# "All Faces Are Equal"

## *The Sceptic in Kabbalistic Hagiography*

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**Abstract**

Doubts about faith can be a potential threat to any institutionalised form of religion. To counter this threat, religious authorities often develop strategies that adopt their opponents' positions and incorporate them into their master narrative as distinctly negative examples. This traditionalist approach can manifest itself at a more abstract level by equating the concept of doubt with a personification of evil. In other cases, it can be more concrete, taking the form of a doubting fellow believer, sometimes portrayed as a sinner whose sinful behaviour needs to be overcome. This study examines how the figure of the sceptic was used in early modern kabbalistic hagiography. It focuses on a narrative in which Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534–1572)—the famous kabbalist and eponym of one of the most influential kabbalistic movements in Judaism—acts as a "physician of the soul" and cures a sinner of his doubts about the existence of God and divine agency in the world. In analysing two specific variants of this story, particular attention is paid to the literary motifs drawn from biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic sources and the way in which these motifs were chosen to create a powerful narrative of the transformation of the rather nihilistic anti-hero into a repentant believer. Against this background, it is argued that the motif of conversion is not only used to convey a moral message, but also serves to establish the authority of a newly emerging religious leadership.

**Keywords**

Doubt – hagiography – Kabbalah – Isaac Luria Ashkenazi – Amalek – early modern Judaism

## 1 Satanic Doubts, or Evil as the Root of Scepticism

In an episode of the acclaimed Netflix series *Shtisel*, the newly engaged Akiva—a young Hasidic free spirit with artistic aspirations—confides to his somewhat

old-fashioned father Shulem that he has doubts about whether married life is the right path for him.[1] Shulem tries to reassure his son, maintaining that second thoughts are nothing out of the ordinary during the liminal phase between engagement and wedding. He tries to comfort Akiva, with little success, by telling him: "But you know what they say: 'Doubt' in *gematria* is 'Satan,' or something like this."[2] As the qualifier to his statement shows, Shulem himself seems to be not entirely sure that he is reproducing this truism correctly. And indeed, the numerical values of the Hebrew terms for "doubt" and "Satan" do not match.[3] Yet the association of what may be called a cultural form of scepticism with evil most likely refers to a common tradition among members of the Hasidic movement. Its origins are attributed to the dazzling founder of one Hasidic court in particular: Naḥman of Bratslav (1772–1810).[4] In a contemporary compilation of his letters, *responsa*, discourses, and aphorisms, one can find the statement that "it is prohibited to doubt anything, because 'doubt' [*safeq*] in *gematria* [equals] 'Amalek,' and he [or it][5] weakens the mind[6] and cools the heart. And our rabbi once said to someone, 'Whatever you do is good as long as you do not do anything bad.' "[7]

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2 Netflix, *Shtisel*, season 1, episode 5, 31.14: אבל אתה יודע מה אומרים? [...] ספק בגמטריה שטן. או משהו כזה.

3 "Satan" (שטן) amounts to 359, whereas "doubt" (ספק) amounts to 240.

4 The study of Hasidism in general, and the study of Bratslav Hasidism in particular, has experienced an enormous increase in popularity over the last few years. It will suffice to mention here Arthur Green's superb and still unmatched intellectual-spiritual biography of Naḥman of Bratslav entitled *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1979). For more recent studies, see Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (London: Continuum; Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2009), as well as Mark, *The Scroll of Secrets: The Hidden Messianic Vision of R. Nachman of Breslav*, trans. Naftali Moses (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2010). For a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on Hasidism, see David Biale et al., eds., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

5 The personal pronoun הוא can refer to either "doubt" or "Amalek." In the present case, the alternative readings do not change the meaning of the sentence, since Amalek is presented as the embodiment of doubt.

6 The use of the term *daʿat* may also be read here as a *terminus technicus* for the *Sefirah* of *Daʿat*, which constitutes an intermediate attribute located in the centre-line just below *Ḥokhmah* and *Binah* and above *Ḥesed* and *Din* (or *Gevurah*).

7 Eliezer Shlomo Schick, ed., *Sefer Ašer ba-Naḥal*, part 11 (Jerusalem, 1995), 174: ואסור להיות

This statement is by no means an exception.[8] Quite the contrary: in the famous collection of Naḥman's teachings entitled *Liqquṭei Mohara"n*, the notion of *teshuvah*—namely, a conscious act of turning away from sins committed in the past and attempting to make amends through repentance in the future—is described as a "war against Amalek."[9] What is more, the idea of having faith or trust in God [*emunah*] is presented as the appropriate antidote that "weakens Amalek—that is, [secular] knowledge and [scientific] inquiry."[10] In this regard, it is also pointed out that "truly, it is highly prohibited to be a scholar, God forbid, and to study books of [non-Jewish] wisdoms, God forbid."[11]

These few striking examples are an apt illustration of some of the elementary coping mechanisms of groups that advocate a traditionalist agenda. They shed light on the strategies aimed at protecting and preserving what they consider an integral part of their heritage. At the same time, they express how they relate to developments that are not in line with their notion of tradition. Due to their capacity to respond to "novel situations which take the form of refer-

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מסופק בשום דבר, כי ׳ספק׳ בגמטריה ׳עמלק׳ והוא מלחיש את הדעת ומקרר את הלב. ורבינו ז״ל אמר פעם לאחד: ווי מען טוט איז גיט אביא מען טיט נישט קיין שלעכטס (איך שעושים זה טוב, העיקר שלא עושים רע). The term ספק amounts to 240 (60+80+100) and thus equals the numerical value of עמלק (i.e., 70+40+30+100).

8 For further Hasidic examples that associate "doubt" with "Amalek," see Jonathan Garb, *Does God Doubt? R. Gershon Henoch Leiner's Thought in Its Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 115–116, 127, 196–198, 200, and 212.

9 See Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqquṭei Mohara"n* (Jerusalem, 1936), part 2, §79, fol. 37[a–b]: מלחמת עמלק זה תשובה. Cf., however, Jonathan Garb, "Doubt and Certainty in Early Modern Kabbalah," in *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies 2017*, ed. Bill Rebiger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 239–246, esp. 240.

10 Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqquṭei Mohara"n*, §19, fol. 22[a]: כי ע״י [על ידי] אמונה החליש את עמלק דהיינו החכמות והחקירות הנ״ל. From the wider context, it is clear that Naḥman of Bratslav is particularly referring to philosophy here, as he describes Amalek in the very same paragraph as a "philosopher, scholar, and infidel" (עמלק היה פילוסוף ומחקר וכפר). In this context, it also seems noteworthy that with reference to Exod 17:12, the *Zohar* interprets Moses's "steadfast" hand that fights the Amalekites hyper-literally as "faith" [*emunah*] (see *Zohar* 2:66[a]).

11 Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqquṭei Mohara"n*, §19, fol. 22[a]: ובאמת הוא איסור גדול מאד להיות מחקר ח״ו וללמוד ספרי החכמות ח״ו. It is possible that this attitude echoes the rabbinic position of Rabbi Akiva; namely, that "one who reads 'uncanonical' works (*sefarim ḥiṣoniyyim*)—identified in the Talmudic discussion (BT *Sanhedrin* 100[b]) as works written by *minim* or schismatics—[…] is also liable to forfeit his share in the World to Come," as Jeffrey H. Chajes discussed in the context of the eternal punishment of those who are not considered "Israel" (see Chajes, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003], 127).

ence to old situations,"[12] traditions are themselves subject to a dynamic process of change. In this sense, they are both innovative and reactive, as they must be constantly adapted to those challenges dictated by entities that lie outside the boundaries of what is deemed controllable. The previously quoted statement that it is forbidden to harbour any form of doubt is a particularly blatant example that reveals how traditionalist groups make use of tactical arguments: it negates one of the central aspects of Jewish intellectual history in favour of encapsulating ideas and teachings that are perceived as a threat. Put differently, it rejects an attitude that encourages one to pose questions and to challenge general assumptions. In that sense, the traditionalist approach constitutes the very antithesis of what has recently been termed "subversive scepticism" or "sceptical strategies," the latter being understood as "a set of literary or rhetorical means intended to induce doubts, questions, and intellectual uneasiness."[13]

On a literary level, this type of deterrence and demonisation is achieved by the identification of doubt with the biblical people of Amalek, who fought the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness.[14] In doing so, the authors draw from the classical imagery of Amalekites as the personification of evil, which developed into a particularly rich trope in kabbalistic writings.[15] Furthermore, the association between doubt and scientific inquiry not only gives these statements a salient modern tone, but also communicates an unambiguous message to their readers: the study of non-Jewish literature is supposedly dangerous as it is a breeding ground for a sceptical attitude that may de-authorise

12 Here, I am following the observations of Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2. See also ibid., 1, where Hobsbawm defines "invented tradition" as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tactically accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviours by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."

13 See Bill Rebiger, "Sceptical Strategies in Simone Luzzatto's Presentation of the Kabbalists," in Rebiger, *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre of Advanced Studies 2017*, 53. Theoretically, it would have been conceivable for the authors of kabbalistic works to apply sceptical strategies such as relativisation or objectification. They did not, however, even bother to discuss the validity of their opponent's attitude. Their strategy is therefore characterised by intentional ignorance rather than by a serious engagement with their opponents.

14 See Exod 17:8–16.

15 Thus, it can be found already in the earliest Provençal writings of Isaac the Blind (ca. 1160–1235). See, e.g., Haviva Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind: A Comparative Study in the Writings of the Earliest Kabbalists* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 103–147, esp. 105–106 and 108. See also Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 104–105 and 143–144n59.

the teachings of the Torah.[16] Not only this, but doubt is also considered harmful as it triggers a rigidity on an emotional-psychological level.[17] Read against the background of kabbalistic sources—and particularly those that conceive the Jewish people as one organism, which may have inspired the authors of these passages—doubt is ultimately equated with the eternal arch-enemy of "the members of Israel";[18] that is, the nation of Amalek, which is believed to reappear in different embodiments in each generation and which is regarded as the force that prevents the unity of Israel and consequently its redemption.[19]

The use of imaginary stereotypes need not be as drastic as in these cases. It can also manifest itself in a more identifiable, and thus arguably more relat-

16 In light of the previously quoted passages, here I am following Jeremy Dauber, who suggests defining scepticism most broadly as "lack of belief" (see Dauber, *In the Demon's Bedroom: Yiddish Literature and the Early Modern* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010], 11).

17 This idea can be found not only in Hasidic writings, but also in those of other modern traditionalist groups. Consider, for example, Avraham Yoffen (1887–1970), a prominent follower of Israel Salanter's Mussar movement and the founder of the Novardok Bais Yosef *yeshivah* in Borough Park, who writes while elaborating on the natural and spiritual type of the evil inclination that "Satan, who is known by the name 'stone' [*even*], […] hardens a person's heart and nape, his nature being like that of a stone" (Yoffen, *Ha-Musar we-ha-Da'at* [Jerusalem, 1973], vol. 2: *Elul–Yom ha-Kippurim*, 56: 'השטן אשר יכונה בשם 'אבן מקשה לבו ועורפו של האדם להיות בטבע כאבן […]). On doubt being affective, see, however, Avraham Rot, "Spinoza's Affective Scepticism," in *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies 2019*, ed. Yoav Meyrav (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 145–172, esp. 147, 153, 165, and 166.

18 For the notion of Israel as one body, see, e.g., Isaiah Horowitz, *Šnei Luḥot ha-Brit*, volume 2 (*Torah ŝe-bi–Khtav, Zo'an Yosef*) (Jerusalem, 1963), fol. 25[b]: "Know that each [member of the people of] Israel is called one soul [*nefeš aḥat*], and altogether they are called *adam*, as it is written '[For] you, [My flock, flock that I tend,] are *adam*' (Ezek 34:31), and thus it is written 'All the persons [*kol ha-nefeš*] belonging to Jacob [i.e., Israel],' etc. (Gen 46:26), are called one soul. And just as the 248 limbs of the body make one *adam*, thus also each [member] of Israel constitutes one limb, and in the *Zohar*, they are called 'member of the body'" [see, e.g., *Zohar* 1:245[a]] [דע כי כל ישראל הם נקראים נפש אחת וכולם בכלל נקראים אדם כמ״ש אדם אתם וכן כתיב כל הנפש הבאה ליעקב וגו׳ קראם נפש אחת. וכמו שרמ״ח אברי הגוף הם אדם אחד כן ישראל כל אחד מהם אבר אחד ונקראים בזוהר שייפא דגופא]. On the conception of an ontological difference between a non-Jewish organism and that of the nations, see Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 120–121.

19 These interpretations are conventionally based on Exod 17:16 ("The LORD will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages"). The author of *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*, for example, presents the destruction of Amalek as *conditio sine qua non* for redemption. See *Zohar* 1:25[a–b] (*Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*) and cf. Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1989), 3:1473. For more contemporary examples that equate the Nazis or Saddam Hussein with the forces of Amalek, see Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 25–26n41.

able, way—for example, in the form of a conventional mortal who questions the probability of divine omnipotence or the consequentialist notion of divine punishment; or as a fictional character who violates religious commandments out of conviction. The appropriation of the figure of the sceptic and its integration into the master narrative as a decidedly negative example can thus be seen as a means of underpinning existing power structures and reinforcing a hegemonic claim to religious authority.

One such attenuated but still dramatic example can be found in the collections of hagiographical stories that tell us about the life and spiritual environment of Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534–1572). In one of these narratives, which was probably first recorded towards the end of the sixteenth century and circulated in various versions throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Luria is portrayed as a "physician of the soul" who cures a sinner of his doubts about the existence of God and divine agency in the world.[20] This study will examine how these fantastic accounts carefully construct the literary figure of the sceptic. In the analysis of two variants of the narrative, particular attention will be paid to the literary motifs drawn from biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic sources and the way in which these motifs were used to create the sceptical sinner who ultimately becomes a repentant believer. Against this background, it will be argued that the motif of conversion from antihero to saint not only serves the purpose of conveying a moral message; rather, and based on what the scholar of Yiddish literature Jeremy Dauber characterises as the first and second levels of "textual scepticism," it will illustrate how stories of this kind seek to establish and consolidate the authority of an emerging religious leadership.[21] Ultimately, and building on the opening discussion, it is this last point that will show to what extent early modern kabbalistic hagiography not only served as a model for creating legendary accounts around the movement's founding figures, but can also be understood as a template for validating the model of Hasidic *ṣaddiq* or rebbe as a mediator between God and the community.

## 2 The Sinner from Constantinople

In his chronicle *Divrei Yosef*, completed in 1672, the seventeenth-century Egyptian historian Josef ben Isaac Sambari (ca. 1640–1703) reproduced a collection

20 For a superb study of Luria, see Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

21 Dauber, *In the Demon's Bedroom*.

of fantastic stories known today as the "History" or "Biography" of Luria [*Toledot ha-Ar"i*].[22] Among these legendary accounts, which stylise Luria as a miracle-worker with paranormal abilities, there is one that particularly stands out. It tells the story of a sinful man from Constantinople who travels to Safed to find Luria and see for himself if he really does have the supernatural abilities he is said to possess.[23] On his arrival in Safed, the sinner confronts Luria with his doubts, and Luria accepts the challenge, revealing every detail of the sinner's past life through retrocognition.[24] Despite this rather lurid and merciless disclosure, Luria is portrayed as a responsible and discrete leader, as he reveals these secrets not publicly, in front of his fellowship, but behind closed doors.[25] This trait is further amplified by the excessive use of the anonymising phrases "such-and-such" and "so-and-so" used with reference to the exact nature of the sinner's misdeeds, the persons involved, or the places where he committed his sinful acts. Apparently moved by the revelation of his deepest secrets, the sceptic falls to his knees and begs Luria's forgiveness. To make amends for his wrongdoings, he expresses his willingness to accept any punishment, even death by execution. Luria, however, only prescribes "many penitentials (*tiqqunim*), including fasting, ritual immersion, and the wearing of sackcloth" and requires him "to study ten folios of *Sefer ha-Zohar* every day."[26]

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22 Sambari's *Divrei Yosef* was published in Sambari, *Sefer Divre Yosef by Yosef Yiṣḥaq Sambari: Eleven Hundred Years of Jewish History under Muslim Rule* [Hebrew], ed. Shimon Shtober (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1994). For a comprehensive discussion of the various manuscript sources and prints of *Toledot ha-Ar"i*, see Meir Benayahu, *The Toledoth ha-Ari and Luria's "Manner of Life"* (*Hanhagot*) [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1967).

23 For the entire story, please see appendix 7.1. I intend to publish a comprehensive discussion that will examine the story's many variants elsewhere, including those (presumably earlier versions) in which the thirteenth-century Castilian kabbalist and alleged author of the *Zohar* Moses de León (ca. 1240–1305) acts as the main protagonist instead of Luria.

24 On retrocognition as reading the "face" of the other, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Weeping, Death, and Spiritual Ascent in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism," in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, ed. John J. Collins and Elliot R. Wolfson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 228–229, where he discusses the talmudic and Zoharic notions of the sins marked on the face of the sinner. On Luria's healing in general, see chapter 5 of Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 150–186, and see 96 and 160 for a reference to metoposcopy in de Vidas's *Rešit Ḥokhmah*. For metoposcopy, see also Lawrence Fine, "The Art of Metoposcopy: A Study in Isaac Luria's Charismatic Knowledge," *AJS Review* 11 (1986): 79–101 (reprinted in Fine, ed., *Essential Papers on Kabbalah* [New York: New York University Press, 1995], 315–338).

25 This considerate conduct also points to the fact that Luria fulfils the prohibition of slander (*lashon ha-ra*). See, e.g., *b. Soṭah* 42a.

26 An English translation of the full story can be found in the appendix. On the ritual reading of the *Zohar*, see Roni Weinstein, *Juvenile Sexuality, Kabbalah, and Catholic Reformation in Italy: Tiferet Bahurim by Pinhas Barukh Ben Pelatiyah Monselice* (Leiden: Brill, 2009),

The first half of the story alternates between the man's journey to Safed and Luria, who, by means of *telesthesia* or "remote viewing," informs his fellowship of the sinner's whereabouts, his outward appearance, and his time of arrival. Thus, already before the first personal encounter between hero and antihero, the narrative attempts to convey the veracity of Luria's extra-sensorial abilities. Furthermore, by embedding these supernatural elements into the thoroughly realistic setting of a travelogue, it attempts to increase the story's plausibility. Both devices ultimately serve as a means of invalidating the readers' potential distrust, which Dauber's study of Yiddish literature and the early modern describes as "universal" and "particular" types of textual scepticism. According to him, the former constitutes doubts about "the *general* existence of a particular supernatural phenomenon"[27] (such as disbelief in the existence of psychic abilities *per se*). The latter, on the other hand, constitutes a sceptical attitude "about a specific claim within a generalized structure of belief."[28] It is primarily the latter category that our example seeks to counteract. It aims at demonstrating the truthfulness of the claim "that the spirit of the Lord speaks through"[29] Luria, which is achieved by utilising the figure of the sceptic, who provides a projection surface for a potentially sceptical readership. To be sure, this reading by no means suggests that one is or should be able to decide "what is real and what is fictional within a text (or a life)," as the scholar of religion Jeffrey J. Kripal has emphasised in his study on the paranormal.[30] Quite the contrary: I would argue that strategies that are intended to counteract textual scepticism are essentially serving the purpose of neutralising the readership's potential uncertainties and doubts and that they present the fantastical as an integral part of "a reality that is controlled by laws unknown to us," to use the words of the literary critic Tzvetan Todorov.[31] In this light, the transformation of the story's negative role model into a positive one can serve to guide the audience in the course of their reading experience towards a recognition of Luria as a divinely inspired healer. In other words, the sinner's conversion experience has the potential to reduce the reader's putative reservations. It therefore represents a central factor in the consolidation of charismatic authority figures.

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279, as well as Boaz Huss, *The Zohar: Reception and Impact*, trans. Yudith Nave (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016), 221.

27 Dauber, *In the Demon's Bedroom*, 11.

28 Dauber, 11.

29 See below, appendix 7.1.

30 See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 34.

31 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 25 (quoted in Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 34).

## 3 There Is No Judgement and There Is No Judge

Fantastic stories, especially those written in the vernacular, were formerly primarily considered to be literature for an audience belonging to a less educated stratum of society. This assessment has been rightly challenged in more recent studies.[32] In the case of kabbalistic hagiography in particular, it would be misleading to assume that the stories were intended only for the mainstream. This is evident from the context in which they are found in their early transmission phase—namely, as parts of technically demanding metaphysical works such as Naftali Bakharakh's *ʿEmeq ha-Melekh*, published in Amsterdam in 1648, or as part of *Sefer ha-Kawwanot*, which was edited by Solomon ben Mordekhai Gabbai and published in Constantinople in 1720.[33] Furthermore, texts such as the story of the sinner from Constantinople were written in Hebrew, and it is not uncommon for them to contain a few—albeit highly effective—references to biblical characters, rabbinic aphorisms, and kabbalistic concepts, the deeper meaning of which can only be grasped through an intimate knowledge of the traditional sources. From this point of view, many of the kabbalistic-hagiographical narratives manage to walk the fine line of providing intellectually stimulating material for a heteronomous group of readers with very different levels of education and genre awareness. In our example, this means that at first glance, the story of the sceptical sinner tells a dramatic tale of doubt and conversion. On a meta-textual level, however, a very different narrative emerges, one that playfully teaches kabbalistic themes such as

32 See, e.g., Lucia Raspe, "On Men and Women Reading Yiddish: Between Manuscript and Print," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 26 (2019): 199–202; Dauber, *In the Demon's Bedroom*, 1–45. See also Eli Yassif, *The Legend of Safed: Life and Fantasy in the City of Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019). For a general study of the fantastic, with a particular focus on its subversive dimension, see Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981).

33 Furthermore, given the fact that some of these themes can be found (at least rudimentarily) in the writings of Ḥayyim Vital, I would argue that at an early stage of dissemination, one can certainly speak of an élite-to-élite transmission—one, however, that quickly evolved into an élite-to-non-élite transmission, while at the same time persisting in elitist circles. On some early hagiographical traces in Ḥayyim Vital, see, e.g., his *Šaʿar Ruaḥ ha-Qodeš* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Šalom, 2017), 56. More detailed and flowery accounts of these themes can be found in the letters sent by the Moravian-born kabbalist Shlomo Shlomel Meinstral of Dresnitz (ca. 1547–1632?) from Safed to Eastern Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Shlomel himself can be considered as belonging to the secondary élites. For a more detailed discussion of Shlomel's letters, see Patrick B. Koch, "Of Stinging Nettles and Stones: The Use of Hagiography in Early Modern Kabbalah and Pietism," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 109 (2019): 534–566.

the transmigration of souls, the importance of rectification [*tiqqun*], and the power of psychic techniques.

The most notable intertextual reference that illustrates the interplay of the two levels of meaning occurs relatively early in the story. While the sinner expresses his intention to embark on his "pilgrimage" to Safed in order to test Luria, he proclaims:

> I will go to Safed, may it be rebuilt and re-established speedily in our own days, to meet the Rav and see whether he will be able to tell me about the transgressions that I have committed. [If so], I will do penance with his support and accept anything he will decree upon me. If not, then I will know that there is no judgement and no judge, but that the world follows its own principles.[34]

The sinner's sober, scientific approach is striking in this passage. His deliberation is presented as being unbiased and open-ended, and he intends to make his decision on the basis of empirical evidence. However, what makes the demonstration of evidence so radical is that the proof of God's existence is ultimately measured solely by Luria's success in convincing the sinner of his supernatural abilities. In other words, the sceptic's acknowledgement of divine agency is reduced to a single factor, which is yet another effective means of establishing Luria's status as an authority figure.

On an intertextual level, the story anticipates that if Luria were to fail, then the sinner would deduce that "there is no judgement and no judge." The fact that this dictum is rendered in Aramaic is a clear indication that it comes from another source. And indeed, there are a number of instances in rabbinic literature where this statement can be found. In some cases, it is accompanied by its positive counterpart; namely, that "there is a judgement and a judge."[35] At times, it is contextualised in declarations such as "in every place where there is no judgement, there is judgement," a seemingly contradictory idea that was

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34 MS Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Alliance Israélite 130, fols. 105a–b, in Sambari, *Sefer Divre Yosef*, 340: אלך לצפת תוב״ב לפני הרב ואראה אם יגיד לי העבירות שעשיתי, אשוב בתשובה על ידו ואקבל עלי כל מה שיגזור עלי, ואם לאו אדע דלית דין ולית דיין אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג.

35 Such as in the name of Rabbi Akiva in *Gen. Rab.* 26:6 (Jehuda Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, eds., *Berešit Rabbah* [Jerusalem: Šalem Books, 1996], 1:252). There, it is part of a larger discussion of Gen 6:3 ("The Lord said, 'My breath shall not abide [*yadon*] in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years'"). The Midrash interprets the term *yadon* as "to judge," i.e., with reference to the interpretation that God would cause a flood or carry out his judgement in 120 years (see James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common*

resolved by interpreting the first part as a reference to the lack of earthly judgement that consequently requires a subsequent divine judgement, as suggested by the second part of the phrase.[36] In the context of the previously quoted passage, however, it is most probable that these words were chosen with the ulterior motive of hinting at the adaptation of the saying found in *Targum Yerušalmi*. There, it reads: "There is neither judgement nor judge, nor another world; nor will good reward be given to the righteous, nor vengeance be taken of the wicked."[37] More importantly, the *Targum* puts these words into the mouth of the biblical figure of Cain, who speaks them to his brother Abel just before murdering him. Luria's foremost student, Ḥayyim Vital (1542–1620), was most certainly familiar with this tradition, as he writes in his *Liqquṭei Torah* that "Cain denied the laws, saying 'there is no judgement, and there is no judge.'"[38] Not only this, but the portrayal of Cain as the epitome of the lawbreaker also served as the basis for Vital's political agenda, which was imposed on him by his teacher. Identifying the origin of his soul as stemming from Cain, Vital writes in his *Šaʿar ha-Gilgulim* [The Gate of Reincarnations] with reference to the Iberian Jews who were forcibly converted to Christianity:[39]

> My master [Luria] told me that I am obligated to facilitate merit for those transgressors more than other people. This is because all the transgressors in this generation [...] are mostly, or perhaps totally, from the [soul] root

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*Era* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998], 212–213). It is noteworthy that both *Berešit Rabbah* and *Targum Yerušalmi* are considered Palestinian traditions rather than Babylonian ones.

36 See *Midr. Deut. Rab*. 5:5 (Shaul Lieberman, ed., *Midraš Devarim Rabbah* [Jerusalem: Bamberger and Wahrmann, 1940], 97): רבי אליעזר אומר במקום שיש דין אין דין, ובמקום שאין דין יש דין, ומהו כן, אלא אמר רבי אליעזר, אם נעשה הדין למטה, אין הדין נעשה למעלה, ואם לא נעשה הדין למטה הדין נעשה למעלה.

37 *Targum Yerušalmi* on Gen 4:8: לית דין ולית דיין ולית עלם אחרן ולית למיתן אגר טב לצדיקיא ולית למפרעא מן רשיעיא. Cf. also *Midraš Leqaḥ Ṭov* on Gen 4:8: אין דין ואין דיין ואין עולם אחר. The date of *Targum Yerušalmi* is disputed. Menaḥem Recanati (1250–1310) repeatedly refers to it in his *Peruš al ha-Torah*, which may have been a source for subsequent generations of kabbalists. For a general summary of the midrashic materials on Cain's sin, see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews, Volume 1: Bible Times and Characters from the Creation to Jacob* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909), 109–113.

38 Ḥayyim Vital, *Liqquṭei Torah* (Vilna, 1879), fols. 61[a–b], and ibid. (Jerusalem, 1995), 145: קין שכפר בדינין ואמר לית דין ולית דיין [...]. This passage is also quoted in Menaḥem Azaria of Fano, *Sefer Maʾamarei ha-Ramʿa le-Rab einu Menaḥem Azariah mi-Fano*, *Tašlum le-Sefer Aserah Maʾamarot* (Jerusalem: Yismaḥ Lev, 2018), 3:263. See also MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Mich. 109, fol. 317[b].

39 On Vital's soul-connection to Cain, see Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 333–350, esp. 340–341. On the exalted status of Cain's soul in Lurianic Kabbalah, see Shaul Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 53–73.

> of Cain. They mixed his good sparks with evil ones, resulting in a majority of evil sparks. Therefore, I am obligated to rectify them because they share the source of my Soul.[40]

Against this background, it is safe to assume that the intertextual reference "there is no judgement and no judge" was used to identify the sinner of the story with the prototypical anti-heroic figure of Cain. In the wider context of Lurianic kabbalistic concepts, it also points to the cosmic project of correcting those soul sparks that originate from a single source and are the cause of a person's (or rather a group of people's) wrongful behaviour.

## 4 All Faces Are Equal

The sinner's initially sceptical attitude is a recurring motif in other versions of the story. Its radicalism lies in the fact that it challenges not only the Jewish legal system as such, but also the entire construct of a consequentialist ethics based on the doctrine of punishment and reward. A highly interesting expression of this nihilistic attitude can be found in *Sefer Kawwanot we-Maʿaseh Nissim*, which was printed in Constantinople in 1720.[41] In addition to a seemingly abridged version of the story already contained in *Divrei Yosef*, it provides a much more dramatic account that portrays the anti-hero as a wealthy person.[42] This detail is important since the sinner's economic status would have made it easier for him to concentrate on Torah study. Following this logic, his sins weigh more heavily on him and he consequently faces a more severe punishment for his transgressions.[43] There is also a significant difference in the way in which

40 Ḥayyim Vital, *Šaʿar ha-Gilgul* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Šalom, 2017), 192: ואמר לי מורי ז"ל כי אני מחוייב לזכות לחייביא יותר משאר בני הרשעים שבדור [...] רובם או קרוב לכלם הם משרש קין שנתערבו נצוצותיו הטובות ברע ורובו רע ולכן אני מחוייב לתקנם כי אדם לפי שכל הם מן השרש שלי; English translation in Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash*, 81. This section is part of the supplements referred to as introductions 38 and 39 of Shmu'el Vital's version of *Šaʿar ha-Gilgulim* (Jerusalem, 1995), 172.

41 Solomon ben Mordekhai Gabbai, ed., *Sefer Kawwanot ve-Maʿaseh Nissim* (Constantinople, 1720). This work is a combination of *Sefer ha-Kawwanot* published by Moshe Trinki in Venice in 1620 and the hagiographical materials that the compiler refers to as *Šivḥei ha-Arʿi* in the main body of the book (see fols. 2ª–13ª). Gershom Scholem suggests that Solomon ben Mordekhai Gabbai may have been the grandson of Solomon ben David Gabbai, the compiler of *Meʾirat Einayim* (see Scholem, "Laqaṭot le-Bibliographiah šel ha-Kabbalah," *Kiryat Sefer* 30 [1955]: 415). The book was reprinted in Safed in 1876.

42 See below, appendix 7.2.

43 This argument was also brought forward by the eighteenth-century Italian kabbalist

the sinner expresses his scepticism towards Luria; namely, he asks him directly, using the following words:

> "Are you the prophet who knows everything that a person does in secret?" He [i.e., Luria] said: "That is me," to which [the wealthy sinner] responded: "If you tell me what I have done, I will accept penance [*teshuvah*]. If not, then 'all faces are equal.'"[44]

Like the saying "there is no judgement and no judge," the Aramaic statement that "all faces are equal" has been carefully chosen. In the Palestinian Talmud, it is attributed to King Manasseh, who is said to have recited Deut 40:30–31; namely, the very same words that his father let him read in the synagogue when he was a child to test whether God would answer his prayer when he was about to be killed.[45] Repentance is a major theme in the wider context of the talmudic passage, and the discussion closes with Manasseh's realisation that "there is judgement and there is a judge"[46]—a recognition that constitutes the counterpoint to the above-quoted saying from *Targum Yerušalmi*.[47] The very same legend about Manasseh is also included in the penitential section of the early haggadic collection *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*,[48] and it was adapted in additional midrashic sources, some of which were quoted by the kabbalists of sixteenth-century Safed in their moralistic or *musar* treatises.[49] Long before the Safedian

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Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto (1707–1746), who claimed that "one who is in a state of prosperity and neglects his obligations is judged much more harshly than one who is in a distressed state and is prevented from living up to the standard by the pressures confronting him" [כי הנה אינו דומה מי שהוא במצב הרוח ומתרשל מעבודתו, למי שהוא במצב הדחק ונטרד בלחצו ולא ישלים את חקו]: see Luzzatto, *Derech ha-Šem—The Way of God*, trans. Aryeh Kaplan (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1981), 114–115.

44 Gabbai, *Sefer Kawwanot ve-Ma'aseh Nissim*, fol. 6[a]: אתה הוא הנביא שיודע כל מה שיעשה האדם בחדרי חדרים א"ל אני השיב לו אם תגיד לי מה שעשיתי אקבל תשובה אם לאו כל אפייא שוין.

45 Deut 4:30–31: "When you are in distress because all these things have befallen you and, in the end, return to the Lord your God and obey Him. For the Lord your God is a compassionate God: He will not fail you nor will He let you perish; He will not forget the covenant which He made on oath with your fathers." Note the anachronism of Manasseh (709 BCE–643 BCE) praying with his father in the synagogue.

46 באותה שעה אמר מנשה אית דין ואית דיין.

47 See *y. Sanh*. 51[b]. For an English translation, see Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, ed., trans., and comm., *The Jerusalem Talmud, Fourth Order: Neziqin, Tractates Sanhedrin, Makkot, and Horaiot* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 357–358.

48 Salomon Buber, ed., *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* (Lyck, 1868; facsimile reprint Jerusalem, 1993), fols. 162[a–b]. The discussion of Manasseh is part of a larger discussion of Hos 14:2: "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, For you have fallen because of your sin."

49 Thus, for example, in Elijah de Vidas, *Rešit Ḥokhmah*, ed. Ḥayyim Yosef Waldmann (Jer-

kabbalists, however, this apparently egalitarian aphorism had already been a subject of debate in the kabbalistic sources of the Middle Ages. The Zoharic corpus includes a highly interesting discussion about the consequences of denying God's sublimity. Referring to the Israelites' accusations against God and Moses for making them leave Egypt (Num 21:5),[50] the *Zohar* interprets the plural form of the verb *he'elitunu* as an indication that they (i.e., the Israelites) "treated all faces equally," which is why "serpents came upon them, burning them like fire, and fire entered their mouths and they dropped dead."[51] Similarly to the passage from the Palestinian Talmud, the *Zohar*'s concern with those who doubt the existence of the divine powers and their effect on human behaviour and vice versa appears to reflect a wider debate on the relationship between repentance and reward that was negotiated in thirteenth-century Castile. In a recently published study on Moses de León's "Order of Penitents," a thirteen-step programme for pietistic living that is part of a larger unpublished "unnamed composition," Jeremy Brown has shown that de León promotes a kabbalistic pietism with the idea of *teshuvah* at its centre.[52] Strikingly, de León applies the very same rationale, as well as the same proof-texts, in order to promote his idea of a supererogatory ethics. Thus, he would claim that those persons who "deny the supernal world, saying: 'there is neither judgment nor judge' "[53] would have no reward in the world to come.

It is instructive to see that de León integrates this sceptical attitude towards the existence and omnipresence of God as a means of promoting his doctrine of the *Sefirot*. He also uses it to polemicise against those who reject

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usalem, 1984), "Gate of Repentance," chapter 1, § 61 (1:700–701), Elijah de Vidas quoted a similar version of the story from *Midr. Ruth Rab*. 5:6.

50 Num 21:5: "And the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food.' "

51 *Zohar* 3:183[b]: למה העליתונו שוו כל אפייא שווין בג"כ אזדמן לגבייהו חוויין דמוקדן לון כאשא ועייל אשא למעייהו ונפלין מתין. Translation in Daniel Matt, trans., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Volume 9* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 223. The Zoharic discussion refers to the following verse in Num 21:6: "The Lord sent fiery serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died."

52 See Jeremy Phillip Brown, "Gazing into Their Hearts: On the Appearance of Kabbalistic Pietism in Thirteenth-Century Castile," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 14 (2020): 177–214. See also Avishai Bar-Asher, "Penance and Fasting in the Writings of Rabbi Moses de León and the Zoharic Polemic with Contemporary Christian Monasticism" [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 25 (2011): 293–319, as well as Hillel Ben-Sasson, "Transgressions and Punishments: The Special Contribution of Rabbenu Yonah Gerondi's *Ša'arei Tešuvah*" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 86 (2019): 106–163.

53 Brown, "Gazing into Their Hearts," 190, quoting from MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek 47, fol. 343[a].

the idea that divine revelation constitutes the source of kabbalistic knowledge and its ancient origins.[54] Elsewhere, de León stresses the acceptance of divine punishment as an expression of *teshuvah*. Thus, in his discussion of the value of the thirteen *middot* for penitents, he refers to the twelfth attribute of being ashamed of one's misdeeds and regretting what one has done as a way of indicating "that there is judgement [and that there is a judge] and that there is a hereafter, a reward for the righteous, and punishment for the evildoers. And when one remembers all he has done with the tears in his eyes, all his days and years, and constantly remembers his sins and guilt."[55] If we compare this declaration with the story of the sinner from Constantinople, we can see that both are based on the idea of a causal link between (the absence of) *tešuvah* and the denial of divine jurisdiction.

These examples show that the urge to counteract sceptical attitudes towards a certain system of beliefs is not limited to hagiography. Quite the contrary, the employment of the literary figure of the sceptic surfaces as a common strategy in different genres, and at times in highly popular writings.[56] An audience with a high level of reader competency would certainly have been able to discern these multiple layers of intertextual subtlety, while the moral message would nevertheless have remained accessible to an audience that did not possess such specialised knowledge. Viewed in this light, hagiography thus also serves as a medium through which targumic, midrashic, and kabbalistic interpretations of biblical figures and their actions and flaws are translated into a more contemporary format. By modelling the protagonists after biblical figures such as Cain or Manasseh on the one hand, and by replacing God in his function as a "judge" with a divinely inspired human authority on the other, they establish a link to

54 Interestingly, de León describes the words of the ancient sages (i.e., kabbalistic lore) as "sweeter than honeycomb when they are examined according to the matters of Torah by way of truth" (MS Munich 47, fol. 343$^{b}$ [translation in Brown, "Gazing into Their Hearts," 190]). This idea may be echoed in the story of the sinner from Constantinople, in which the forgiveness of sins is induced by putting sweets into the sinner's mouth rather than executing him with boiling liquid lead.

55 Moses de León, *Sefer Miškan ha-Edut*, ed. Avishai Bar-Asher (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2013), 73: כי יורה על זה בלבו שיש דין [ויש דיין] ויש עלם אחרן ויש שכר לצדיקים ויש עונש לרשעים ואם על כל מה שעשה יכלו בדמעות עיניו וימיו ושנותיו וישים חטאתיו ואשמיו תמיד לנגד עיניו.

56 Here, I am following Boaz Huss, who uses the term "canonical" to designate "an authoritative corpus of texts." See Huss, "*Sefer ha-Zohar* as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text: Changing Perspectives of the Book of Splendor between the Thirteenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1998): 257–307, esp. 258. See also Huss, *The Zohar*, esp. 67–111.

the everyday realities of an early modern readership. The dialogue between the individual and God in the rabbinic context switches to human interaction. In other words, judgement becomes a this-worldly affair, and the judge becomes flesh and blood.

The central role that these hagiographical narratives attribute to an individual as a medium between the divine and the community was not immediately accepted by the rabbinic authorities of the seventeenth century. Thus, even works that were heavily influenced by the literature of the Safedian Kabbalists, such as *Šnei Luḥot ha-Brit* by the famous Prague-born Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (1565–1630), still supported the idea of divine omniscience, arguing that anyone who does not believe that the divine "knows, sees and protects at all times […] denies the principle of God's existence."[57] However, Luria's function as a divine mediator who sees and (in a later phase of history) protects the sinner at all times was to become particularly important for the formation and social organisation of later Jewish spiritual movements. It served as a blueprint for Sabbatean hagiographical texts such as *Zikkaron li-Vnei Yiśra'el* by Baruch ben Gershon of Arezzo, in which Nathan of Gaza (1643–1680), the prophet of the messianic figure Šabbatai Ṣevi (1626–1676), was modelled on Luria's image of a divine mediator.[58] Moreover, it developed much more powerfully in the structural transformation of the Hasidic movement at the end of the eighteenth century, with the establishment of the *ṣaddiq* qua divine agent—a function that was to be inherited dynastically. For example, the founder of the Komarno Hasidic dynasty, Isaac Eizik Judah Yehiel Safrin (1806–1874), urged his readership to "make a *tzaddiq* and holy one as your rabbi, and through this, remove yourself from doubt, the husk of Amalek, whose *gematria* is equivalent to doubt and who arouses questions and heresy."[59]

57 Isaiah Horowitz, *Šnei Luḥot ha-Brit*, volume 2 (Amsterdam, 1648–1649), fol. 57[b]: אם מאמין שהש"י יודע ורואה ומשגיח בכל עת ורגע או לא מאמין אם אינו מאמין נמצא הוא כופר בעיקר במציאות השם. This statement is part of his interpretation of the famous biblical verse "I am very mindful of the Lord's presence" (Ps. 16:8). See also Yeḥiel Mikhel Avraham Epstein, *Sefer Qiṣur Šnei Luḥot ha-Brit* (Fürth, 1693), fol. 6[b] [my counting] and ibid. (Jerusalem, 1960), 17.

58 See Efrat Lederfein-Gilboa, "Revisiting *Zikkaron liVne Yisrael*: A Multifaceted Sabbatian Monograph," *El Prezente* 16/17 (2022/2023): 60–92, esp. 62, 76–81, and 88–89. On *Zikkaron li-Vnei Yiśra'el*, see also *Sabbatai Zevi: Testimonies to a Fallen Messiah*, ed. and trans. David J. Halperin (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), 21–101.

59 Isaac Eizik Judah Yehiel Safrin, *Noṣer Ḥesed ha-Mevu'ar* (Jerusalem, 2016), 35; quoted and translated in Garb, *Does God Doubt?*, 198.

## 5 The Subversive Dimension of Kabbalistic Hagiography

So far, this article has emphasised how the figure of the sceptic in Lurianic hagiography serves to consolidate an ideology that includes, on the one hand, a strict adherence to the rules established by a specific community, and, on the other, a set of practical instruments for censuring those who have broken those rules. However, this programmatic orientation should also be read in the light of its specific historical context; namely, the early formative phase of what some scholars have defined as "Lurianism."[60] From this perspective, the hagiographical mode also has a thoroughly subversive dimension, especially when read against the background of sixteenth-century Ottoman society as a whole. It seems no coincidence that the (wealthy) sinner is portrayed as a resident of the cultural, religious, and political epicentre of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, he is also shown to be the one who takes on the hardship of travelling to a peripheral place like Safed. Luria, whom he visits, is at best a marginal figure, if not completely insignificant in the empire's political and religious landscape. In other words, the reference to Luria's fame, which reached as far as Constantinople, and the recognition of his prophetic authority and paranormal abilities can therefore also be read as an attempt to control one's own historiography and to create a counter-narrative to the conditions of the Jews in Safed, who lived under relatively strictly administered and at times discriminatory Ottoman rule in the late sixteenth century.[61] As Heidi A. Ford has convincingly argued in her study of Muslim miracle stories, the miraculous act as such is "a symbolic representation of divine power." Furthermore, she states that it has the potential "to subvert the social reality in which it is grounded, because by its very nature it is, to borrow [Michel de] Certeau's terminology, 'the eruption of divine power.' In other words, it claims as its source of power and authority that which is both external to and above social reality: God."[62]

60 See, e.g., Moshe Idel, "One from a Town, Two from a Clan—The Diffusion of Lurianic Kabbala and Sabbateanism: A Re-Examination," *Jewish History* 7, no. 2 (1993): 84. See also the remarks in Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Ṣevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 24.

61 See, e.g., Abraham David, *To Come to the Land: Immigration and Settlement in Sixteenth-Century Eretz-Israel* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 48–53.

62 Heidi A. Ford, "Hierarchical Inversions, Divine Subversions: The Miracles of Râbiʿa al ʿAdawîya," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, no. 2 (1999): 10. Ford refers here to Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 278. For mockery and scepticism in early Christian hagiography, see, e.g., Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1983), 56.

Narratives centred around miracles can therefore not only call the social order into question; they can also reverse the existing power relations. These dynamics clearly emerge in a relatively detailed account of the miracles performed by El'azar Azikri (1533–1600), one of Luria's contemporaries in Safed and the author of the mystico-moral treatise *Sefer Ḥaredim* (first printed in Venice in 1601).[63] In the narrative, Azikri travels to Constantinople to consult with the Sultan, imploring him to replace the current malevolent governor of the city of Safed with one who will be more sympathetic to the Jews.[64] On the way to Constantinople, the ship on which Azikri is travelling is caught in a heavy storm, and the prayers of those on board have no effect. At the captain's request, Azikri writes a divine name on a piece of paper and orders the captain to attach this hastily made amulet to the ship's mast. Immediately, the storm calms, and the ship sails towards Constantinople at incredible speed, making the entire journey from the Land of Israel to its destination on the northern shore of the Mediterranean in only a few hours. On arrival, Azikri looks for a place to stay. He contacts the local *šamaš*, who agrees to house him; however, he tells Azikri that he can only sleep on the roof of his house because he does not have enough room inside. So Azikri takes his books and goes onto the roof of the building, where he studies by candlelight and keeps his midnight vigil [*tiqqun ḥaṣot*]. That same night, the Sultan's daughter falls ill, and her condition worsens as the night wears on. While the doctors are fighting for her life, the Sultan goes out onto his balcony to relieve his grief and sees a great shining light coming from one of the roofs of the city.[65] Thinking it is a fire, he sends

63 Even though this story may have been composed at a much later point in time and no specifics are known about its provenance, it can still serve as an example that illustrates the mechanisms of subversion. To the best of my knowledge, it was first published in Pinḥas David Weberman, ed., *Sefer Ma'aseh Nissim* (Jerusalem: Defus ha-Teḥiah, 1966), 125–130. It is also included in the anonymous collection *Sefer Anaf Eṣ Avot* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Qodesh Hilulim, 1972), 235–237. Both versions make reference to Ḥayyim Yosef David Azulai's famous *Šem ha-Gedolim*, stating in his name that "we have heard about his [i.e., Azikri's] holiness and the wondrous deeds that he performed in Constantinople" [ושמענו מקדושתו ופלאות שנעשה לו קוסטאנטינא]. Even though this passage is in fact included in some of the later prints of Azulai's work (see, e.g., Azulai, *Šem ha-Gedolim* [Podgorze, 1905], fol. 15[a] [29], no. 212), it seems to be a later addition as it is absent from the *editio princeps* (Azulai, *Šem ha-Gedolim* [Livorno, 1774], fol. 8[a], no. 38), as well as from the second edition (Azulai, *Šem ha-Gedolim* [Livorno, 1786], fol. 5[a], no. 40). I will only present those parts of this very rich history that seem most relevant to our context.

64 The story uses the name "Istanbul."

65 The motif of the great shining light appears to be an allusion to the biblical theophany in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israelites out of Egypt (see, e.g., Exod 13:21). This motif was also adopted in Lurianic hagiography, where it is stated, for example, that

his subjects to extinguish it. When they discover that the source (or receiver) of the light is not a fire, but Azikri, the Sultan understands that Azikri must be a holy man. He therefore brings him to the palace and asks him to heal his daughter. With the help of Azikri's prayer, the Sultan's daughter is completely cured. Deeply in his debt, the Sultan offers Azikri the governorship of Safed. Azikri refuses, but asks the Sultan to suspend the current governor and appoint a replacement.[66] He also demands that the new official consult him personally on all matters and decisions concerning the community. The Sultan agrees, giving him a letter to this effect, and on Azikri's return, the malicious governor is removed from office and the Jews of the city live in peace and quiet from that day forth.

Although this story does not use the figure of the sceptic, it does revolve around events that trigger a process of persuasion through the performance of miracles. As the story progresses, this leads to a reversal of the balance of power. Recognising Azikri's supernatural abilities, the Sultan allows him to dictate political decisions, not least those affecting the financial situation of his realm. In doing so, he acknowledges him as a medium through which divine power manifests itself on earth, thereby subordinating himself not to Azikri, but to God. At the same time, however, the Sultan grants *de facto* power to Azikri, as the story implies an effective reversal at the administrative level. The transfer of authority to Azikri, formerly a subject with a subordinate status, gives him enough power to neutralise his former oppressor. In Foucauldian terms, the story tells of a victory over the "administrative machine" of the "zealous bureaucracy [...] with its inevitable effects of power."[67]

## 6 Conclusion

Much like the examples from the Bratslav corpus cited at the beginning of this article, the hagiographical texts analysed here represent a traditionalist agenda. From a Jewish perspective, the portrayal of Luria as a charismatic

a pillar of clouds or fire (depending on the version) was moving in front of Cordovero's corpse on the procession to his burial site in Safed. See Ya'aqov Moshe Hillel, ed., *Šivḥei ha-Ar"i ha-Šalem we-ha-Mevu'ar* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Šalom, 2014), 11.

66 The motif of the rejection of a monetary reward can be found in a Sufi hagiographical story about Sahl b. 'Abdallāh al-Tustarī: see Farid al-Din Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya'* (*"Memorial of the Saints"*), trans. A.J. Arberry (London: Penguin/Arkana, 1990), 37–38.

67 Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974–1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003), 12.

leader with paranormal powers can be interpreted as a demonstration of intellectual and political superiority over his contemporaries, who were more open to the secular sciences and an intellectual exchange with Christian scholars.[68] It is precisely in this context that a counter-narrative quality of hagiographical literature emerges that has received little attention in Jewish studies. Similarly to Einat Davidi's assessment of the Spanish allegorical drama of the so-called *autos sacramentales* as a typical Counter-Reformation play, kabbalistic hagiography constitutes a counter-strategy and a didactic (re-)indoctrination "whose purpose is to stand as a bulwark against reform."[69] As noted above, traditionalist aspirations are themselves innovative, and they are thus subject to potential criticism from those currents they oppose. In order to conceal this fact, they establish a continuity between old and well-established traditions. In the Lurianic context, this continuity is achieved through the presentation of its main protagonist as someone who has "received divine wisdom in perfection," like the second-century Tannaitic figure and alleged author of the *Zohar* R. Shimon bar Yoḥai. Luria himself is even considered to be a soul-spark of the former,[70] and his source of knowledge is presented as the result of divine inspiration, whose authority is difficult to dispute.[71] Furthermore, his contemporary and

68 See Moshe Idel, "Italy in Safed, Safed in Italy: Toward an Interactive History of Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah," in *Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Modern Italy*, ed. David B. Ruderman and Giuseppe Veltri (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 239–269, esp. 243–244 and 248–249. More recently, see also Jonathan Garb, *A History of Kabbalah: From the Early Modern Period to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 30–66, esp. 30–36 and 41–42. According to the little historical evidence that we possess—namely, the few documents that are today housed in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Ezra Gorodesky Collection at the National Library of Israel—Luria was apparently very prosperous and was involved in domestic and international trade, as well as in philanthropic activities. See, e.g., Abraham David, "Genizat Yerushalayim: The National Library of Israel in Jerusalem," in *Books within Books: New Discoveries in Old Bindings*, ed. Andreas Lehnardt and Judith Olszowy-Schlanger (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 303–306.

69 Einat Davidi, "The Corpus of Hebrew and Jewish 'Autos Sacramentales': Self-Deception and Conversion," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 13 (2019): 185. See also ibid., 189, where Davidi stresses that a "major part in the theatre was written and presented in the Western Sephardic Diaspora, a community of ex-conversos, [where it] served as a powerful tool for re-indoctrination, similar to the function of Spanish didactic theatre in service of the Counter-Reformation."

70 Hillel, *Šivḥei ha-Ar"i*, 10–11.

71 In *Šivḥei ha-Ar"i*, Luria is presented as a figure who spent thirteen years in seclusion in Egypt, on an island close to Cairo, where he received the revelation from Elijah the prophet (see ibid., 3–9, esp. 5). On the perception of Elijah's revelation among kabbalists, see Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 103 and 296. On Luria's prophetic authority, as well as the centrality of the superiority of divinely revealed over intellectually acquired knowledge in mod-

rival Moses Cordovero (1522–1570) is portrayed in Lurianic hagiography as a follower of Lurianic teachings, proclaiming to his own disciples that they introduce a level of kabbalistic wisdom that was inaccessible to him.[72] Most importantly, however, the author(s) of the story of the sinner from Constantinople anticipate(s) the reader's possible doubts and dispel(s) them by using the figure of the sceptic who is transformed into a zealous believer as a result of Luria's successful treatment.

"Stories and histories and other narrative or descriptive accounts help us to escape boredom and indifference—ours as well as that of other people," writes Paul Hernadi.[73] As the previous discussion has shown, hagiographical exempla do exactly this by evoking an emotional response and providing an impetus to improve one's personal observance. Equally important, however, is their purpose of defining communal power structures. Thus, one of the primary goals of the sinner who challenges Luria is to distinguish the charismatic leader from the ordinary person and to show that his (or, very rarely, her) abilities are exceptional and beyond emulation. In this sense, hagiography establishes a clear hierarchy between religious authority and those subordinated to it. The combination of edification and glorification conveys not only an ideal of how one should behave, but also to whom one should listen. Thus, although the term *shevaḥ* literally means "praise," these stories serve to induce not only the veneration of a saint, but also participation through obedience and loyalty.

According to the targumic tradition, Cain proclaimed that "there is no judgement and there is no judge" right before he killed his brother. However, doubt about God's omnipotence is not the only parallel between Cain and the penitent from Constantinople who attempts to challenge Luria with these very words. In the biblical narrative, Cain was not killed for his wrongdoing, and in our context, the sinner is also spared death. Seen in this light, the real "punishment" is that Cain and the sinner have to go on living and learning to live with their guilt. The conversion of a sceptic into a believer is, therefore, as transformative as it is traumatic. Ultimately, it is the beginning of a life marked by a permanent state of being in debt to God.

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ern Kabbalah, see, e.g., Jonathan Garb, *Modern Kabbalah as an Autonomous Domain of Research* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2016), 20, 26–27 (for an English summary, see iii–iv).

72 *Šivḥei ha-Ar"i*, 11.

73 Paul Hernadi, "On the How, What, and Why of Narrative," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 203.

## Appendices

### 1 *The Sinner from Constantinople*

And on the day this deed happened [i.e., Luria preventing a locust infestation in the Upper Galilee], there was a rich person from Constantinople, may God protect her, in Safed, may it be rebuilt and re-established, who came to celebrate Passover, and he had heard about that incident and was greatly astonished by the Rav's abilities. And they told him that this was just one of the many things that the Rav was able to do. Upon his return to Constantinople, he told people there about the Rav's deeds and how he was able to reveal to an individual the sins that he had committed since his adolescence. There was one man who had committed virtually every sinful act. He said to himself, "I will go to Safed, may it be rebuilt and re-established speedily in our own days, to meet the Rav and see whether he will be able to tell me about the transgressions that I have committed. [If so], I will do penance with his support and accept anything he will decree upon me. If not, then I will know that there is no judgement and no judge, but that the world follows its own principles." Thus, he left Constantinople. Having made it halfway, he took a break at a place next to a river, and he drank and lay down and took a glass of wine in his hands and said: "Wise R. Isaac, I drink this glass to your wellbeing and the wellbeing of your disciples." While [the sinner] was still there, the Rav said to his disciples: "Friends, you must know that a few days ago, an evil person from Constantinople set out to come to me in order to try me. Right now, he is in such-and-such place, and he is eating and drinking a glass of wine for your and my well-being. On such-and-such a day, he will arrive here, and his appearance and character is such-and-such. Thus, when he comes and asks for me, bring him before me, because he is a great soul, a spark of Aḥab, the king of Israel, and through me, it will be restored." Eventually, this man came and asked for the Rav, and the disciples brought him before him, and it happened that when he came before the Rav, he was terrified, because he was looking at the countenance of the *Šekhinah*. He approached him and said: "Are you the man who sees, and who tells people their sins?" He responded, "It is I, and the divine wisdom is the one that guides the individual in the cycles of uprightness and righteousness." [The sinner] then said to the Rav: "You should know that I am a very evil person and that if you tell me what I have done, then I will faithfully acknowledge that the spirit of the Lord speaks through you." Thus, the Rav told all his disciples to leave as he did not want to embarrass [the sinner] in front of the others, and they all left. Then, the Rav told him: "Your name is so-and-so son of so-and-so, and on such-and-such a day in such-and-such a place, you committed such-and-such a transgression; and on such-and-such a day you did such and

such." And he continued to tell him everything he had done from the day of his birth to that very day; he even told him about a trivial conversation that he had had with his wife. And so it happened that when he heard him, he fell on the Rav's feet and said: "It is as you said, I have intentionally sinned, I have sinned out of lust and emotion, and I have sinned unintentionally. Now, give me the *tiqqun* for my transgressions, and as the Lord lives, if you tell me that there will be no *tiqqun* for me without [my being executed by means of] decapitation or strangulation, I will accept it for the expiation of my sins." Then the Rav gave him many *tiqqunim*, including fasts, ritual immersions, and the wearing of sackcloth around his waist, and told him to study ten folios of *Sefer ha-Zohar* every day, even without any [deeper] understanding [of its contents]. And from this day on, he was a complete penitent (*baʿal tešuvah*) and he died in penance.[74]

## 2 *The Wealthy Sinner*

There is yet another exemplum about a wealthy person who came before the Rav, asking him: "Are you the prophet who knows everything that a person does in secret?" He said: "It is I," to which he [the wealthy man] responded: "If you tell me what I have done, I will accept *tešuvah*. If not, then 'all faces are equal.'"

74 MS Paris 130, fols. 105a–b, published in Sambari, *Sefer Divre* Yosef, 340–341: וביום אשר אירע מעשה זה היה שם בצפת ת״ו עשיר אחד מקושטנדינה יע״א אשר בא לחוג את חג המצות ושמע הדבר ההוא ותמה מאד על ידיעת הרב. ויאמרו לו, ולא זו בלבד עשה הרב, ויספרו לו ויאמרו כמה וכמה. ובחזרתו לקושטנדינה סיפר שם המעשים של הרב ואיך הוא מגלה לאדם העונות אשר עשה מנעוריו. והיה שם אדם אחד שלא הניח עבירה שלא עשאה. ויאמר בלבו אלך לצפת תוב״ב לפני הרב וארא אם יגיד לי העבירות שעשיתי, אשוב בתשובה על ידו ואקבל עלי כל מה שיגזור עלי, ואם לאו אדע דלית דין ולית דיין אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג. אז יצא לו מקושטנדינה, וישב לו באמצע הדרך במקום אשר היה שם נהר ויאכל וישת, ויקח בידו כוס אחד של יין ויאמר: חכם ר׳ יצחק אני שותה כוס זה לחייך ולחיי החברים שלך. בעודו שם אמר הרב לחברים: חברים, דעו לכם שזה כמה ימים יצא אדם רשע מקושטנדינה, ובא אלי לנסות אותי והנו עתה במקום פלוני אוכל ושותה כוס של יין לחייכם ולחיי. וביום פלוני יבא הנה, כך וכך תוארו ודמותו. לכן כשיבוא וישאל עלי הביאוהו לפני, כי הוא נשמה גדולה, ניצוץ מאחאב מלך ישראל, ועל ידי יתוקן. לימים בא האיש ההוא וישאל על הרב, ויביאוהו החברים לפניו, ויהי בבואו לפני הרב נבהל כי ירא מהביט בפני השכינה, ויגש אליו ויאמר: האתה האיש הרואה המגיד לבני אדם עונותיו. ויאמר אני, וחכמת אלקים היא להנהיג האדם במעגלי יושר וצדק. אז אמר לרב: תדע לך שאני רשע גדול ואם תגיד לי מה שעשיתי אדע נאמנה כי רוח ה׳ דבר בך. אז אמר הרב לחברים שיצאו כולם שלא יתבייש לפניהם, ויצאו כולם. אז אמר לו הרב אתה נקרא פלוני בן פלוני וביום פלוני במקום פלוני עשית עבירה פלונית וביום פלוני כך וכך, עד הגיד לו כל מה שעשה מיום היתו עד היום ההוא, ואפילו שיחה קלה שהיה בינו לבין אשתו הגיד לו. ויהי כשמעו ויפול לרגלי הרב, ויאמר כך דברת, וחטאתי עויתי ופשעתי. ועתה תן לי תקון לעונותי, וחי ה׳ אם תאמר לי שאין לי תקון בלתי הרג או חנק אקבל עלי לכפרת עונותי. אז נתן לו הרב תקונים הרבה, בתעניות טבילות ולבישת שק על מתניו, וללמוד בכל יום עשרה דפים מן הזוהר הלשון לבד בלתי שום הבנה. ומן היום ההוא והלאה היה בעל תשובה גמורה ומת בתשובתו. See also Benayahu, *Toledoth ha-Ari*, 173–174, and cf. Hillel, *Šivḥei ha-Arʿi*, 50–51.

And the Rav came closer to him and told him all of the things he had done since the day he was born. Also, he told him that he had had sexual relations with his female servant, and he admitted everything, except for the [exposure related to] his female servant, which he denied. The Rav said: "If I made her appear to you right now, what would you say?" Promptly, the Rav put his hand on him and he pulled her out [of the wealthy man's body]. When [the wealthy man] saw her and recognised her, he almost passed away. He fell down before the Rav's feet and said: "I have sinned, and perverted that which was right" (Job 33:27). And the Rav, peace be upon him, restored his soul to him. The man was screaming in a bitter voice, crying and begging the Rav, saying, "If you could only remove this death from me," to which he responded: "This is to let you know that what the sages of blessed memory said is true: 'He who has intercourse with a non-Jewish woman will be attached to her like a dog until the world to come.' Thus, she is bound to you and she will not leave unless you [perform] great [acts of] penance and *tiqqunim*." The man responded: "I am here and even [ready to accept the] four modes of capital punishment." So the Rav told him that his *tiqqun* would be by means of burning. Promptly, [the wealthy man] took coins out of his pocket to buy wood in order to burn himself. But the Rav told him: "Our law is not like the law of the nations, but lead is required according to the law." And the man replied, "Whatever will be shall be, I am going to die [in any case]." The Rav then commanded them to buy lead, and so they did and they put it on the fire. And the Rav told him to recite the *šekhiv me-raʿ* confession, and thus he did. And he told him: "Lie down on the ground," and he lay down. He told him: "Spread out your hands," and he spread them out. "Close your eyes," and he closed them. "Open your mouth," and he opened it. And he threw down some sweets that he had with him while saying, "Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin expiated" (Isa 6:7), "Thou shalt not die" (2 Sam 12:13). And he helped him to get up from the ground, prescribing him *tiqqunim*, and the general principle of the *tiqqun* was to read five folios of the *Zohar* every day, even without understanding it, and he reached out to his wife and children, and died in Safed in complete penance.[75]

75 Gabbai, ed., *Sefer Kawwanot ve-Maʿaseh Nissim*, fol. 6[a–b] (and ibid. [Safed, 1876]), fols. 8[b]–9[b]: שוב מעשה בא׳ עשיר שבא לפני הרב יאמר לו אתה הוא הנביא שיודע כל מה שיעשה האדם בחדרי חדרים א״ל אני השיב לו אם תגיד לי מה שעשיתי אקבל תשובה אם לאו כל אפייא שוין ויקרב אליו הרב והגיד לו כל מה שעשה מיום שנולד וג״כ אמר שבא על שפחתו ובכל הודה לו חוץ מהשפחה שכיחש לו א״ל הרב אם עתה אני מראה אותה לך מה תאמר מיד נתן הרב ידו עליו והוציאה וכשרא׳[ה] אותה והכיר׳ כמעט שפרח׳ נשמתו ונפל לפני רגלי הרב ויאמר חטאתי והישר העותי וחזר הרב והשיב נשמתו אליו והאיש צועק בקול מר בוכה ומתחנן להרב שיסירה מעליו ויאמר לו תדע שאחז״ל הבא על הגויה מתקשר עמה ככלב אפי׳ לעה״ב ולזה היא קשורה עמך ואינה יוצאה כי אם בתשובה גדולה ובתיקונים השיב האיש הנני אפי׳ לד׳ מיתות ב״ד אז א״ל

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הרב תיקונו בשריפ׳[ה] מיד הוציא מעות לקנות עצים לשורפו א״ל הרב אין דיננו כאומו׳[ת] אלא צריך עופרת כדין אמר האיש יהיה כמו שיהיה הנני אמות אז צוה הרב שיקנו עופרת ויבואו ויתנו על האש ואמר לו שיאמר וידוי שכיב מרע וכן עשה א״ל השלך עצמך לארץ והשליך עצמו אל הארץ אמר לו פשט רגליך ופשט פשוט ידיך ופשט סגור עיניך וסגר פתח פיך פתח והשליך בפיו מיני מתיקה שהיה לו מזומן וא״ל וסר עונך וחטאתך תכופר לא תמות והקימו מן הארץ וכתב לו תיקונים ובכלל התיקון היה שיקרא בכל יום ה׳ דפין מספר הזוהר אפי׳[לו] בלא הבנה ושלח אחר אשתו ובניו ומת בצפת בתשובה שלימה.

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