

## “The Light is Burning Pretty Low”: The 1948 correspondence between Samuel Lewis and Gershom Scholem

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### Abstract

This article presents the brief correspondence between Samuel Lewis (a.k.a. Sufi Sam), one of the founding figures of the New Age movement, and Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Kabbalah. The correspondence, which took place in the spring of 1948, in the midst of the hostilities between Arabs and Jews in Palestine, followed the publication of the second edition of Scholem's grand opus, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, in which Lewis found much interest. The article, which presents some newly-discovered documents from Scholem's archive, examines the publication and early reception of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, the encounters Scholem had with contemporary occultists and spiritual seekers, and new information concerning esoteric-Kabbalistic circles in the United States, which is found in the letters. The correspondence emphasizes the cultural and personal differences between the herald of the Jewish New Age and the founder of the academic study of Jewish Mysticism, and at the same time it highlights the mutual interests and cultural exchanges between academic scholars and modern occultists.

Keywords: Gershom Scholem; Samuel Lewis; Sufi Sam; Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism; Kabbalah Scholarship; Occult Kabbalah; Kabbalah in America; Jewish Theosophists

In the early spring of 1948, in the midst of the hostilities between Arabs and Jews in Palestine and shortly before the declaration of the State of Israel, an interesting exchange took place between Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Kabbalah, and Samuel Lewis (who was later known as Sufi Sam), one of the founding figures of the New Age movement. Their brief correspondence, which we present below, contains new information concerning esoteric-Kabbalistic circles in the United States at that period, and sheds light on the reception of Scholem's *Major Trends in*

*Jewish Mysticism*. The letter emphasizes, at times in an amusing manner, the cultural and personal differences between the German-Jewish scholar from Jerusalem and the Jewish-Sufi spiritual seeker from San Francisco. At the same time, the correspondence between the herald of the Jewish New Age and the founder of the academic study of Jewish mysticism highlights mutual interests and cultural exchanges between academic scholars and modern occultists.

## [1]

The idea to pen the influential *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* came about by chance, in 1937, in the midst of Gershom Scholem's correspondence with Shalom Spiegel, then of New York. Scholem wished to travel to New York "to inspect the Kabbalistic manuscripts held in the United States."<sup>1</sup> Yet this swiftly developed into a much larger plan, which would include a series of lectures sponsored by Salman S. Schocken.<sup>2</sup> A detailed list of the manuscripts Scholem located in New York and those he sought to have reproduced has been preserved, and he appears to have dedicated much of his trip to the study of Sabbatianism.<sup>3</sup> He wrote openly of his discoveries, signing a letter written then to S. Y. Agnon as "the one who dwells in piles of manuscripts and resembles a leaf of parchment more than a human being."<sup>4</sup> The discovery of dozens of manuscripts and their identification in the libraries he visited were no less important than the actual lectures he delivered, and at the time he certainly did not imagine the tremendous future impact of the book in which they would

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1. Shalom Spiegel to Gershom Scholem, 16 June 1937, Gershom Scholem Archive, 41599' Correspondence, Folder 2523.1, The National Library of Israel.

2. For preliminary accounts of Scholem's visit to the United States, see Dweck, "Gershom Scholem and America"; Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 131-44. On Schocken and his sponsorship see Meir and Yamamoto, "The Open Book," 16-17, 19.

3. "Gerhard Scholem, Record of Manuscripts on Cabbala Used, Feb.-March 1938," Scholem Archive, Correspondence, Folder 1716. A unique 36-page booklet entitled "Cabbala-Manuscripts in New York" that contains a list of the manuscripts Scholem discovered in New York is preserved in the Scholem Archive, Series 15, Folder 43. See Meir and Yamamoto, "The Open Book," 16-18.

4. Gershom Scholem to S. Y. Agnon, 9 May 1938, Scholem Archive, Correspondence, Folder 16.2.

be published. The positive reception of the addresses, delivered on February 28 and March 1, 2, 7, 8, and 9 spurred Scholem to adapt them for publication.<sup>5</sup>

The lectures had been written by Scholem in German and Hebrew and subsequently translated into English by his close friend George Lichtheim. The text of the lectures is only partially extant in Scholem's archive, yet it is evident that it underwent many changes as it was adapted for publication, even doubling in length. According to Scholem, the book, published by Schocken in Jerusalem in 1941, was written on the basis of lectures delivered between the summers of 1939 and 1940.<sup>6</sup> It was not a receptive moment for such works and the book received relatively little attention.<sup>7</sup> Scholem was not satisfied with the printed edition for other reasons as well, and felt that it needed to be updated with additional chapters.

## [2]

Scholem had already commenced work on a second edition of the book in 1945. In a number of letters, he expressed his desire to append a tenth chapter on Nahmanides and the origins of Kabbalah. This chapter was indeed written, but ultimately incorporated into a later publication.<sup>8</sup> The negotiations with Schocken

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5. In the pamphlet: "Jewish Institute of Religion announced Six Lectures by Dr. Gerhard Gershom Scholem of Hebrew University, Palestine, on *Jewish Mysticism: Major Trends*," *Prospect* (1938), 4 pp., Scholem Archive, Series 09, Folder 268.8.

6. Scholem, *Major Trends*. On the adaptation of the lectures for publication, see *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, 256; Scholem Archive, Correspondence, Folder 2523.2. See also Meir and Yamamoto, "The Open Book," 19–26.

7. See "Reviews on Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 1941–1980," Scholem Archive, Series 09, Folder 268.8.

8. Scholem Archive, Correspondence, Folder 2523.2; Scholem, *Briefe* (1), 44; "Original Document: Letter from Gershom Scholem to Shalom Spiegel," 77 [in Hebrew]. Scholem wrote further in 1942 regarding the expanded edition of *Major Trends*, "I am awfully upset that I did not utilize the full expanse of the book and write a tenth chapter on the first signs of the Kabbalah and the circle of Nahmanides. I would have arrived at the symbolic number of the ten *sefirot*, as well as present in a fitting and synthetic manner one of the most important yet difficult subjects I have encountered in my research, one on which I have labored for years. Precisely such a chapter on the development of Kabbalah would have been the sole one with an organic place within the structure of the book. If I were to adapt the book into Hebrew, I would

were exhausting, leading to the appearance of a revised, but not expanded, edition in 1946.<sup>9</sup> Scholem was upset by the process but sensed that the time was right to reissue the book, which might now be better received. A document from 1946 contains an extensive list of distinguished scholars to whom Scholem requested Schocken send copies of the work, as a gift or as a review copy; among them were Leo Baeck, Karl Jaspers, Rudolf Bultmann, Carl Jung, Charles Puech, Georges Vajda, Jacob Epstein, Thomas Mann, Hans-Joachim Schoeps, Margarete Sussman, Evelyn Underhill, and Aldous Huxley.<sup>10</sup> This list provides a sense of the circles in which Scholem hoped his book would be read. The second edition indeed received far more attention, beginning in the summer of 1947, and was widely reviewed (most prominently by Hannah Arendt).

## [3]

Scholem's book likewise engendered religious, spiritual, and prophetic feelings among certain readers, some of whom found in *Major Trends* a call for a new spiritual era. Such responses were largely prompted by the final page of the work. For example, Scholem's colleague Shmuel Hugo Bergman wrote the following in the Hebrew daily *Davar* on the occasion of the former's 50th birthday:

Gershom Scholem completed his great work on the major trends in Jewish mysticism with the following words . . . : "That is the position in which we find ourselves today, or in which Jewish mysticism finds itself. The story is not ended, it has not yet become history, and the secret life it holds can break out tomorrow in you or in me. Under what aspects this invisible stream of Jewish mysticism will again come to the surface we cannot tell. But I have come here to speak to you of the main tendencies of Jewish mysticism as we know them. To speak of the mystical course which, in the great cataclysm now

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add many things." Scholem to Schocken, 6 July 1942, Schocken Archive, Privat 8, 882/2. Parts of this added chapter were incorporated into Scholem, *Reshit ha-Kabbalah* [in Hebrew]. See Smith and Scholem, *Correspondence*, 15, 20. See, as well, Meir and Yamamoto, "The Open Book," 20, 29.

9. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 2nd ed.

10. Gershom Scholem, "Liste für Geschenkexemplare von *Major Trends*, 26.11.1946," Scholem Archive, Series 03, Folder 335.

stirring the Jewish people more deeply than in the entire history of Exile, destiny may still have in store for us – and I for one believe that there is such a course—is the task of prophets, not of professors.”<sup>11</sup> Here, I believe, lies Scholem’s great mistake. The Jewish people in its current spiritual and physical condition cannot permit itself this dichotomy between “prophets” and “professors.” We cannot accept that a man like Gershom Scholem will be solely a historian and linguist and train his students to be historians and linguists—with all due respect to Scholem’s scholarly enterprise. With the completion of his fifth decade, we feel that he now bears a new, greater responsibility. Until now he has been permitted to study other people’s words and elude or pass by in silence when pressed about his own take on the matter. That time has passed. . . . A special responsibility rests upon he who has dedicated his life to the study of the esoteric movement and penetrated deeply into the spiritual life of Israel. Others may lighten their burden and avoid the matter, but he who has made a covenant with the spirit of the past bears responsibility for the spirit of the future.<sup>12</sup>

Scholem responded privately (in a letter addressed to Bergman and his wife, Escha):

I do not know if I might satisfy Hugo’s demands and I am quite doubtful. For I have lost my faith in straightforward “gospels” and I cannot disclose if even one “harbinger” has yielded any blessing. I am inclined to the opinion that the very naiveté of the direct appeal to humanity as if it is possible at this very moment to repeat with new or different words the truth of “Tell, O man, what is good” is responsible for the failure of such attempts, even if it is not presented in Buber’s false mantle of Elijah, etc.<sup>13</sup>

A number of other responses to *Major Trends*, many written in a spirit similar to that of Bergman, were addressed to Scholem in private letters. These responses, largely unpublished, contain a number of surprises, among them a letter to Scholem from Samuel Lewis, a Jewish occultist from San Francisco, who wrote Scholem “to see if we may not be of service to each other in some manner.”<sup>14</sup> Lewis informed Scholem about his spiritual quests and the esoteric circles he

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11. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 249–50.

12. Bergman, “Ie-Gershom Scholem,” 4 [Hebrew].

13. Scholem Archive, Series 01, Folder 0239.2, 12 December 1947; Scholem, *Briefe* (1), 331, 457–58.

14. Gershom Scholem Archive, Correspondence, Series 1, Folder 1583, The National Library of Israel. Both Lewis’s letter and Scholem’s response are presented at the conclusion of this article.

was affiliated with. He enquired about contemporary Kabbalists in Jerusalem, and expressed his wish to bring together Jewish and Muslim mystics. Scholem responded cordially, although with a markedly ironic tone. He enquired about Lewis's esoteric studies, and about the California Kabbalists Lewis was acquainted with. However, he did not hide his disregard for modern esotericists and expressed his doubts concerning the ability of mystics to further peace in Palestine. Scholem's answer concluded the correspondence between the scholar and the spiritual seeker. Probably Lewis was discouraged by Scholem's sarcasm, and Scholem did not find any further interest in Lewis and his spiritual quests.

## [4]

Samuel Lewis was not the first spiritual seeker to approach Scholem and communicate with him. From the very beginning of his career, Scholem was approached by occultists who were interested in Kabbalah, and he met and corresponded with them. Notwithstanding his disparagement of occultist Kabbalah and his denial of the historical significance of contemporary Jewish Kabbalah, Scholem did find some interest in contemporary practitioners of Kabbalah.<sup>15</sup> Before turning to discuss in more detail the correspondence between Lewis and Scholem, we would like to examine some of the previous communication Scholem had with occultists (many of them of Jewish origin) who found interest in his Kabbalah scholarship.

In 1921, while working on his PhD dissertation at Munich University, Scholem became acquainted with the circle of the Jewish occultist Oscar Goldberg (1885–1953). Scholem, who was introduced to Goldberg's writings by Walter Benjamin, had some acquaintances among his followers.<sup>16</sup> Scholem relates that the members of the group found him interesting “not only because

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15. Burmistrov, “Gershom Scholem und das Okkulte,”; Huss, “‘Authorized Guardians,’” 93–94; Hanegraaf, “The Beginnings of Occultist Kabbalah,” 108–9.

16. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 146–49; Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 97–98.

I had access to the Hebrew sources, but primarily because an old friend of mine had told them that I was studying the Kabbalah.”<sup>17</sup> Scholem emphasized the difference between Goldberg’s circle’s interest in Kabbalah and his own as follows: “The Kabbalah was highly regarded by them, not only because of the religious and philosophical aspects that prompted me to study it, but on account of its magical implications, about which Goldberg (the only one in the circle who really knew Hebrew) had the most extravagant notions.”<sup>18</sup> Scholem relates that he had a “wholly negative attitude toward the attempts to draw me into this circle, and toward the pseudo-kabbalah that was presented to me in Goldberg’s name.”<sup>19</sup> Despite his negative attitude to Goldberg’s “schizophrenic character” and to his circle of “metaphysical magicians,” Scholem wrote an entry on Goldberg for the *Encyclopedia Judaica*,<sup>20</sup> and mentioned him as one of the Jewish scholars who transformed Kabbalistic ideas into forms of modern thought.<sup>21</sup> In 1921, Scholem paid a few visits to Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932), a well-known author who was interested in occultism, and who was affiliated with various esoteric groups.<sup>22</sup> Scholem was introduced to Meyrink by Robert Eisler (1882–1949), a controversial historian of religion who was interested in Kabbalah and esotericism and who was a regular contributor to the journal *The Quest*, edited by G.R.S. Mead (1863–1933), Madame Blavatsky’s former secretary, who founded The Quest Society after he left the Theosophical Society.<sup>23</sup> In his

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17. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 97. See also idem., *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 146 (the friend was Karl Türkisher).

18. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 146. See also idem., *Walter Benjamin*, 97.

19. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 97–98.

20. Scholem, “Oscar Goldberg,” 705.

21. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 85.

22. Frenschkowski, “Gustav Meyrink,” 327–31.

23. On Eisler see Hakl, *Eranos*, 100–2. On Scholem’s connection with Eisler, see Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 126–35. Scholem also published an article in *The Quest*: “Chiromancy in the Zohar”: 255–56. In his introduction to Scholem’s article, Mead relates that the translation from the Zohar was taken from a collection of physiognomic passages in the Zohar that Scholem sent to Eisler for future publication in a series of Jewish mystical texts (*ibid.*, 255).

partial autobiography, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, Scholem relates the following: “One day, Eisler said to me that he told Gustav Meyrink in Starnberg about my Kabbalistic studies, and that Meyrink wanted to invite me over to have me explain some passages in his own writings to him.”<sup>24</sup> Scholem, who read Meyrink’s novels *The Golem* (first published in 1915) and *The Green Face* (first published in 1916), relates that he had to shake his head over the “pseudo-Kabbalah” in them. Nonetheless, he went to visit Meyrink, whom he described as “a man in whom deep-rooted mystical convictions and literarily exploited charlatanry were almost inextricably amalgamated.”<sup>25</sup>

Meyrink showed Scholem a few passages from his novels and asked him to explain them to him. Meyrink said that, although he wrote them, he did not know what they meant. Explaining it, observed Scholem, “was not very difficult for someone who not only knew the Kabbalah but also about its misuse or distortion in the occult or theosophic writings of Madame Blavatsky’s circle.”<sup>26</sup> Scholem gave one example, the words “CHABRAT ZEREH AUR BOCHER” that appeared in *The Golem*.<sup>27</sup> Scholem explained to Meyrink that the words must be the mystical name of a lodge, retranslated into Hebrew, “something like ‘Lodge of Aurora’s Seed’.”<sup>28</sup> However, Scholem wrote fifty years later that he found out that the words were a retranslation of the title of the Frankfurt Jewish masonic lodge, Loge Aurora zur aufgehenden Morgenröte, which was “incorrectly transcribed by some ignoramus in an English book in Meyrink’s library.”<sup>29</sup>

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24. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 132.

25. *Ibid.*, 133.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Meyrink, *The Golem*, 99. The words appear also in another passage in the novel, *ibid.*, 146.

28. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 133. Scholem assumed at that time that ZEREH transliterated the Hebrew word זרע= seed). He gave a similar explanation to these words in a letter to Sigrid Mayer, dated 9 February 1976. See Scholem, *Briefe* (3), 125–26 (letter 115) (and see *ibid.*, 367, n.3).

29. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 134. On the history of Loge Aurora zur aufgehenden Morgenröte see Katz, *Jews and Freemasons in Europe, 1723–1939*, 57–72. As far as we know, there is no evidence that the name of the lodge was translated into Hebrew in a form similar to the words that appear in *The Golem*.

Scholem was not aware that the words in *The Golem* (which mean “shine morning light”) were the Hebrew name of the “Order of the Golden Dawn,” according to the Cipher Manuscript,<sup>30</sup> the founding document of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn that was probably compiled by English occultist, Kenneth R.H. Mackenzie (1833–1886).<sup>31</sup> Meyrink’s direct source was most likely the “Historic Lecture for Neophytes,” which was written by William Wynn Westcott (1848–1925) and circulated amongst the neophytes of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.<sup>32</sup> The words that were written in the Cipher manuscript in Hebrew “הברת אור בוקר” appear in the “Historic Lecture” in Latin characters “Chabrath Zereh Aur Bokher.”<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note that Scholem’s speculation concerning the source of the Hebrew words in Meyrink’s novel was used by both scholars and contemporary adepts of the Golden Dawn as proof of the authenticity of the discovery narrative of the Cipher Manuscript.<sup>34</sup>

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30. See Ellic Howe, “The Golden Dawn Cipher Manuscript,” added December 26, 2016, accessed January 2020, [https://archive.org/stream/EllicHowe-TheGoldenDawnCypherManuscript/EllicHowe-TheGoldenDawnCypherManuscript\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/EllicHowe-TheGoldenDawnCypherManuscript/EllicHowe-TheGoldenDawnCypherManuscript_djvu.txt). The Hebrew words הברת זרה אור בוקר appear under the English words, “Order of the Golden Dawn” which are written in the cipher used in the manuscript.

31. Wheeler, “The Finding of Hidden Texts,” 4–6.

32. Howe, *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, 22. It is interesting to note that, according to the “Historical Lecture” the German name of the order was “Die Goldene Dämmerung.”

33. *Ibid.*, 25. Meyrink encountered the Hebrew words in Latin transcript either in a manuscript version of the “Historical Lecture” or in one of the published references to it, in which the words appeared: Gustav Mommsen’s “Letter to the Editor” in *Notes and Queries* (December 8, 1888); Westcott’s lecture on *Die Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzer* (1888); Westcott in Blavatsky’s *The Theosophical Glossary* (1892); or A.E. Waite’s *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross* (1924). We are grateful to Henrik Bogdan, who provided us with this information. The words appear in slightly different spellings in each of the above sources.

34. Suster, “Modern Scholarship and the Origins of the Golden Dawn,” 167; Prinke, “Deeper Roots of the Golden Dawn,” 16; Renatus, “The Sabbatian Qabalah and its relation to the Golden Dawn,” <https://gylleenegryningen.blogspot.com/2009/04/sabbatian-qabalah-and-its-relation-to.html>; the author of this lecture, Tomas Stacewicz, the former imperator of the Golden Dawn temple in Sweden, argues on the basis of Scholem’s hypothesis for the Sabbatean sources of the Golden Dawn’s Qabalistic tradition.

Scholem related that he visited Meyrink once or twice more following their first meeting (in which Meyrink also showed him a copy of John Woodroffe's *The Serpent Power*) and that Meyrink offered him the opportunity to write a fictional biography of Isaac Luria for a series of biographies of great occultists that he planned to publish.<sup>35</sup>

Another occultist that approached Scholem, a few years later, was Israel Regardie (1907–1985). Regardie sent a letter to Scholem, on March 4, 1929, from 55 Avenue de Suffren, Paris. This was the address of the famous occultist and magician Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), with whom Regardie studied and served as his unpaid secretary. Regardie presented himself to Scholem as a twenty-one-year-old American, of Jewish origins, who had been extremely enthused by the “Holy Qabalah.” Regardie writes that he is currently “studying under a Qabalist (who is not Jewish),” without disclosing the name of his teacher. He says that he encountered certain problems regarding “Zoharic and Yetziraistic philosophy,” which he believed could be solved by someone familiar with Jewish psychology, an aspect of Jewish esotericism he was not familiar with. Hence, he decided to write to Scholem (whose name he found in *Hartmann's Who's Who in Occult, Psychic and Spiritual Realms*),<sup>36</sup> to ask him if he could collaborate with Crowley, or inform him about other Jewish Kabbalists who could correspond with him in English or French. “I am of the opinion that a Jewish Qabalist of some years experience and study could collaborate with my present Teacher, and much benefit could be mutually derived.” Regardie signed the letter with his magical name in Hebrew letters שָׁנָא (=snake) and its numerical value, 358.

We do not have any indication that Scholem responded to the letter, and we do not know if he was aware at the time that Regardie was a student of Crowley, whom

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35. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 134.

36. Hartmann, *Hartmann's Who's Who*, 21: “Scholen [sic], Dr. Gerhard, of Jerusalem. Author, pupil of Prof. Fritz Hommel of Munich University. Complete Biography [sic] of all existing books and articles in periodicals on Kabbalistic texts and problems, completed, to be published.”

he considered a “humbug.”<sup>37</sup> However, in later years, Scholem purchased and read Regardie’s first book, *A Garden of Pomegranates: An Outline of the Qabalah*, which was published in 1932.<sup>38</sup> Scholem noted in his copy of the book that Regardie was Crowley’s secretary, and scribbled many question and exclamation marks in the margins. Concerning one passage in the book, he exclaimed: “nonsense!”

## [5]

Almost twenty years after Regardie’s attempt to recruit Scholem to collaborate with Crowley, another American occultist, Samuel Lewis, who was also of Jewish origins, sent a letter to Scholem, who by now was a renowned scholar of Jewish mysticism. Lewis had read Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* in the years after its second publication. Upon finishing the book, which he reported having read “with joy and gladness from beginning to end,” he sent Scholem an enthusiastic letter, dated March 14, 1948.

Samuel Leonard Lewis was born in San Francisco in 1896 (a year before Scholem) to an affluent Jewish family. A spiritual seeker since his youth, Lewis first encountered the Theosophical Society when he visited the Palace of Education at the 1915 World’s Fair held in San Francisco.<sup>39</sup> In 1919, he met Ada Martin, also active in the Theosophical Society, who introduced him to Sufism. Ada Martin, née Ginsberg (1871–1947), the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants, was active in the Theosophical Society and the Martinist Order. In 1911, she met the Indian Musician and Sufi teacher Inayat Khan (1882–1927), who delivered a lecture on Indian Music at the Vedanta Society in San Francisco. Martin, who became Inayat Khan’s first American follower, was initiated by him and took the Arabic name Rabia. Rabia Martin established a Western Sufi organization, initially called “The Chistie Branch of the Sufic

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37. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 2.

38. Regardie, *A Garden of Pomegranates*. Scholem’s copy is held at the National Library of Israel, Scholem Collection 8609.

39. Lewis, *Spiritual Brotherhood*, 48.

Order of America.” In 1918, she opened the Kaaba Allah Sufi retreat in Fairfax, California, a small town not far from San Francisco.<sup>40</sup>

According to Lewis’s account of his meeting with Martin, his first question to her concerned Kabbalah:

In November 1919 he is walking on Sutter Street; he sees a display of books. He is unaware of how but soon he is upstairs facing a little dark-haired lady. She is Jewish. “You can explain the Kabbalah?” he asks. “Yes, and all religions.” “What is Sufism?” “Sufism is the essence of all religions. It has been brought to the West by Hazrat Inayat Khan.” The woman is Murshida Rabia A. Martin, Inayat Khan’s senior disciple, and his first appointed Murshida.<sup>41</sup>

Lewis became a member of Martin’s Sufi order and joined the Kaaba Allah center, from where he sent his letter to Scholem, in 1948. Lewis was similarly interested in Martinism, Kabbalah, and Hinduism, and also studied Zen Buddhism with Nyogen Senzaki (1876–1958), one of the first Zen masters in the United States. Later (likely soon after writing to Scholem), Lewis left the Kaaba Allah group, possibly over disputes concerning the succession of Ada Martin, who had died in 1947. Lewis worked in various odd jobs and traveled to Japan, India, Pakistan, and Egypt. In the late 1960s, Lewis began to draw young disciples from among the ranks of the counterculture and declared himself the spiritual leader of the hippies. He became known as Sufi Sam, developed the dances of Universal Peace, and published several books. He spent the last years of his life in the Lama Foundation New Age community, in New Mexico, where he died in 1971.<sup>42</sup>

## [5]

Lewis penned his letter to Scholem after reading the latter’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. He told Scholem that he read the book with joy and declared that it “throws light upon innumerable problems and which may clear the way

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40. Bowen, *A History of Conversion*, 22, 215–18, 220–24; Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 159–60.

41. Lewis, *Spiritual Brotherhood*, 48 (Introduction).

42. Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam*, 353–54; Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 222–23, 225–28.

for the future in many directions.” Lewis’s enthusiasm reveals the impact that *Major Trends* had on contemporary spiritual seekers. Western occultists such as Lewis believed that they and Kabbalah scholars shared common goals and that academic research was compatible with their spiritual search.

Lewis’s letter contains fascinating information about esoteric circles in California and their interest in Kabbalah. Lewis mentions one of his teachers, a Mr. Meyer from Oakland, whom he refers to as the last Kabbalist in his area. According to Lewis, Meyer was born near Vilna and educated in Safed, yet was despised and persecuted by the local Jewish community. It was Meyer (as well as Inayat Khan), Lewis writes, who taught him about the parallels between original Judaism and Hinduism. According to Lewis, “Mr. Meyer claimed that some prophets were Arabs, that the teacher of Moses was a Hindu, etc. and all his statements can be verified by scholasticism and science.”

Lewis also mentions Elias Gewurtz, who, he says, resided in the same building in which he wrote his letter—i.e., the Kaaba Allah Sufi center in Fairfax. Elias Gewurtz (1875–1947) was a Jewish Theosophist born in Dembitz (Dębica), Poland, to a notable rabbinic family. In the early 1900s he immigrated to London, where he joined the Theosophical Society.<sup>43</sup> Gewurtz left England in 1914 and settled in California, where he continued his affiliation with the Theosophical Society and other esoteric groups.<sup>44</sup> Gewurtz published several books and articles on Kabbalah (some of them together with another Jewish Theosophist from London, Leonard Bosman).<sup>45</sup> Gewurtz based much of his

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43. Huss, “Qabbalah, the Theos-Sophia of the Jews”, 141–42. In 1902, Gewurtz converted to Christianity (see the Church of London Births and Baptisms, 1813–1916). The rumors about his conversion reached his hometown. Nonetheless, Gewurtz never mentioned his conversion in his writings and he in later years presented himself as Jewish.

44. Gewurtz resided in different locations in Southern California until his death in San Bernardino in 1947. We are grateful to Philip Deslippe for kindly providing us with information about Gewurtz’s date and place of death, as well as some other documents concerning his life in the United States.

45. Gewurtz’s publications about Kabbalah include Gewurtz and Bosman, *The Cosmic Wisdom*; Gewurtz, “The Qabalah”; idem., *The Hidden Treasures of Ancient Qabalah*; idem., *The Mysteries of the Qabalah*; idem., *Beautiful Thoughts of the Ancient Hebrews*.

perception and knowledge of Kabbalah on the writing of the French occultist Antoine Fabre d'Olivet (1768–1825). In his letter, Lewis relates that Gewurtz, who suffered from poor health, was engaged in the translation of the Zohar as well as of Fabre d'Olivet's *The Hebrew Language Restored*. In his letter, Lewis discusses the interest he and his circle had in the teaching of Fabre d'Olivet and his followers (Stanislas de Guaita, Alexander Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, and Papus). He writes that his original teacher (this is probably referring to Ada Martin<sup>46</sup>) was initiated in Fabre d'Olivet's school and that he himself had written an unpublished work on this approach. Lewis mentions Miss Nayan Redfield (possibly Marie Louise Redfield, 1869–1948), the translator of Fabre d'Olivet's writing into English.<sup>47</sup> Lewis says that he worked as her part-time secretary and that he has in his possession a copy of her unpublished translation of the Zohar.<sup>48</sup>

Lewis also mentions his “spiritual brother” Shabaz C. Best from Rio de Janeiro and advises Scholem to write to him. Shabaz Best (Cecil Eric Britten Best, 1882–1972), was an English banker who had lived in Rio de Janeiro since the 1920s, having previously been a member of the Theosophical Society in England. He became a follower of Inayat Khan and established the first branch of the Sufi movement in Brazil.<sup>49</sup> He also had a keen interest in the teachings of Fabre d'Olivet.<sup>50</sup>

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46. On Ada's Martin connection with the Martinist order, see Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam*, vol. 1, 215–16.

47. We have not been able to find much information on Redfield, who, according to the introductions to her publications resided in Hartford, Connecticut. Nayan Louise Redfield's translations of Fabre d'Olivet are *Hermeneutic Interpretations*, *The Golden Verses of Pythagoras*, *The Hebraic Tongue Restored*, *Cain, a Dramatic Mystery in Three Acts, with Fabre d'Olivet's Arguments against Lord Byron*, *The Healing of Rodolphe Grivel, Congenital Deaf-Mute*.

48. In a letter to Dr. Oliver L. Reiser, from 1966, Lewis writes that he urged Redfield to translate the Zohar. He relates that in the framework of his research for the project, he met “at least one real Kabbalist” who imparted to him, among other things, that Moses had two teachers, one in Egyptian wisdom and one in Indian teachings. Diaries 1966, Murshid Samuel Lewis Online Archives <https://www.ruhaniat.org/index.php/diaries/diaries-1966?highlight=WjyZWRmaWVsZCJd> (accessed January 2020). He is probably referring to Meyer, the Oakland Kabbalist he mentioned to Scholem.

49. Sedgwick, “Sufism in Latin America,” 11–12.

50. According to Best, he based his book *Genesis Revised* on an English translation of *The Hebraic Tongue Restored* made by Nayan Redfield, which he revised into more modern English. See Best, *Genesis Revised*, 9. Best also published *The Drama of the Soul*, which was first published in Portuguese as *Mistérios e Misticismo da Bíblia - Ciência da Alma* (Rio de Janeiro, 1949). For more information on Best, supplied by his daughter, Joyce Best, see the Nektakht Foundation website, accessed December 2018, <https://wahiduddin.net/mv2/bio/Sketches.htm>.

Lewis writes in his letter that he first heard of Scholem and his work from T. Reich, a fellow San Francisco resident of Jewish parentage.<sup>51</sup> “Between the two of us,” he writes, “we have quite covered all the deeper mysticisms of earth – Sufism, Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Buddhism, Esoteric Christianity, Vedanta, Hindu Yoga, etc.” Finally, Lewis informs Scholem that he had previously been in close touch with Dr. Sossnitz. Lewis is referring to Dr. Isaac Sossnitz (1872–1967), the translator into English of Adolphe Franck’s *The Kabbala: or, the Religious Philosophy of the Jews*. Lewis mentions, as well, Sossnitz’s father (the famous scholar Joseph Judah Löb Sossnitz, 1837–1910), attributing to him the opinion that the Kabbalistic doctrine was derived from Zoroastrianism (an opinion held by Adolphe Franck).<sup>52</sup>

Lewis describes himself in the letter as “a Jew and a Sufi.” He seems to identify with “the famed Surmad” (i.e., the sixteenth-century Sufi of Jewish origin, Sarmad),<sup>53</sup> as well as with Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank, noting that “the common experience of Mr. Reich and myself, which seems to take us outside the pale of the synagogue, and of Mr. Meyer ... seems to point in the direction of Zevi and Frank.”

As mentioned above, Lewis believed that *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* was of spiritual significance and assumed that he and Scholem had a common mystical goal. He tells Scholem, “your work seems both clear and self-explanatory and includes what I think is most important – the validity of the inner experience itself.” (The last words were underlined by Lewis.) Lewis sees a connection between the religious message he attributes to Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* and the “thesis of establishing Kabbalistic mysticism as a meeting ground of Spiritual Judaism and Christianity,” which he found in the novel *East River* by the Yiddish writer Sholem Asch, published in English translation in 1946.

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51. Ted (Theodore) Reich is mentioned many times in Lewis’s letters and diaries, which are found in the “Murshid Samuel Lewis Archive,” <http://www.ruhaniat.org/index.php/archive-home>. For an interview with him see Ted Reich, “Remembrance by Reich, Ted.” Reich says in the interview that he met Lewis in the Theosophical Society in San Francisco in the late 1920s.

52. On Sossnitz and the publication of Franck’s book in English, see Meir, “The Beginnings of Kabbalah in America,” 238–39.

53. On Sarmad, see Katz, “The Identity of a Mystic,” 142–60; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism*, 31–38.

Lewis expressed interest in the contemporary Kabbalists in Jerusalem that Scholem mentioned in his book:<sup>54</sup> “You have mentioned that there are still a few in Jerusalem, and presumably in Safed, who have maintained contact with the inner light.” In the face of the imminent war in Palestine, Lewis expresses his wish to bring together Jewish and Muslim mystics, claiming that “I have been for years working, quite ineffectively, upon the possibility of those who have had this inner light contact in Judaism and Islam coming together to try to prevent great bloodshed.” Lewis concludes his letter with a statement of what he regarded as his task as a Jew and a Sufi: “As a Jew and a Sufi I would like to do what little I can in this seeming momentous task; whoever loses, I lose, and I feel that more lose. I have no political program as such, but the zeal to effect the brotherhood of man in the Fatherhood of God, in deeds, not words.”

## [6]

Notwithstanding the difficult situation in Jerusalem, which was under siege at the time, Scholem answered Lewis promptly (the date of his letter, April 5, marked the commencement of Operation Nachshon, which aimed to break the siege on Jerusalem). Scholem’s reply is very cordial, although somewhat ironic. He thanks Lewis for his letter and the interest he took in his book and expresses his hope that he will make use of it “in the way it suits you best.” Scholem addresses the writing of Fabre d’Olivet, which he is familiar with, but divulges that he does not consider him as highly as does Lewis. He expresses interest in the California Kabbalists whom Lewis met and in the esoteric studies that Lewis pursued with “so much zeal.” Scholem is especially interested in Elias Gewurtz, whose book *Beautiful Thoughts of the Ancient Hebrews* he had in his collection. Scholem does not conceal his scorn for “this gentleman” and expresses puzzlement over the alleged Kabbalistic citations in his book, claiming

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54. Scholem mentions contemporary Jerusalem Kabbalists on only a few occasions in *Major Trends*. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 278, 328–29.

the following: “I have never understood the mind of this author in putting out this book, not a single quotation of which is authentic. His quotations have nothing to do with what is contained actually in the source he mentions, and I would appreciate it very much if you have an explanation of this kind of modern pseudoepigraphy.” Scholem wonders whether Dr. Martin Meyer, who wrote the introduction to Gewurtz’s book, is the Kabbalist from Oakland that Lewis mentioned in his letter.<sup>55</sup>

Scholem distinguishes his position towards esoteric studies from that of Lewis and his circle. “I must confess,” he writes, “that I have never been initiated into any esoteric circle, and in interpreting Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism at all, I have been relying on my own intuition and that measure of understanding which a careful analysis of difficult texts on a philological basis may afford.”<sup>56</sup>

This was a further expression of the same attitude Scholem maintained towards the Kabbalists of Jerusalem. He did not view them as a significant form of Jewish mysticism, even as he took interest in their writings and collected every work they published. He even stated in one place, “What remained of Bet-El was something like Yoga. I had the feeling that I was dealing with a group of Eretz Yisrael Jewish-style Yoga practitioners.”<sup>57</sup> While Scholem later proposed a wide-ranging project to investigate “late Kabbalah,” including developments outside of Judaism, he does not seem to have altered his estimation of present-day Kabbalist phenomena.<sup>58</sup>

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55. Dr. Martin Abraham Mayer (1879–1923), who wrote the introduction to Gewurtz’s *Beautiful Thoughts of the Ancient Hebrews*, was a scholar and the rabbi of the Reform synagogue Temple Emanuel El in San Francisco. Mayer visited Palestine in 1901–1902 and maintained an interest in esoteric and alternative religious movements (in 1912 he invited Abdul Baha, the leader of the Bahai movement, to speak in Temple Emanuel). However, he was not born near Vilna and was not a resident of Oakland.

56. This passage is cited in Burmistrov, “Gershom Scholem und das Okkulte,” 33–34.

57. Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 38. See Huss, “Ask No Questions,” 141–58; Garb, “The Modernization of Kabbalah,” 2–3, 5, 16; Meir, *Kabbalistic Circles*, 9–15.

58. In 1962, Scholem proposed a fascinating project to the Bollingen Foundation concerning “late Kabbala” (see, among other places, Scholem Archive, Folder 134.2). He proposed writing

Scholem, in his letter, is skeptical of the possibility of interfaith dialogue between Jewish and Muslim mystics that Lewis suggested. “The light is burning pretty low in Palestine at the present,” he remarks, “and I have not noticed any peculiar inclination on the part of the mystics of several religions to come together to settle the matter according to their own lights.” He concludes the letter with words which remain relevant to this day—“I still hope that there will be a way to maintain peace and happiness for those of our people who need it most.”

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The letters presented here are held in the archive of Gershom Scholem at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem.<sup>59</sup> Scholem’s letter was previously published in the second volume of his collected letters.<sup>60</sup> However, it is entirely incomprehensible without the broader context presented here, not to mention Lewis’s letter itself. One hopes that future editions of Scholem’s letters will not print the one-sided correspondence of Scholem but rather include the complete correspondence in order to present a broader and more complete picture of the complicated web of figures who took interest in his work.

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a book on the history of Kabbalah from 1600 to modern times (a five-year project), with an emphasis on Sabbatian remnants, Hasidism, Lithuanian Jewish society, the Kabbalah of the *RaShaSh* in the Land of Israel, and the spread of Kabbalah beyond Jewish society. The Foundation indeed funded this project. Various drafts pertaining to the project are preserved in a number of folders in the Scholem Archive; these have the potential to shed new light on Scholem’s relation to modern Kabbalah, as well as significantly alter the criticism of certain scholars. On Scholem and the Bollingen Foundation, see Meir and Yamamoto, “The Open Book,” 32–33.

59. Gershom Scholem Archive, Correspondence, “Lewis,” Series 1, Folder 1583, The National Library of Israel.

60. Scholem, *Briefe* (2), 5–6.

[Letter 1]

133 Hillside Drive,  
Fairfax, Calif.  
March 14th, 1948  
Prof. Gershom G. Scholem,  
The Hebrew University,  
Jerusalem, Palestine

Dear Professor Scholem:

I have just completed your “Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism” (second edition) which has been read with joy and gladness from beginning to end, which throws light upon innumerable problems, and which may clear the air for the future in many directions. Those who have read “East River” by Scholem Asch may be lead [sic] toward a new view of religion. His thesis of establishing Kabbalistic Mysticism as a meeting ground of spiritual Judaism and Christianity is, I believe, entirely correct, and can be easily proven, but there still is an atmosphere of awe, suspicion, ignorance and repugnance in regard to what has become known as the fantastic, superstitious and transcendental.

I am taking the liberty to write to you to see if we each may not be of service of each other in some manner. One realizes that this may be a daring step. For not only do most of the synagogues of this part of the world look upon mysticism with askance, but Kabbala most of all. Indeed the last Kabbalist I knew in these parts, a Mr. Meyer of Oakland, Calif. – born near Vilna, educated at Safed – was despised by his brethren and persecuted until the rise of Hitler made a few see that their course was not altogether wise. The learned, of course, are entirely under the influence of Graetz and Margolis.

I am writing this letter in a room and building which originally housed one Elias Gewurz. He had studied Kabbala and was an avid writer but poor health thwarted his efforts. He was engaged in two efforts, the translation of “Zohar”

and the French “Hebrew Language Restored” by one Fabre D’Olivet. His secretary-pupil also studied with a learned Kabbalistic-Rabbi whom I never met, and I was instructed in turn, to some degree. Later I acted in part time secretarial capacity to a Miss Nayan Redfield, a linguist, who has translated and published the above work by Fabre D’Olivet, and also his “Hermeneutic Interpretation of the Social State of Man;” also “Zohar,” privately. We have this unpublished, the manuscript being, as you say, about twice the length of Sperling’s work, and containing all kinds of valuable footnotes. Here my story branches out in several directions, and I hope you do not mind the details:

Fabre D’Olivet was a French scholar and linguist. His teacher, Court de Gebelin, attempted to restore the original Indo-Aryan language and anticipated the work of the Grimms, Muller, etc. by generations. But he was a theosophist and his reasoning was repugnant to “scientists” who eject, more than reject God.

F.D. chose to do a similar work with the Semitic tongues and in his “Hebrew Tongue Restored” containing the Cosmogony of Moses, he throws considerable light upon original Hebrew and the roots thereof. In the Hermeneutic Interpretation he applies the philosophy of the Sacred Name of God to the history of mankind, showing that the principles associated with A, M, Sh are basic to everything.

His work was continued in France by Stanislaus de Gault, St. Yves-D’Alvedre, “Papus,” and occult orders such as the Martinists. My original teacher was initiated in these schools and I learned therefrom also. Besides Miss Redfield, my spiritual brother,

Mr. Shabaz C. Best  
 Rua Julio Ottoni 579,  
 Santa Teresa,  
 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

has continued his own researches, and is about to publish his findings. If he has not read your book, I am wondering whether it would be possible for you to write to him and tell him of your other works. I am sending him the name of

your publisher. For my own part I have written in the same field (unpublished) demonstrating the the [sic] principles involved in the sacred letters do apply the [sic] problems of the day.

I heard about you and your work first from Mr. T. Reich of San Francisco. Our life has been strangely parallel. We have known each other since boyhood and are both of Jewish parentage. We have both taken unusual but quite parallel paths and between the two of us we have quite covered all the deeper mysticism of earth - sufism, Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Buddhism, Esoteric Christianity, Vedanta, Hindu Yoga, etc. In the end we come to no difference, only agreement.

From Mr. Meyer, the Oakland Kabbalist, and from Pir-o-Murshid, Inayat Khan, my original teacher in Sufism, I learned of the Parallels between the original Judaism and Hinduism. Any investigation into this field at once clarifies some of the language of Berashith (and the Torah) generally, the the [sic] book of Jonah. Mr. Meyer claimed that some prophets were Arabs, that the teacher of Moses was a Hindu, etc. and all his statements can be verified by scholasticism and science.

What is more interesting is the validity of experiences and the common goal that is actually reached when one is trained, shall we say, in meditation, "yoga," deep devotion, etc. the common acceptance of the universality of Light, for instance, overcomes all the smaller differences which are met at the start of the path.

The common experience of Mr. Reich and myself which seems to take us outside the pale of the synagogue, and of Mr. Meyer, who was not only persecuted, but married a Christian (therefore non-Jewish) lady, seems to point in the direction of Zevi and Frank. I had already known that one or two Sephardics had become Sufis, and saints at that. I mentioned this recently to a Hindu Sufi and he tells me that in his land, not only the famed Surmad (teacher of the elder son of the Emperor Shah Jehan) was a born Hebrew, but many saints of his land also, and he could name them.

I do not know whether this is important. Years ago I was in close touch with Dr. Sossnitz whose father claimed that the Kabbalistic doctrines were

derived from Zoroastrianism. He published his work and would accept no criticism. A glance at the book known as “Dabistan” published at the time of the above-mentioned Saint Surmad, and with his cooperation, shows definitely that there has been a “secret doctrine” and “esoteric methods” for ages, even [sic] since Egypt was founded. Your work seems both clear and self-explanatory and includes what I think is most important – the validity of the inner experience itself. Mystics are not externalists who go around borrowing ideas or patterns.

I do not feel it proper to write further on the above unless you are interested. I feel it wise to turn slightly to another subject. You have mentioned that there are still a few in Jerusalem, and presumably at Safed, who have maintained contact with the inner light. I have for years been working quite ineffectively, upon the possibility of those who have had this inner light contact in Judaism and Islam coming together to try to prevent great bloodshed. Perhaps it is too late at this moment, but even if there be war, how can real heart-peace be established without more understanding and mutual sympathy.

I have spoken to Arabs and Muslims of all groups and spent some time (alone) in Washington, D.C. hoping to find a path to peace, not through politics, but through human contacts. But all the methods have been based upon the forcefulness of pressure-groups and for practical purposes, the rejection of God as Reality. I do not wish at the moment to go into the various messianic outlooks. They would either confuse the issues further – or, actually clear them up.

But if there are men who speak to God and to whom God speaks, though they be of various languages, religions and outlooks, how is it possible for that God to speak differently to them in the language of the spirit? As a Jew and a Sufi I would like to do what little I can in this seeming momentous task; whoever loses, I lose, and I feel more lose. I have no political program as such, but the zeal to affect the brotherhood of man in the Fatherhood of God, in deeds, not words.

Faithfully,  
Samuel L. Lewis

[Letter 2]

28 Abarbanel Road  
Jerusalem  
April 5, 1948  
Mr. S.L Lewis  
133 Hillside Drive  
Fairfax, Calif.  
U.S.A

Dear Mr. Lewis

I am in receipt of your interesting letter of March 14th. I wish to thank you very much for the interest you have taken in my book and I hope you will be able to make use of it in the way it suits you best.

I was very interested to hear about the Kabbalists in California whom you have met and of the esoteric studies which you have pursued with, it seems, so much zeal. I must confess that I have never been initiated into any esoteric circle, and in interpreting Kabbala and Jewish Mysticism at all, I have been relying on my own intuition and that measure of understanding which a careful analysis of difficult texts on a philological basis may afford. I am pretty well acquainted with the work of Fabre D'Olivet whose book about the Hebrew languages I have in my library, but I can not estimate him as highly as you seem to do, interesting though as his book may be.

What makes me wonder most is your reference to one Elias Gewurz whose room you occupy at present. I have never met this gentleman and have been quite puzzled about his personality on account of a book of his which I have in my collection. It is called "Beautiful Thoughts and the Ancient Hebrews" with an introduction by a certain Dr. Martin Mayer. (can this be the Meyer of Oakland, California?) [sic] whom you mention as the last Kabbalist you knew in your parts?) this book is supposed to contain a kind of anthology from Kabbalistical writings, many of them from manuscripts in the British Museum. I happen to be acquainted a little with original texts of Rabbinical literature

and with the Kabbalistical manuscripts and other texts from which this book claims to be based. I have never understood the mind of this author in putting out this book, not a single quotation of which is authentic. His quotations have nothing to do with what is contained actually in the source he mentions, and I would appreciate it very much if you have an explanation of this kind of modern pseudepigraphy since I do not see the reason why he should have to put his thoughts into the mouth of old books instead of claiming them as his own illuminations. If you are acquainted with his pupils and his way of teaching, you may be able to enlighten me on this score.

I do not know if there is anything you can do from your point of vantage for furthering the course of peace in Palestine, however desirable that certainly would be. The light is burning pretty low in Palestine at present, and I have not noticed any peculiar inclinations on the part of the mystic of several religions to come together to settle the matter according to their own lights. I still hope that there will be a way to maintain peace and happiness for those of our people who need it most.

Yours Faithfully,

Gershom G. Scholem

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