of the esoteric workings of the sacrifices appears in similar language in Ezra's explication (*be'ur*) of the 613 commandments that emerge from the Decalogue (henceforth: *Be'ur*).<sup>31</sup> There, he enters into great detail, explaining all the categories of sacrifices, in the course of which he emphasizes the principle of "appeasing the inner, spiritual (*ruhaniyyim*) *devarim*"; that is, the sacrificial offering repairs damage caused to the *sefirot* by human beings.<sup>32</sup>

All told, four texts from a variety of genres show a carefully thought out approach to the sacrificial rite, which integrates three esoteric reasons from as many sources. They are: the returning of the ethereal, elemental fire to its source, based on the *Kuzari*; the somewhat enigmatic direction of the sacrifice to embodied and spiritual divine powers, attributed to a tradition of the *Hasid*; and the drawing down of the divine power to the "holy forms," taken from the *Bahir*.<sup>33</sup> This synthesis marks Ezra's unique explanation of the sacrificial logic that would come to be widely disseminated.<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, the evident link between Ezra's terse epistolary response and his more extensive treatment in his commentary on Song of Songs makes it reasonable to assume that the former came first. Perhaps he initially wrote more esoterically to specific initiates and only later devoted his energies to disseminating kabbalah.<sup>35</sup> Only in the longer version do we learn that he was quoting Isaac the Blind's interpretation in the letter, although he had replaced the original theosophical nomenclature, "the tenth attribute" (*Malkhut*) and "*Teshuvah*" (*Binah*), with "the light of the *Shekhinah*" and "the light of the intellect." It is noteworthy that Ezra uses this pair of terms in the proximity of a quote from Halevi, because elsewhere Ezra quotes the *Kuzari* (1.109) approvingly for distinguishing between "intelligible light" (*al-nūr al-ma'qūl*) and "sensible light" (*al-nūr al-mahsūs*).<sup>36</sup> In formulating

<sup>31</sup> See Yakov M. Travis, "Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice: Rabbi Ezra of Gerona—On the Kabbalistic Meaning of the Mizvot; Introduction, Annotated Translation, Critical Hebrew Edition" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2002) 292–300 (Eng. section).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–32 (Heb. section).

<sup>33</sup> On the place of theurgy in Ezra's explanation of the commandments, see Moshe Idel, "Some Remarks on Ritual and Mysticism in Geronese Kabbalah," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993) 121–25.

<sup>34</sup> The fact that an early Catalan kabbalist combined these three runs counter to the unsupported speculation that the *Bahir*, Rabad's circle, and the *Kuzari* encountered one another earlier in Provence, see above, n. 7, and Shear, *Kuzari*, 27–28.

<sup>35</sup> Ezra described his commentary on Song of Songs as his first composition, although he penned it only during his twilight years; see *Kitvei Ramban*, (ed. C. D. Chavel; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963) 2:479. The degree to which Ezra's "circle" disseminated kabbalistic material depends largely on an epistle written by Isaac the Blind to the Geronese kabbalists; see Avishai Bar-Asher, "R. Isaac the Blind's Letter and the History of Early Kabbalah," *JQR* 111 (2021) 414–43.

<sup>36</sup> MS Vat. ebr. 441, fol. 8v. See Isaiah Tishby, *Commentary on Talmudic Aggadah* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1945) 34 n. 15 (Hebrew) (Azriel adapted the words of Ezra without attribution: "his soul will be tied to the intelligible light and cleave to it without individuation"); and Scholem,

his own approach to the secret rationale of the sacrificial rite, perhaps Ezra sought to borrow Halevi's terminology while charging it with theosophical meaning.

The two ontologically distinct lights in fact appear in Halevi's own discussion of the sacrifices in *Kuzari* 2.25–26. Halevi writes that the animal sacrifices, meal offerings, and incenses were not intended for God's benefit but to maintain harmony among the "living, godly people" by establishing a connection with the elemental fire, the most rarefied and sublime element in nature. The "well-arranged order" (*ḥusn al-nizām*) prepares reality for the "divine matter" (*al-'amr al-'illāhī*)<sup>37</sup> to "rest in an exalted sense" (*ḥulūl tashrīf*), and enables it to "to emanate light, wisdom, and understanding" (*'an al-ifādati 'alayhi nūran wa-ḥikmatan wa-ilhām*).<sup>38</sup> Halevi also differentiates quite finely between existents, especially those described as lights, associated with the various temple implements. Aside from the copper and golden altars, to which the manifest and ethereal fires respectively cleave, there are the shewbread table, to which the divine efflux and "embodied blessings" (*al-khayrāt al-jasadiyyah*) are bound; the candelabrum that bears "the light of wisdom and inspiration" (*nūr al-ḥikmah wa-'l-ilhām*); and the Urim and Thummim to which clings the "the light of prophecy" (*nūr al-nubuwwah*). Halevi provides an account of how the "divine matter" rests on all creation and how a range of fires and divine lights adhere to aspects of reality.

It is my contention that Ezra did not cite the *Kuzari* in the first part of the letter simply because he selected a specific line to shoehorn into his own theory, owing to some fortunate likeness in language or in concept. Rather, Ezra's entire kabbalistic account of the Godhead and divine emanation is significantly indebted to Halevi's conception of God and the activity of these various entities. He had all this in mind as he reworked the *Ḥasid's* tradition, leading to his incorporation of "the light of the *Shekhinah*" and "the light of the intellect" alongside the original distinction between the "spiritual *devarim*" and the "spiritual within the embodied."<sup>39</sup>

---

*Origins*, 224 (and 300 n. 200, and 411 n. 107); Moshe Idel, "Nishmat Eloah: On the Divinity of the Soul in Nahmanides and in His School," in *Life as a Midrash* (ed. Shahar Arzy, Michal Fachler, and Baruch Kahana; Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot Aḥaronot, 2004) 360–61 (Hebrew); Boaz Huss, *The Zohar: Reception and Impact* (trans. Yudit Nave; Oxford: Littman Library, 2016) 19. Compare this to another important citation of the *Kuzari* found in the writings of the Geronese kabbalists: "He further said that the only thing required of it is the return of the divine soul of the human being" (Ezra of Gerona, *Perush ha-aggadot*, MS Vat. ebr. 441, fol. 5r; Tishby, *Commentary*, 14 ll. 5–9 n. 6; see the same statement attributed to "philosophers" in Jacob b. Sheshet, *Meshiv devarim nekhoḥim* [ed. Georges Vajda; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1969] 96). See, further, Afterman, *Devequt*, 99–101, 265–70.

<sup>37</sup> Owing to the many different senses and shades of meaning attributed to this term, it will be translated relatively neutrally as "divine matter."

<sup>38</sup> *Kuzari* 2.26: 94, 12. Compare to Halevi's earlier discussion in 2.14 about the altars used by the patriarchs, "who through them were answered by the supernal fire and the divine light."

<sup>39</sup> For attempts to identify the incorporation of Halevi's "divine matter" in medieval kabbalah, see, inter alia, Scholem, *Origins*, 291 n. 182; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:232. For the same regarding his notion of the *Shekhinah*, see esp. Scholem, *Origins*, 223–24 (and Yochanan Silman, *Philosopher and Prophet: Judah Halevi, the Kuzari, and the Evolution of His Thought* [trans. Lenn J.

Other kabbalists aside from Ezra drew on Halevi's thought in discussing the mystery of the sacrificial rite. Halevi concludes his discussion of the sacrifices with an unusual declaration about the limitations of his lengthy, rationalistic explanation. This, he says, is intended for those "who investigate and analyze," relying on *ta'acqu* and *baht*, whereas a "more secret and higher" (*akhfā wa-a'lā*) reason is reserved for the elite.<sup>40</sup> As we will see below, Catalonian kabbalists also provided exoteric and esoteric reasons, and even considered their own kabbalistic interpretation the "secret and higher" reason that Halevi refused to disclose.

### ■ The *Kuzari* in Nahmanides's Treatment of the Sacrifices

Moses Nahmanides (ca. 1194–ca. 1270), Ezra of Gerona's illustrious rabbinic contemporary, famously discoursed the reasons for the sacrificial rite in his Torah commentary. On the exoteric level, he vigorously rejected Maimonides's rationalization of the sacrifices while adopting, in some fashion, the astral model of the noted Bible commentator, and thinker, R. Abraham Ibn Ezra (ca. 1090–ca. 1165).<sup>41</sup> At the same time, Nahmanides believed in an esoteric kabbalistic explanation, to which he characteristically was only willing to allude.<sup>42</sup>

Less well-known is Nahmanides's literary sermon of allusive kabbalistic material titled *Torat ha-Shem Temimah*, which might have been a precursor to the kabbalah of his Torah commentary.<sup>43</sup> It not only resembles Ezra's letter in its brevity and

---

Schramm; Albany: SUNY Press, 1995] 203–6). On the connection between the term *Shekhinah* and *al-'amr* in the *Kuzari*, see the classic treatment of Harry Austryn Wolfson, "Halevi and Maimonides on Prophecy (continued)," *JQR* 33 (1942) 49–58. On the connection between humoral equilibrium as a necessary foundation for the human intellect and the resting of the divine matter, see Menachem Lorberbaum, *Dazzled by Beauty: Theology as Poetics in Hispanic Jewish Culture* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2011) 178–79 (Hebrew).

<sup>40</sup> For Halevi's use of *baht* and its limitations, see Yehuda Halper, "Socrates and Socratic Philosophy in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*," *JQR* 107 (2017) 460–61.

<sup>41</sup> For a treatment of Nahmanides's disagreement with Maimonides about the sacrificial rite, see Amos Funkenstein, "Nahmanides' Symbolic Reading of History," in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism* (ed. Joseph Dan and Frank Talmage; Cambridge, MA: Association of Jewish Studies, 1982) 133–34; Daniel Ch. Matt, "The Mystic and the 'Mizvot'," in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages* (ed. Arthur Green; Crossroad: New York, 1986) 380–81; Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments (Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot)* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998) 67–86; Moshe Halbertal, *Nahmanides: Law and Mysticism* (trans. Daniel Tabak; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020) 239–49. See also Maurizio Mottolese, "Sulla ri-significazione dei rituali del sacrificio nell'esegesi cabalistica del XIII secolo," *Materia Giudaica* 6 (2001) 69–77. On Ibn Ezra's understanding of the sacrifices, see esp. Tvzi Langermann, "Some Astrological Themes in the Thought of Abraham Ibn Ezra," in *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath* (ed. Isadore Twersky and Jay M. Harris; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 35–42; Shlomo Sela, *Astrology and Biblical Exegesis in Abraham Ibn Ezra's Thought* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999) 338–40 (Hebrew).

<sup>42</sup> For an analysis of the kabbalistic interpretation of the sacrificial rite in Nahmanides's Bible commentary, see esp. Elliot R. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic," *AJSR* 14 (1989) 129–33 (with lit. cited).

<sup>43</sup> See Oded Yisraeli, "From *Torat Ha-Shem Temimah* to the Torah Commentary: Milestones in

allusiveness, but it too treats *Kuzari* 2.25–26 in a discussion of the reasons for the sacrificial rite.<sup>44</sup> Nahmanides mentions Ibn Ezra’s astral theory approvingly but notes its limitations and the need for “another reason,” the one supplied by theosophical kabbalah. Although he deems both valid, he privileges the esoteric reason over the exoteric one.<sup>45</sup>

I propose that Nahmanides does not mention Halevi’s reason merely for the sake of variety but to indicate that he is using it to develop his esoteric, theurgic reason for the sacrifices. Recall that Halevi said the purpose is to cause the “divine matter” to “rest in an exalted sense” within reality, and Nahmanides, too, talks about the resting of the *Shekhinah* achieved through the sacrificial rite.<sup>46</sup> Although the *Kuzari* wasn’t a major source of Nahmanides’s thought, Halevi’s conception of God did contribute to Nahmanides’s notion of the soul emanating from a divine source and to his account of cleaving to the *Shekhinah*.<sup>47</sup> We will return to the legacy of Nahmanides’s kabbalah and its encounter with the *Kuzari* below.

## ■ Traces of the *Kuzari* in Kabbalistic Works Attributed to R. Azriel of Gerona

Ezra of Gerona’s kabbalistic explanation of the sacrificial rite in his commentary on the Talmudic *aggadot* does not seem to have left any trace in Azriel of Gerona’s (fl.

Nahmanides’ Creative Life,” *Tarbiz* 83 (2015) 163–95 (Hebrew).

<sup>44</sup> *Kitvei Ramban*, 1:163.

<sup>45</sup> Dov Schwartz has claimed that the exoteric explanation based on astral magic and the esoteric one based on kabbalistic theurgy were of equal validity for Nahmanides, and that some expositors of his allusions highlighted the astral more than the theurgic elements; see Dov Schwartz, “From Theurgy to Magic: The Evolution of the Magical-Talismanic Justification of Sacrifice in the Circle of Nahmanides and His Interpreters,” *Aleph* 1 (2001) 165–213, esp. 165–80. In contrast, see Miriam Sklarz, “The Place of Abraham Ibn Ezra in Nahmanides’ Commentary to Genesis” (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2002) 192–97 (Hebrew). See now Oded Yisraeli, “The One Bringing the Sacrifice Must Think Only about the Divine Name: Nahmanides’ Criticism of the Kabbalah,” *Jewish Studies* 2 (2019) 9–21 (Hebrew). On hermetic ideas in Nahmanides’s writings, see Idel, “Hermeticism and Kabbalah,” 396; Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004) 105–12 (Hebrew).

<sup>46</sup> *Kitvei Ramban*, 2:163. See Chavel’s note linking Nahmanides’s formulation to *Kuzari* 3.53 (*Kitvei Ramban*, 2:164).

<sup>47</sup> On the emanation of the soul, see Nahmanides’s use of Halevi’s *mustajāb* poem, “Barekhi ’azulah me-ruaḥ ha-kodesh,” in his commentary on Num 11:17 and in his responsum to Jonah Gerondi (*Kitvei Ramban*, 1:384). It is also quoted by Azriel of Gerona in Tishby, *Commentary*, 32–33. See, further, Moshe Hallamish, “Toward the Source of the Kabbalistic Expression: ‘One Who Blows—Blows from within Himself,’” *Bar-Ilan* 13 (1976) 219–20 (Hebrew); Yehuda Liebes, “Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol’s Use of the *Sefer Yešira* and a Commentary on the Poem ‘I Love Thee,’” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6.3–4 (1987) 88 nn. 49–51 (Hebrew); Moshe Idel, “Understanding of Kabbalah in Scholem’s Research,” *Daat* 50–52 (2003) 492 (Hebrew); idem, “*Nishmat Eloah*,” 364 n. 176. On cleaving to the *Shekhinah*, see Nahmanides’s comment on Deut 11:22, which relies on *Kuzari* 3.65 about the cleaving of human beings who were “an abode (*maḥall*) for the *Shekhinah*.” See Lobel, “Dwelling Place,” 103–6; Afterman, *Devequt*, 301–3.

mid-13th cent.) own such commentary.<sup>48</sup> Still, texts concerning the secrets of the sacrificial rite are attributed to Azriel. One manuscript of early Spanish kabbalah contains a collection of five short expositions of the sacrificial rite produced by different kabbalists, the last of which is attributed to Azriel.<sup>49</sup> Four of these pieces, including the one attributed to Azriel, are also included in *Me'irat 'enayim* of R. Isaac of Acre (late 13th–mid-14th cents.), who knew of more than twelve kabbalistic explanations, but the one attributed to Azriel is cited anonymously and a different anonymous piece is attributed to Azriel instead.<sup>50</sup> We will refer to the author of this passage as Pseudo-Azriel. Some of these pieces were later reworked by R. Bahya b. Asher of Saragossa (ca. 1255–ca. 1340),<sup>51</sup> R. Menahem Recanati (ca. 1250–ca. 1310),<sup>52</sup> and the author of a supercommentary on Nahmanides's kabbalistic allusions published under the name of R. Meir b. R. Solomon Abusahulah.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Tishby, *Commentary*, 59 n. 2.

<sup>49</sup> MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 211, fols. 10v–11r. The collator subsumed all five interpretations under the title *Sod ha-korbanot* (fol. 8v) and at the end added that they were all learned “from the mouths of genuine kabbalists” and copied “from books” (fol. 11v). Gershom Scholem theorized that at least some of the passages derive from the teachings of Ezra or Azriel; see Gershom Scholem, “New Fragments from the Writings of Rabbi Azriel of Gerona,” in *Studies in Memory of Asher Gulak and Samuel Klein* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1942) 220 n. 7 (Hebrew). Isaiah Tishby likewise attributed them to Ezra's disciple Azriel and his colleagues, or to other anonymous disciples (Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:881). In subsequent scholarship, this subtle distinction became lost and all of them were attributed to Azriel; see Ephraim Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature* (ed. Joseph Hacker; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1976) 76–79; Charles Mopsik, *Les grands textes de la Cabale. Les rites qui font Dieu* (Paris: Verdier, 1988) 130–33; Todros b. Joseph Abulafia, *Sha'ar ha-razim* (ed. Michal Oron; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1989) 145 n. 539; Seth L. Brody, “Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights: Contemplative Ascent and Theurgic Power in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah,” in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics and Typologies* (ed. Robert A. Herrer; New York: Lang, 1993) 149–53; Joseph Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism* (12 vols.; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2008–2018) 8:258–62. On the attribution of the final text in this manuscript to Azriel, see Moshe Idel, “The Kabbalistic Interpretation of the Secret of 'Arayot in Early Kabbalah,” *Kabbalah* 12 (2004) 122 (Hebrew). For attempts to distinguish among the pieces and their authors on the basis of content, see Sarel Rosenblatt, “Rezon adam rezon Elohim: sod ha-korban be-kabbalat ha-Ramban ben Geronah le-Barzelonah,” (master's thesis, Ben-Gurion University, 2014) 22–49 and 107–12; Jonathan Dauber, “An Early Kabbalistic Explanation of Temple Sacrifice: Text and Study,” in *Accounting for the Commandments in Medieval Judaism: Studies in Law, Philosophy, Pietism and Kabbalah* (ed. Jeremy Brown and Marc Herman; Leiden: Brill, 2021) 58–79. Some of the passages were recently published by Oded Porat, *Kabbalistic Works by R. Azriel of Girona* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2020) 164–74 (Hebrew).

<sup>50</sup> Isaac of Acre, *Sefer me'irat 'enayim le-r. Yizhak de-min 'Akko* (ed. Amos Goldreich; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984) 136–51.

<sup>51</sup> *Rabbenu Bahya: be'ur 'al ha-Torah* (ed. Charles B. Chavel; 3 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1966–1968) 2:401.

<sup>52</sup> Menahem Recanati, *Perush 'al ha-Torah* (Venice, 1523), *parashat Noah*, 28a, and *parashat Va-yikra*, 95a.

<sup>53</sup> R. Meir b. R. Solomon Abusahulah, *Be'ur le-Ferush ha-Ramban z"l 'al ha-Torah: meyuhas le-ha-rav r. Me'ir b'r Abusahulah z"l* (Warsaw, 1875), fol. 23r–v. His attribution of this version to “the rabbi, the *Hasid*” was taken to be the most reliable transmission of Isaac the Blind's words, despite the fact that he lived in the 14th century! See Scholem, *Origins*, 306 n. 217; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:881; Gottlieb, *Studies*, 562; Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary*, 209–10, 214–19; Georges

The five passages are all elaborations of the same kernel, clear evidence of the intense kabbalistic literary activity taking place in mid-thirteenth-century Catalonia. This kernel, as it happens, might have been based partly on Ezra's reasoning detailed above, in the form of an explication of Lev 1:9 based on the very same *Sifra*. 'Olah refers to the sacrifice's rise from "ascent (*illuy*) to ascent"; 'isheh marks the sublimation of the sacrifice into fire, "after the smoke finishes rising"; *reah* is the next stage when "the fire and sparks completely expend themselves and become spirit (*ruah*) again"; and *nihoah* is the final stage when the rising spirit unites or becomes mixed with the supernal divine spirit.<sup>54</sup> The five versions distinguish themselves from one another in their explanations of this transcendence, which include: the elevation of the human being's base desire, via the animal's soul, to the supernal Will, so that it is "appeased to fulfill his will concerning the matter for which the sacrifice was brought";<sup>55</sup> the "ascent" by means of one's thought;<sup>56</sup> bringing together the "lower will" that is connected to the "power of multiplicity" with the "supernal will" that is connected to the "power of unity," in order to achieve "a complete unification of the ten *sefirot*";<sup>57</sup> and more.

For our purpose of investigating Halevi's presence in early kabbalah, let us return to Pseudo-Azriel, according to whom the sacrifice is meant to facilitate the cleaving of "the offeror's consciousness and soul" with the Holy Spirit. The offeror unites with the sacrifice "through a single intention," to the point where the distinction and separation of their "forms" (*dimyonim*) is nullified and they are brought into harmony through their return to a single source.<sup>58</sup> The sacrifice's success depended on the offeror's ability "to direct the attention and the offering of every single piece of meat, every type of suet, and every drop of blood to its root source," that is, to its supernal root.<sup>59</sup> This also explains why certain organs were not offered on

---

Vajda, *Le commentaire d'Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969) 395–404. Dauber ("Kabbalistic Explanation"), however, argues against the attribution, and I would add to his evidence the following facts: the manuscript of this commentary includes a line indicating that only a small portion was attributed to the *Hasid* in his source material; some exegetical elements seem to originate in Nahmanides's commentary on Lev 1:9; it is not identical to what Ezra of Gerona quoted firsthand. For a general treatment of problematic attributions to Isaac the Blind, see Avishai Bar-Asher, "Illusion versus Reality in the Study of Early Kabbalah: The Commentary on *Sefer Yeẓirah* Attributed to Isaac the Blind and Its History in Kabbalah and Scholarship," *Tarbiz* 86 (2019) 269–384 (Hebrew).

<sup>54</sup> This is the basic progression in the three parallel pieces copied in MS Vat. ebr. 211, fol. 9r l. 28–fol. 9v l. 8; fol. 9v ll. 8–19 (= *Me'irat 'enayim*, 144 l. 31–145 l. 4); fol. 10v l. 2–fol. 11r l. 1 (= *Me'irat 'enayim*, 144, ll. 5–31); and in two other pieces that only appear in *Me'irat 'enayim* (139 ll. 7–20 in the name of "the enlightened sage," and 142 l. 27–143 l. 12 anonymously).

<sup>55</sup> Isaac of Acre, *Me'irat 'enayim*, 142 ll. 32–33.

<sup>56</sup> MS Vat. ebr. 211, fol. 9v ll. 11–12.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 10v ll. 6–14 (= *Me'irat 'enayim*, 144 ll. 8–14). On the Hebrew term *dimyonim/dimyonot* as "forms," see further in n. 67 below.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* On this description, see Scholem, *Ha-kabbalah be-Gironah*, 335–36 (although he attributes this to Ezra of Gerona).

the altar: “It is known that they would not offer the brain, heart, lung, or dividing membrane that serves the heart.”<sup>60</sup>

The Hebrew used here is drawn from Ibn Tibbon’s translation of Halevi’s long commentary on *Sefer yeẓirah* in *Kuzari* 4.25. Halevi noted the absence of these four from *Sefer yeẓirah*’s list of twelve organs that correspond to the twelve “simple” letters and defined the lung and dividing membrane as “servants” of the heart.<sup>61</sup> He went on to explain why the only parts of the animal offered come from the stomach cavity beneath the diaphragm:

Furthermore, the organs below the dividing membrane have a secret, for they are the primordial nature. The membrane divides the elemental world from the animal world, in the same way the neck divides the animal world from the rational world (*‘ālam al-nuṣṣāq*), as Plato mentioned in the *Timaeus*.<sup>62</sup> The primordial elements (*al-ma‘ādīn al-‘ūlā*) belong to the elemental world, which is the source of existence, because thence the seed emerges, and there the fetus is formed among the four elements.

From there the Creator chose the offered parts: the suet, the blood, the lobe of the liver, and the two kidneys. He chose neither the heart nor the brain <nor the lung> nor the membrane. The secret is very profound and explanation is forbidden (*wa-’l-sirr ‘aḡmaḍ wa-’l-sharḥ maḥẓūr*). It has already been said: “One may not expound *Sefer yeẓirah*<sup>63</sup> except on certain conditions, which are rarely met.”<sup>64</sup>

According to Halevi, all organs and limbs offered on the altar belong to the anatomical region that corresponds to the “elemental world,” which contains the “root of being” and of multiplicity.<sup>65</sup>

Having read this passage, Pseudo-Azriel was also aware of the profound secret that Halevi would not divulge, which also appears here. He reasoned:

<sup>60</sup> *Me’irat ‘enayim*, 144 ll. 17–18.

<sup>61</sup> *Kuzari* 4.25: 274, 2.

<sup>62</sup> Plato, *Tim.*, 69d–e.

<sup>63</sup> See Judah Halevi, *The Book of Kuzari: The Book of Rejoinder and Proof of the Despised Religion* (trans. and ed. Michael Schwarz; Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2017) 252 n. 449 (Hebrew).

<sup>64</sup> *Kuzari* 2.26 (based on MS Munich, Cod. hebr. 264, fol. 168v, with additions from MS London, British Library, Harley 5779 [Margoliouth 901], fol. 94r).

<sup>65</sup> On the relationship between Halevi’s explanation and Saadia’s commentary on *Sefer yeẓirah*, see Halevi, *Book of Kuzari*, 251 n. 33, and *Sefer Yeẓirah (Kitab Almagadi)*, ‘*im perush ha-Gaon Rabbenu Sa’adyah b’r Yosef Fayyumi*’ (trans. and ed. Yosef Kafih; Jerusalem: Ha-Va’ad le-Hotza’at Sifrei Rasag, 1972) 140. For Saadia’s use of an anatomical division that is quite similar to Plato’s, with ontic parallels on the celestial plane and within the Tabernacle, see *Rav Saadya’s Commentary on Exodus* (ed. Yehuda Ratzaby; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1998) 133–34 (Hebrew). See, further, Idan Pinto, “Universe – Sanctuary – Man: On a Threefold Analogy in Two Anonymous Texts and Their Traces in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah,” *Tarbiẓ* 88 (2022) 373–77 (Hebrew). Finally, it seems likely that Halevi used the same specific recension of *Sefer yeẓirah* as Saadia did; see Avishai Bar-Asher, “The Earliest Extant Version of *Sefer Yesirah*” *Tarbiẓ* 89 (2023) (forthcoming).

Perhaps they would not offer them because they are dedicated to the cogitation of the intellectual soul (*ha-nefesh ha-hakhamah*), nothing precedes them, and they are one—one head, one brain, one heart, and one membrane.<sup>66</sup> The point is that the sacrifice (*qorban*) was intended to bring together (*le-qarev*) and unify the separate forms (*dimyonot*) in a single form and a single source.<sup>67</sup>

The diaphragm and its superior organs, of which humans have only one each, possess two characteristics: they are not dependent on the activity of a preceding organ, and they are involved in “the cogitation of the intellectual soul.” Pseudo-Azriel begins with an explanation that matches the exoteric one offered in the *Kuzari*, but then he integrates it with his own theosophical reasoning, according to which the offeror’s intention negates the multiplicity of forms and returns them to their single point of origin.<sup>68</sup>

Interestingly, Ezra of Gerona offers a similarly brief reason for offering the limbs and organs of the sacrifice in his *Be’ur*. According to him, they all “conspire in sin and lead man off the good path,” and as partners in sin they must be returned to their source in order to effect atonement:

Therefore “the kidneys”—the source of counsel—“and the fat that is atop them, which is by the loins, and the lobe” that protects “the liver,”<sup>69</sup> and the suet were all burned up and returned to their elemental source, in order to atone for man’s sin produced by the thought of the kidneys, the desire of the liver, and the fat of the heart. The blood is likewise sprinkled <on the altar> to atone for man’s soul, which subsists in the blood.<sup>70</sup>

This view is quite close to Pseudo-Azriel’s, which itself is based on the *Kuzari*. This provides further support for our claim that Ezra esteemed Halevi’s views and used them as a conceptual foundation for his own.

Finally, let us turn to *Sha’ar ha-sho’el*, a work about the *sefirot* composed in question-and-answer format that has been attributed by both tradition and the academy to Azriel.<sup>71</sup> The author takes the sacrifices to be a prime example of Scripture confirming the existence of the *sefirot*. The scent that rises from the sacrifices expresses, to his thinking, the order of the *sefirot* according to the ontological distinction between three worlds: “the natural, the sensible, and the intelligible.” As he puts it:

<sup>66</sup> Given the discrepancy between limbs and organs listed, it would seem that Pseudo-Azriel had a slightly different version of this passage in the *Kuzari*.

<sup>67</sup> *Me’irat ’enayim*, 144 ll. 18–20.

<sup>68</sup> The Hebrew term *dimyonot* is also used in this sense in an exegetical text based on Geronese kabbalah, and in possible connection with *al-’amr al-’illāhī*, in MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 283, fol. 71r. See Scholem, “New Fragments,” 216 n. 3, and Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 303–4 n. 130.

<sup>69</sup> Words from a verse repeated in Lev 3:4, 10, 15 and elsewhere in Leviticus.

<sup>70</sup> Travis, “Kabbalistic Foundations,” 28 (Heb. section).

<sup>71</sup> I intend to dedicate a separate study to the authorship of this work.



and certainly the sacrifices, about which it is written: “My sacrifice, My bread, My fires, My pleasing aroma” (Num 28:2), . . . this attests that there is something distant that draws close from *davar* to *davar* until it reaches the supernal power.<sup>72</sup>

This conception of the sacrificial rite resembles other kabbalistic ones current in Catalonia, particularly Ezra’s basic model. In this work, too, there is an overt connection to the *Kuzari* through the author’s extended usage of one of Halevi’s expressions: “the root of faith is the root of rebellion.”<sup>73</sup> In its original context, Halevi labeled as rebels those who rely on “common sense” (*qiyās*) and believe that rituals of astral magic, such as ritual sacrifice, can draw down *rūḥānīyāt*, spiritual existents susceptible to magic.<sup>74</sup> The faithful, on the other hand, merit complete and lucid divine knowledge (*ilm ’illāhī*) that derives from the “divine matter” (*al-’amr al-’illāhī*). Nevertheless, both have a single root. This, I submit, gestures toward the position that a certain symmetry exists between astral magic and kabbalistic theurgy, such that the validity of the former is not necessarily undermined by the latter.<sup>75</sup> This issue is explored in more depth in the next section.

### ■ The “Davar of the Godhead” in an Early Synthesis of Astral Magic with Geronese Kabbalah

Yet another composition that displays significant use of Halevi’s explanation of the sacrifices is the so-called *Ta’amei ha-mizvot nusah bet* (hereafter: *STM/B*), an anonymous kabbalistic commentary on the reasons for the positive commandments that follows Maimonides’ enumeration. Based on its reception of earlier sources and its own subsequent reception, we can say with reasonable confidence that it was composed during the second half of the thirteenth century in Catalonia or Aragon, and that its author made a pioneering effort to synthesize the various streams of Geronese kabbalah.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> MS Berlin, State Library, Ms. Or. Phillip 1392, fol. 11r (= *Derekh ’emunah*, 3b). The basic idea is that the string of nouns with possessive suffixes represents a gradual ascent from *sefirah* to *sefirah*.

<sup>73</sup> *Perush ’al ’eser sefirot ’al derekh she’elah u-teshuvah*, in *Derekh ’emunah* (Warsaw, 1880), fol. 2r. The expression originates in Ibn Tibbon’s translation of *Kuzari* 1.77–78. Discussions of this composition are enumerated in the footnotes of Pachter, “Root of Faith,” and see esp. 321–27 for a parallel expression in *Derekh ha-’emunah ve-derekh ha-kefirah*, a late work also attributed by scholars to Azriel.

<sup>74</sup> See Pines, “*Ruḥaniyyot*,” 523–30.

<sup>75</sup> See the scholarship referenced above in n. 11.

<sup>76</sup> On the provenance of the manuscript and the identity of its author, see Alexander Altmann, “On the Question of the Authorship of the *Book on the Reasons for the Commandments* Attributed to Isaac Ibn Farhi (Part One),” *Kiryat Sefer* 40 (1965) 257–58 (Hebrew). For use of the work by later writers, see Ephraim Gottlieb, *Kabbalah in the Writings of R. Baḥya ben Asher ibn Halawa* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1970) 200–213, 259–63 (Hebrew). Altmann showed verbatim parallels to Azriel’s formulations (“Question of Authorship,” 257), whereas Gottlieb thought the author drew more from the writings of Ezra and Baḥya b. Asher of Saragossa, and even from Zoharic material (*Kabbalah*, 194–95, 198–200). On the basis of Gottlieb’s findings, Moshe Idel thought *Nosah bet*

The author of *STM/B* devotes more space to the sacrificial commandments than to any other,<sup>77</sup> and he also uncharacteristically deviates from Maimonides's enumeration by inventing a new ritual category: "to sacrifice our flesh, blood, and fat to the Lord, so that He will atone for us and for our souls."<sup>78</sup> In explicating this, he adapts material from his main sources without attribution, primarily the above citation from Ezra of Gerona's *Be'ur*. He is especially enamored of the ideas of returning the primordial forces to their elemental source and of the priest theurgically drawing forth the Will. Essentially, he presents Ezra's theory with mostly minor changes but also makes one major addition: the attainment of noetic cleaving to God through the offering of the sacrifices.<sup>79</sup>

In his discourse on the commandments, the author reproduces about half of Halevi's long explanation of the sacrifices from *Kuzari* 2.26 in Judah Ben Kardaniel's (rather than Ibn Tibbon's) translation, but he attributes it to "a scholar who gave a natural reason for the sacrifices."<sup>80</sup> He is interested in the principle Halevi developed:

the entire layout (*tavnit*) of the Tabernacle and the Temple was not arranged—Heaven forbid!—for some need of the One who dwells there, but for the honor, splendor, and greatness of the *davar* of the Godhead manifest there. [In order to] bring it closer to the intellect, the *davar* of the Godhead can be compared to the intellectual, speaking soul that rests in the natural body.<sup>81</sup>

Notably, he ends by saying that "there are great difficulties with this reason for whoever wants to raise them" and that he prefers kabbalistic explanations. He copies the rest of *Kuzari* 2.26 elsewhere in connection with the commandment to shoulder the ark, where he again expresses reservations about the rationalistic explanation, this time likely channeling Halevi himself: "there is something more sublime and exalted than this regarding the vessels."<sup>82</sup> Although he refrains from

---

ought to be dated to late-1280s Castile; see Moshe Idel, *R. Menachem Recanati the Kabbalist* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1998) 53 and 100–101 (Hebrew). Yehuda Liebes noted the strangeness of the quoted Zoharic material in his *Studies in the Zohar* (trans. Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, and Penina Peli; Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) 204–5 n. 88. In addition to the sources noted by scholars, we should add the appreciable place of Nahmanides's Torah commentary in this work. Avishai Bar-Asher, "Illusion versus Reality," 317–24, esp. nn. 234–36.

<sup>77</sup> In his commentary on the very first commandment, the author stresses the centrality of the "mystery of the sacrifices" for the kabbalistic doctrine of emanation; see MS Moscow, Guenzburg 70, fol. 88r (the passage was mistakenly copied at the end, rather than at the beginning, of the manuscript).

<sup>78</sup> The discussion thereon spans MS Moscow 70, fols. 57r–60v. The anonymous author, writing in medieval Hebrew, uses the the second-person masculine singular suffix for verbs in the present.

<sup>79</sup> For example, after his lengthy adaptation of Ezra's words, the author of *STM/B* concludes: "Therefore, we are commanded to offer sacrifices so that we cleave to the Lord in our thoughts and the *nous* (*ra'yon*) of our souls" (MS Moscow 70, fol. 212v).

<sup>80</sup> On Ben Kardaniel's translation, see Avishai Bar-Asher, "Lost and Found in Translation: The *Kuzari* Translations of Judah Ben Kardaniel and Other Medieval Translators," *HENOCH* (forthcoming).

<sup>81</sup> MS Moscow 70, fol. 57v.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 55r–v.

fully approving the exoteric reasons he quotes from Halevi, he does incorporate certain elements in his own kabbalistic interpretation. More specifically, he splices the idea of the “divine matter” extending throughout reality and the adherence of the concealed fire and light of wisdom to the temple implements with his conception of the cleaving achieved through the sacrifices.<sup>83</sup> He considered these ideas of Halevi to be compatible with the theosophical kabbalah of the first Geronese kabbalists.

The author of *STM/B* exhibits similar ambivalence vis-à-vis Nahmanides’s treatments of the sacrifices in his Torah commentary. While he gets behind Nahmanides in his assault on Maimonides’s historical-pedagogical explanation of the sacrifices in his *Guide of the Perplexed* (3.46), he does not quote Nahmanides’s own allusions to the theosophical secret in his comment on Lev 1:9. Instead, he repeatedly invokes Nahmanides’s discussion of the necromantic practice of offering incense to demons, which appears in a comment on Lev 17:9.<sup>84</sup> In his long discussion about the sacrifices, the author writes :

If I were to see that you are learned and well-versed in tradition, whose heart will not incline to an incorrect opinion, I would reveal to you some of the purpose of the sacrifices, and what efficacy there is for the powers through their offering. For it is surely known through the science of necromancy,<sup>85</sup> in connection with the spiritual powers to which they would offer incense in order to cleave their intellects to them and to perform an action through them. I have seen but a smidgeon of this science, having found writing about the dead and the deadly spirit of their power; about the spirits in the air that incite and fulfill man’s will, sometimes for ill; and also about the captains of the abdomen (*shalishe ha-beṭen*) that move by air on account of their power, on Monday or Thursday nights.<sup>86</sup>

While necromancy retains the usual meaning of consulting the dead, the author further uses it in two broader senses that match Nahmanides’s usage. First, it includes demonolatry, to which the author adds a noetic dimension: “to cleave their intellects to them.”<sup>87</sup> Second, it subsumes astrolatry, for which the practitioner must know astrology, geography, and cosmology, especially the “seven separate

<sup>83</sup> See also Mitzvah 27, on the continual maintenance of a pyre on the altar: “therefore we are commanded to maintain a perpetual fire, even though fire descends from Heaven, to teach that the Lord cleaves and draws close to us through the sacrifices, in the same manner as the supernal fire cleaves to the lower one” (MS Moscow 70, fol. 53v).

<sup>84</sup> The author of *STM/B* does this especially in three discussions where he cites from Maimonides, *Guide* 3.46: Mitzvah 39, on sacrificing the paschal lamb in the afternoon and eating it at night (MS Moscow 70, fol. 62r); Mitzvah 69, on slaughtering various animals (71v); and Mitzvah 70, on covering the blood of certain slaughtered animals (72r). For this usage in other commandments unrelated to the sacrificial rite, see Mitzvah 3, on loving God (44v); Mitzvah 15, on affixing a mezuzah (49r); Mitzvah 54, on the impurity rendered by a carcass (66r); Mitzvah 112, on making the wife suspected of adultery drink the bitter waters (85v).

<sup>85</sup> Heb. *ṣṭmwsy*, a corruption of *ngrmnsy* (vocalized *negromansiyya*).

<sup>86</sup> MS Moscow 70, fol. 59v.

<sup>87</sup> Reimund Leicht, “Nahmanides on Necromancy,” in *Studies in the History of Culture and Science: A Tribute to Gad Freudenthal* (ed. Resianne Fontaine et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 251–64.

intellects” that move the seven planetary spheres he terms “forms” (*zurot*) in Aristotelian fashion.<sup>88</sup> He again adds the notion of cleaving to supernal powers. In order to provide a firm foundation for this notion of cleaving via a kind of astral magic, he quotes a recipe for activating an open-air altar from a source available in his milieu:

Whoever wants to perform an act through them, must take a virgin maiden younger than eleven years of age. He must dress her in white clothes, not of silk or embroidery; she must fast every day for nine days; and he must immerse her in standing water that is not flowing on an incline or moving. On each day he takes incense of frankincense, and he must fumigate a single round house with a small opening. After nine days pass, he must prepare another place aligned with the central point of the sphere and build an open-air altar there out of earth alone, without iron or wooden tools. It must be eleven handbreadths tall, and it must be square, with horns like chicken feet. Then he takes a brilliantly white cock, and the maiden who was immersed in water takes, slaughters, and burns the cock entirely—from head to toe—with its plumage. He must pronounce the name of the spirits and the name of the forms (*zurot*) that they call in their language *qrqtš*,<sup>89</sup> and he must offer the incense in their name. I found it written that he will see a name<sup>90</sup> descending in the likeness of the form (*zurah*) of a foot, hand, or another human limb. Through it he can inquire of the dead and into their nature, so that they do his bidding and whatever he asks of them.<sup>91</sup>

While he does go on to condemn this sort of recipe as “words of folly,” in the same breath he emphasizes its usefulness for understanding the sacrificial rite:

we can learn from them [about] cleaving to supernal powers. If you make a concerted effort, you will understand the essence of the sacrifices, and how the attributes and spirits suckle from the essence of the sacrifices . . . and how they descend down to the earth.<sup>92</sup>

Here, again, he underscores the notion of mystical cleaving to supernal powers, which is the means by which astral magic operates according to the author. This cleaving, which he characterizes as mental or noetic, is the interface between the Godhead emanated through the *sefirot* and the earthly plane, the axis by which they can affect one another.

The author of *STM/B* relies on Nahmanides’s account of magical and demonological practices and divinations,<sup>93</sup> all the while completely ignoring his allusions to a theurgic, theosophical mystery behind the sacrifices.<sup>94</sup> This

<sup>88</sup> See MS Moscow 70, fol. 59v.

<sup>89</sup> I.e., *charaktères*.

<sup>90</sup> Heb. *shem* (a name). Alternatively, this can be vocalized as *sham* (there): “he will see there descending the likeness. . . .”

<sup>91</sup> MS Moscow 70, fol. 59v.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> See first and foremost Nahmanides’s comment on Lev 17:7.

<sup>94</sup> The author himself alludes to but refuses to disclose: a demonological, magical dimension to

selectiveness fits into a trend witnessed among Nahmanides's supercommentators, some of whom used hermetic paradigms in their explanations and even, at times, considered them to be the concealed kabbalistic secret.<sup>95</sup> Works like *STM/B* throw open a window on a phenomenon that demands more scholarly eyes: the interpretation of theosophical kabbalah in terms of astral magic at a relatively early date in Catalonia.<sup>96</sup>

The author of *STM/B* employs the paradigm of astral magic to establish a certain conception of mystical cleaving through the sacrificial rite, which he contrasts to Halevi's exoteric reason concerning the indwelling of the "divine matter." Is it possible that he thought this was the esoteric reason Halevi refused to reveal? This is a tantalizing possibility, particularly because scholars have shown that Halevi was steeped in hermeticism and theurgic conceptions of ritual through the mediation of Arabic magic.<sup>97</sup> An affirmative indication may lie in the fact that when he continues his quote from the *Kuzari* in his discussion of shouldering the ark, he juxtaposes Halevi's exoteric explanation with his own theosophical, theurgic conception:

All this is the statement of the rabbi of blessed memory, yet there is something else more exalted and sublime than this regarding the vessels. Let us return to our discussion and say that the voice which emanated from the Glory of the Lord would come via the channels of *Hokhmah* into the hollow of the ark, and from the ark another Glory was emanated which reached the cherubs, and from the cherubs it would reach the tent of meeting. As it says: "He heard the voice speaking to him . . . from between the two cherubs, and it spoke to him" (Num 7:89)—"voice . . . to him," voice implies two voices. . . . I cannot reveal more to you because I know that the ark was hidden while the holy implements were not hidden; only it was hidden in its place. Do not look behind you. Remember that the soul of the babe exited at the place of the ark. Understand this.<sup>98</sup>

This account of the emanation of the divine Glory, explicitly an alternative to the one proposed by Halevi's rabbi, might be the product of the author's attempt to decipher Halevi's secrets using Halevi's own doctrine of the Godhead and understanding of religious praxis, and at the same time founded on the assumption

---

the open-air altar built by King Solomon (1 Kgs 11:17) in Mitzvah 18, on the Israelite king writing his own Torah scroll (MS Moscow 70, fol. 50r); black magic performed within a round stone wall erected around a tree in Mitzvah 58, on the fourth year of tree-fruits (68r); and more. On the basis of these scattered hints, it seems that some are rooted in magical or demonological elements.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Schwartz, "Theurgy to Magic," 165–67, and similarly the four streams described in 211–13.

<sup>96</sup> For scholarly discussion of this phenomenon during the Renaissance, see Moshe Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of Kabbalah in the Renaissance," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (ed. Bernard D. Cooperman; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) 186–242.

<sup>97</sup> Pines, "*Ruḥaniyyot*," 513–23; Sviri, "Spiritual Trends," 81–83; Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002) 52 n. 20 (Hebrew).

<sup>98</sup> MS Moscow 70, fol. 55v.

that kabbalistic theosophy holds the key to opening Halevi's esoteric lock.<sup>99</sup> The author of *STM/B* also cites the *Kuzari* in connection with the commandment to give the foreleg, cheeks, and abomasum to the priest. First, he supplies general reasons for the superiority of these over other limbs and organs, relying partially on Maimonides's reasoning in *Guide* 3.39, which is also cited in Nahmanides's Torah commentary on Deut 18:3. But the rationalistic explanation falls short: "Know that there is another matter behind the [priestly] gifts that I do not wish to reveal."<sup>100</sup> Then he copies in a free adaptation, rather than word for word,<sup>101</sup> a portion of Halevi's long commentary on *Sefer yezirah* discussed above, where he explains why only abdominal organs below the diaphragm are offered on the altar. Here, again, he uncovers a reason purposely concealed in the *Kuzari*, namely, "because all of these are partners in creation and in sin."<sup>102</sup> This explanation meshes the *Kuzari*'s explanation, that the offered parts are located in the part of the body that corresponds to the natural world and the root of being, with Ezra's kabbalistic reason in his *Be'ur*, that these internal organs abet the soul in sin.<sup>103</sup> As such, the author of *STM/B* clearly believed that Halevi's hidden reason could be discovered using the writings of the first Geronese kabbalists. The larger takeaway is that the phenomenon observed here exemplifies a broader hierarchizing approach to the reasons behind religious praxis, in which rationalistic ones are not rejected but read as a basic layer of meaning that subsumes, while simultaneously veiling, kabbalistic meanings.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>99</sup> It bears noting here that in another long and unattributed quote from *Kuzari* 2.18–20, the author of *STM/B* refers to Halevi as "a scholar who knows the science of the stars and course of the sun," and adopts his words unreservedly; see *ibid.*, fol. 61r–v, Mitzvah 37, on ascending to the Temple on the Festivals. He closes by saying: "all this is the language of the rabbi and his analysis; understand the Torah in his speech and you will find it is the truth."

<sup>100</sup> MS Moscow 70, fol. 71r (Mitzvah 67).

<sup>101</sup> Again, the author of *STM/B* uses a non-Tibbonide translation of the *Kuzari*, part of which is preserved in MS Munich, Bavarian State Library, Cod. hebr. 47, fols. 332v–325v. On this translation see Bar-Asher, "Ben Kardaniel's Translation."

<sup>102</sup> MS Moscow 70, fol. 71r.

<sup>103</sup> The author of *STM/B* cites this without attribution to Ezra in his long treatment of the sacrifices, in *ibid.*, fol. 57r.

<sup>104</sup> Some kabbalists of the 14th and 15th cents. espoused a similar approach. For example, Shem Tob Ibn Shem Tob, author of *Sefer ha-'emunot*, married ideas from the *Kuzari* with core ideas of kabbalistic theosophy and eschatology. In an untitled work, after a long quote from *Kuzari* 4.1–3 on the names of God, he remarks: "The great rabbi comes to explain and disclose how the essence, namely the Tetragrammaton, was concealed from them, and the reason is concealed in his words" (MS London, British Library, Add. 26929 [Margoliouth 771], fol. 118v). He then proceeds to explain it using kabbalistic sources. See David S. Ariel, "Shem Tob Ibn Shem Tob's Kabbalistic Critique of Jewish Philosophy in the *Commentary on the Sefirot*: Study and Text" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1982) 93–94.

## ■ The “Power of the Godhead” in the Neoplatonic Exposition of Nahmanidean Kabbalah

Joshua Ibn Shu‘eib (fl. early 14th cent.), a disciple of Solomon b. Abraham Ibn Adret (Rashba) who was himself a disciple of Nahmanides, crafted an entire literary sermon on the Torah reading of *Va-yikra* concerning the reasons for the sacrifices.<sup>105</sup> In the course of the sermon, Ibn Shu‘eib relates to rationalist reasons proposed by a number of medieval thinkers. He declares his own point of departure to be the position of Nahmanides, enriched by what he learned from Ibn Adret:

I heard in the name of my teacher Rashba of blessed memory that the matters concealed in the Torah concerning the sacrificial rite and the like indicate their sublimity, for what is concealed and hidden indicates its substance—the substance of the Godhead, for its essence and affairs are hidden from all mankind and even from angels. He would further say that it is perplexing that some Torah scholars want to explain the commandments using the intellect, because the secrets of our Torah and the esoteric commandments are beyond rationality. . . . Indeed, our sublime commandments are beyond rationality and are known only to whomever God has favored with an endowed intellect, as the prophets possessed, and transmitted them to the Sages orally.<sup>106</sup>

Ibn Shu‘eib therefore claims that the reasons proposed by rationalist thinkers like Abraham Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Jacob Anatoli were intended only “to make the matter approachable to the intellect”; these thinkers had another reason they did not reveal.<sup>107</sup> This esoteric reason, according to Ibn Shu‘eib, is the kabbalistic one to which Nahmanides alluded in his Torah commentary whose source is prophecy and tradition.

In the midst of this discussion, Ibn Shu‘eib refers to Halevi’s reason for the sacrifices as he seeks to lay bare the secret rationale behind the sacrificial rite. Like the author of *STM/B*, he uses Ben Kardaniel’s translation of the *Kuzari*,<sup>108</sup> but he completely rewrites the dialogue between the king and the rabbi.<sup>109</sup> Although the conceptual kernel—“how the power of the Godhead rests on the sacrifice”—is from Halevi, in his free adaptation he replaces the harmonistic account of the temple service with an explanation of the “natural philosophers” grounded in astral

<sup>105</sup> R. Yehoshua ‘Ibn Shu‘eib, *Derashot ‘al ha-Torah* (Krakow, 1573), 35b–37b.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 36b (corrected acc. to MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 42, fol. 106r).

<sup>107</sup> MS Vat. ebr. 42, fol. 105r. See Carmi Horowitz, “The Attitude of R. Joshua ibn Shu‘eib Towards Asceticism,” *Daat* 12 (1984) 29–36 (Hebrew); Israel Ben-Simon, “Sermons on the Torah: Rabbi Jacob Anatoli and His Influence on Rabbi Joshua Ibn Shu‘eib’s Sermons,” *Daat* 81 (2016) 69–87, esp. 83 n. 90 (Hebrew); Schwartz, “Theurgy to Magic,” 197 n. 67.

<sup>108</sup> Contrary to the assumption that Ibn Shu‘eib reworked Ibn Tibbon’s translation; see Shraga Abramson, preface to *Derashot ‘al ha-Torah le-r. Yehoshua ‘Ibn Shu‘eib* [photo reproduction of the Krakow 1573 ed.] (Jerusalem: Makor, 1969) 27. The manuscript evidence shows otherwise; see Avishai Bar-Asher, “Beyond Ibn Tibbon: Additional Medieval Hebrew Translations of the *Kuzari*,” *Sefunot* 28.6 (2023) 185 (Hebrew).

<sup>109</sup> He does this again for *Kuzari* 2.29–30 in the continuation of this sermon; MS Vat. ebr. 42, fol. 37r–v.

magic.<sup>110</sup> In Ibn Shu'eib's thinking, this hermetic approach, which he inserted through sophisticated revision of the rabbi's words, was Halevi's esoteric reason but not the truly secret one.<sup>111</sup>

God forbid that I should declare that there is no more exalted and sublime reason than this, for there is undoubtedly a different meaning to this in the possession of the sages of Israel, who have received it from the prophets and from the Sages and require no other meaning. But I say this for whomever has not attained the lofty level of our Torah and desires to partake of its wisdom, in order to make it approachable to the intellect.<sup>112</sup>

This concealed meaning was transmitted esoterically among kabbalists and has to do with connecting the spiritual and physical through *shekhinah*, the indwelling of the Godhead.<sup>113</sup> He goes on to explain this approach for most of the refashioned response of the rabbi to the king, in which he interleaves Halevi's original principles with those pertaining to the eschatology and recompense of the individual soul found in Nahmanides's *Sha'ar ha-gemul*.<sup>114</sup> Importantly, he concludes:

Thus we are able to understand from the sacrifices that the indwelling (*shekhinah*) of the Lord is the soul of Israel, and Israel is like the body; all are responsible for one another and are connected as one through the limbs of the body. . . . In the same manner that the soul draws close to the body through food and drink yet does not itself eat and drink, so the indwelling (*ha-shekhinah*) does not draw close (*mitkarevet*) to Israel except via the sacrifice (*qorban*) together with the sanctity of the Land, the altar, and the priests. Therefore, Scripture called the sacrifice "My bread . . . my pleasing aroma" (Num 28:2).<sup>115</sup>

These words, which Ibn Shu'eib wedges into the mouth of Halevi's rabbi, draw a parallel between the resting of the "divine matter" and the soul being drawn close to the body. Great emphasis is placed here on the indwelling of the Godhead through the offering of sacrifices. Nevertheless, this is all merely an analogy for the profound kabbalistic explanation that Ibn Shu'eib never fully reveals,

<sup>110</sup> MS Vat. ebr. 42, fol. 107v. This is based on Halevi's own climatic theory (*Kuzari* 2.10–14) and an astrological conception of the influence of celestial bodies on each of the climes (from a different source).

<sup>111</sup> Pace Dov Schwartz, "Philosophical Conceptions of the Land of Israel in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Thought," in *The Land of Israel in Modern Jewish Thought* (ed. Aviezer Ravitzky; Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1998) 84 (Hebrew), who tried to equate the two reasons.

<sup>112</sup> MS Vat. ebr. 42, fol. 107v.

<sup>113</sup> Ben Kardaniel translates *hulul* as *shekhinah*, whereas Ibn Tibbon translated it as *hul*. Therefore, there is some ambiguity as to whether it refers to a discrete entity, an activity on the part of the divine, or both. In any case, it should not be confused with the *sefirah* designated *Shekhinah*. See Bar-Asher, "Beyond Ibn Tibbon."

<sup>114</sup> MS Vat. ebr. 42, fol. 108r. For an extended discussion of the eschatology of the soul in Nahmanides's thought, see Avishai Bar-Asher, *Journeys of the Soul: Concepts and Imageries of Paradise in Medieval Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2019) 111–26 with lit. cited (Hebrew).

<sup>115</sup> MS Vat. ebr. 42, fol. 108r (corrected).



sticking to his principled refusal to decode Nahmanides's kabbalistic allusions for his readership.<sup>116</sup> As such, even the exposition Ibn Shu'eib attributed to the esoteric layer of the *Kuzari* (drawing close to the divine indwelling through the sacrifice) remains "exoteric" in relation to the hidden, unarticulated explanation of theosophical kabbalah. According to our proposal, Ibn Shu'eib takes the same stratified approach in his interpretation of both Halevi and Nahmanides, offering explicit explanations based on hermetic or neoplatonic thought and holding back the kabbalistic ones.

Another case of Ibn Shu'eib rewriting the script for Halevi's rabbi is found in his literary sermon for the Torah portion of *'Emor*. In his hands, the discussion in *Kuzari* 4.25 balloons into an entirely new dialogue between king and rabbi.<sup>117</sup> Halevi asserted that the kidneys have the power to improve reasoning, on which basis Ibn Shu'eib states that the soul resides in the brain, the heart, and the kidneys, and that the latter, although one of the menial organs, are involved in human mental activity. Unlike the other kabbalists, Ibn Shu'eib does not appear to deal with Halevi's esoteric allusion here, nor does he make a connection to Nahmanides's own esoteric allusions.

## ■ Conclusion

The range of kabbalistic sources reviewed above gives the lie to the long-standing assertion that the *Kuzari* only had an ill-defined, mainly terminological influence on the "first kabbalists" active in Provence and on their "successors" in Spain. The test case chosen here shifts the center of early kabbalah to Catalonia and reveals a more sophisticated picture of kabbalistic interaction with Halevi's work. Not mere individuals but several generations of Catalonian kabbalists had recourse to Halevi's writings on the sacrificial rite. In the early decades, they treated Halevi's thought as a genuine source of theosophical speculation about religious praxis—both ancient and current. Their immediate successors continued to draw on his conceptual paradigms in developing their own key kabbalistic views. Later still, kabbalists were drawn to his esoteric allusions, which they interpreted using the principles of theosophical, theurgic kabbalah. These modes of interaction with Halevi's thought, which extended continuously over a century, were not exclusive but complementary, and they inform us of a shared approach toward Halevi's thought in Catalonia.

As shown above, Spanish theosophical kabbalah and Halevi's thought converged in four main areas. First, with respect to the very notion of theurgy and the conceptualization of its workings, kabbalists were well aware of Halevi's position and even adopted it as a foundation for their own. Second, and in connection with the preceding point, kabbalistic theosophy was shaped by Halevi's theory of the

<sup>116</sup> For this principled approach in connection with discussion of psychology and eschatology, see Bar-Asher, *Journeys of the Soul*, 126–30.

<sup>117</sup> *Kuzari* 4.25: 272, 23–24; MS Vat. ebr. 42, fol. 156r.

Godhead and the indwelling of the “divine matter.” The rendering of Halevi’s Judeo-Arabic leitwort, *al-’amr al-’illāhī*, as the one-to-one Hebrew *devar/koah ha-’elohut* or in a more paraphrastic manner is not a superficial, terminological move but a deep, conceptual one. These kabbalists essentially conceived of the sacrificial rite as the “divine matter” coming to dwell in creation and added their own emphasis of man’s noetic cleaving to the Godhead or the reverse. In addition, the second and third generations of Catalonian kabbalists interpreted the *Kuzari* using paradigms they simultaneously employed to explicate the esoteric doctrines of theosophical kabbalah: the hermetic paradigm of astral magic (*STM/B*) and neoplatonic psychology and spiritual eschatology (Ibn Shu‘eib). In both examples, the esoteric element of Halevi’s discussion served as fertile ground for exegetical developments, which long preceded trends that would intensify at the beginning of the Renaissance. At the same time, the reaction resulting from these kabbalists bringing Halevi’s conceptual substrate into contact with other paradigms and worldviews might have actually exposed the building blocks of Halevi’s own thought, which one can see are made of the same stuff from which the medieval kabbalists fashioned their own doctrine of the Godhead. The incidence and importance of Halevi’s thought in Catalonian kabbalah attest to the need for a reevaluation of the role played by Andalusian, Judeo-Arabic philosophy in kabbalah. Third, not only did *Kuzari*’s hand shape these foundational doctrines of theosophical kabbalah, it also outlined a general approach to the commandments. Halevi posited a fundamental distinction between rationalistic rationales and esoteric ones, which contributed to the kabbalists’ own hierarchizing approach. They also were quick to interpret Halevi’s undisclosed, esoteric reasons in terms of theosophical kabbalah. Fourth, in this connection, there is a more specific need to reevaluate the role played by the *Kuzari* (alongside other sources) in the creation of a medieval genre of radical interpretations of *Sefer yezirah*.

In light of the foregoing, we would do well not to consider Halevi as a kind of amicable neighbor whom kabbalists called upon only when they needed to borrow a teaspoon or two of words. Rather, he was a revered sage and long-standing mentor whom they often visited and whose profound ideas they pondered, incorporated, and even built upon. It is my hope that the framework and findings of this study can serve as a guide for investigating further test cases in eponymous and anonymous kabbalistic works, particularly those in manuscript that await exhaustive treatment.