

---

## Yiddish ethical texts and the diffusion of the Kabbalah in the 17th and 18th centuries

Jean Baumgarten

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/bcrfj/223>

ISSN: 2075-5287

**Publisher**

Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 30 November 2007

Number of pages: 73-91

**Electronic reference**

Jean Baumgarten, « Yiddish ethical texts and the diffusion of the Kabbalah in the 17th and 18th centuries », *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem* [Online], 18 | 2007, Online since 07 January 2008, connection on 18 May 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/bcrfj/223>

---

## Yiddish ethical texts and the diffusion of the Kabbalah in the 17th and 18th centuries<sup>1</sup>

Jean BAUMGARTEN

CNRS / EHESS

From the 17th century, the ideas of the Kabbalah began to be widely diffused, as can be seen, among other facts, in the phenomenon of the *ba'alei shem* and the popularization of certain aspects of practical kabbalah, like magical practices, amulets or charms for protection, exorcism or union with the divine world. The “heretical” movements from the 17th-18th centuries, the Shabbateans and the Frankists, had two main consequences: first of all, they increased messianic speculation, in particular through the use of the Lurianic kabbalah (*yihudim*, unification and meditation on the letters of the prayers); but also, after the errors and failures of the false Messiahs, they gave rise to a need for moral redemption. This desire for individual purification and collective redemption led to the publication of many mystical and ethical treatises that attempted to create a synthesis of kabbalistic themes, mystical techniques and theurgical practices. For example, the Zohar was only published twice in the 17th century (Lublin, 1623 and Sulzbach, 1683). In 18th century, the Zohar was edited fifteen times and also we find about twenty commentaries of the Zohar and anthologies of zoharic literature<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is an enlarged version of a paper read at the Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Washington, December 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Boaz Huss listed fifteen editions and fifteen commentaries from the 18th

In the 17th-18th century, a slow change occurred in the Ashkenazi society with the popularization of the kabbalistic tradition which became a major ingredient of the religious culture, especially the liturgical practices. We notice, for example, many quotations of mystical texts, like the Zohar, in the Yiddish ethical literature, such as the *Brantshpigl*<sup>3</sup> (Basel, 1602). For the less educated readers a limited number of Hebrew mystical and ethical texts were translated into Yiddish, presenting in a simple language and an abridged form basic notions of kabbalah. We could mention the translation of some Lurianic prayers, like the *vidoui* (Francfort, 1674). We find also a few original works, the most widely diffused being the bilingual *Kav ha-yashar* by Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover (Francfort, 1705, 1709, reprinted fifty times up to the 20th century).

This trend demonstrates two notable evolutions. First, they show the dissemination of Kabbalistic concepts in religious life, whether in prayer (*kavvanot*), ritual (*tikkunei hatsot*) or practices, like the cosmic influence of the performance of *mitsvot* (*ta'amei ha-mitsvot*). Some prayers recited in the Lurianic circles were integrated into the daily ritual and few were translated into vernacular. For example, we could mention the *Tehines* by Isaac ben Jeremia Leib Juedels from the *Sefer sha'arei tsyon* by Nathan Nata Hannover (Prague 1708, 1709). At the end of the book of ethics the *Sefer tam va-yashar* (Francfort, 1674) by Jacob ben Jeremiah Matitiah Levi, a Yiddish translation of the *Sefer ha-yashar*, we find a *piyyut* by Eleazar ben Arakh, prayers against the *yetser ha-ra'a* and the *vidui* by Isaac Luria. We could also mention the tradition of the *Maymodes* (Vérone, 1595; Prague, 1661-1668), the *Seder shomerim la-boker* in Yiddish by Ellush bath Mordekhay Michaels de Slutzk (Francfort-on-the-Oder, 1704, Hanau, 1719), the *Tikn htsos*, (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1666), the

---

century. The first editions of the Zohar were printed in Mantova (1558) and Cremona (1597), then in Salonika (1597). The Zohar was only printed twice in the 17th century, in Lublin (1623) and in Sulzbach (1684), see B. Huss, "Ha-shabbtaut ve-toldot hitkabelut Sefer ha-Zohar", *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, The Sabbatian Movement and Its Aftermath. Messianism, Sabbatianism and Frankism*, Rachel Elior ed., tome 17, Jerusalem, Hebrew University, 2001, pp. 59-60.

<sup>3</sup> M. M. Faierstein, *the Influence of Kabbalah on early Modern Yiddish Literature prior to 1648*, paper delivered at the Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 2005.

*Seder kries shel layle* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1710), the *Taytsh nakht kryes shma*, (Prague, 1719) and the *Nakht leynen*, (Prague (?), 1700 (?). These Yiddish chapbooks give proof of the diffusion of devotional and penitential practices inspired by the Lurianic Kabbalah. An other important testimony is the book of prayers, the *Seder tefila derekh yeshara* (Frankfort, 1697) by Yehiel Mikhl Epstein, who was an itinerant preacher possibly related to the Shabbatean circles. Secondly, few ethical-mystical texts, aimed at a broader public, are written in Yiddish, thus making the vernacular language a vector for the themes of Jewish mysticism. We find many echos of the penetration of mystical themes in Old Yiddish literature, such as, for example, in this excerpt from the first chapter of the *Seyfer tikkunei ha-moadim* (Fürth, 1725)<sup>4</sup> :

“Everyone thinks that when he as learned how to study a page of *Gemore*, he has become a scholar and he never looks at another holy book. But, dear people, know that when a man has studied the entire *Gemore* and the *Toysefes* without having any knowledge of the secrets and wisdom of the kabbalah, he is, in comparison to those who do have such knowledge, like a child who has only begun to study.... Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai wrote the Zohar so that everyone could take pleasure in it and so that, thanks to that splendid instruction, one might attain the world to come.... Some people think that when it is a matter of the science of the kabbalah, then it is necessary that one be a master of the Holy names and have all kinds of knowledge about how to vanquish demons and evil spirits. But that is a different kind of wisdom, called practikal kabbalah of the celestial realm, the grandeur and power and the holyness of the Holy One, blessed be He, is taught”.

The rise of private reading and the privatisation of faith, coincide with the spreading of Yiddish texts centering on “cleaving to God” (*devekut*), description of the upper world, including the “other side”, the *sitra ahra*, demonology and the quest for ethical purification through individual and collective reparation (*tikkun*). The semi-literate could now become initiated into the « mysteries of the world » through “sealed books”, sermons, written and oral, as well as through private pious reading on *shabbes*. There was a growing conviction that kabbalistic ritual possessed a symbolic and concrete efficacy and that, as a privileged

---

<sup>4</sup> *Seyfer tikkunei ha-moadim*, Fürth, 1725, fol. 13b.

access to the secrets of the Torah, Kabbalah could be a path to individual purification and collective redemption.

The best examples of Yiddish ethical literature filled with kabbalistic themes are the adaptation by Yehiel Mikhl Epstein of the *Shnei luhot ha-brit* by Isaiah Horowitz (First edition, Amsterdam, 1649) called *Ets Hayyim* (Francfort, 1720) and the *Kav ha-yashar* by Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover<sup>5</sup> (Francfort, 1705). We could also mention the *Nahalat Tsvi* or *Taytsh-Zohar* (Francfort, 1711), an abridged Yiddish version of the Zohar by Tsvi Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsch, an important testimony of the popularization of kabbalah into the vernacular.

### **I. From ethics to mysticism : The *Kav ha-yashar* (Francfort, 1705) by Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover**

The *Kav ha-yashar* has an interesting story, well representative of the way many Jewish “authors” compose their work. Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover, born in Vilna, settled in Francfort where, in 1705, he published his book in Hebrew (First bilingual edition in 1709). Two individuals had a decisive influence on his writing. First his father, Aaron Samuel (1614-1676), who was a Rabbi and a preacher<sup>6</sup>. Second his teacher, Yosef ben Yehuda of Dubno, an ascetic and a kabbalist, the author of an mystical and ethical treatise, the *Yesod Yosef* (first printed in Sklov, 1785). In 1700, when Yosef of Dubno died, Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover inherited a manuscript of the *Yesod Yosef*<sup>7</sup>. To compose the *Kav ha-yashar*, Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover combines three pieces : his father’s teachings and sermons, passages *in extenso* from the *Yesod Yosef* and his own commentary. In the Hebrew foreword, Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover says that he wrote “on the basis of what he heard from his father, R. Aaron Shmuel

---

<sup>5</sup> A new edition was recently printed in Jerusalem, see T. H. Koidanover, *Kav ha-yashar*, 2. Vols, A. Sheinberger ed., Jerusalem, no date.

<sup>6</sup> The Maharshak, Aaron Shmuel ben Israel Koidanover (c. 1614-1676) talmudist and preacher. He wrote halakhic and homiletic works which contain many ideas of the Kabbalah written in a popular form, like the *Birkat Shmuel* (Francfort, 1682),

<sup>7</sup> He was the son of Yehuda Yudel ben Moshe de Lublin, author of commentaries. Some of them are mentionned in the *Kav ha-yashar*. The *Yesod Yosef* was recently reprinted in Ashdod, Kyriat Belz, no date.

and other great rabbis from his land, among them, the famous rabbi, may he rest in peace, the just, Rav ha-Gaon R. Yosef of Dubno.” Another quotation : “And in certain chapters, these are exactly his words... but, at times, on the contrary, I added my own words to his words, and other times, I removed (omitted) things... so I do not take the crown solely for myself<sup>8</sup>”.

The structure of the text raises many issues. About its “originality” and the distinction between the three layers of the book<sup>9</sup>. I won’t deal with these complex questions, preferring to focus this paper on the possible relation of the *Kav ha-yashar* to the ethical homiletic literature diffused by Shabbatean preachers in 18th century. Several indications prove that the author could be related to the Shabbatean movement. The title of his work could be an allusion to the mystical thought of Nathan of Gaza for whom the “thoughtful light” (*or ha-mahshava*) was streaming back in a “straight line” (*kav ha-yashar*) into the space (*tehiru*) created after the *tsimtsum*<sup>10</sup>. More convincing are the mentions of two Shabbateans preachers and prophets. In the chapter 11, Yehuda Hassid, the *maggid* of Sziedlow, is mentioned<sup>11</sup>. And in the chapter 102, Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover explains about a *Guematria*: “It is what I received of the divine person, our master Rav Heschel Tsoref, *za’’l*”. Is this indication a proof that the author could have some connection with the circle of Heschel Tsoref<sup>12</sup>, an ascetic mystic, a seer and one of the Shabbatean leaders in Poland who revealed to a group of “believers” (*ma’aminim*) prophecies and esoteric explanations? Even if it seems difficult to give a definitive answer, this extract shows a possible link between the author and the Shabbatean movement. More convincing

---

<sup>8</sup> From TB Kiddushin 48b. See *Kav ha-yashar*, introduction.

<sup>9</sup> About the comparisons between the *Yesod Yosef* and the *Kav ha-yashar*, see E. Tsherikower, “Di Geshikhte fun a literarishn plagiat: ver iz der emeser mekhaber fun Kav ha-yosher”, *Yivo bleter*, 4, 1932, pp. 159-167.

<sup>10</sup> On this aspect of the Shabbatean Kabbalah, see G. Scholem, *Sabbataï Tsevi, le messie mystique (1626-1676)*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1983, pp. 300-310.

<sup>11</sup> On Yehuda Hassid, see G. Scholem, “Le mouvement sabbatéen en Pologne”, in *Aux origines religieuses du judaïsme laïque*, éd. par M. Kriegel, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2000, pp. 169-170.

<sup>12</sup> On Heschel Tsoref, see G. Scholem, *ibid.*, 2000, pp. 167-173.

could be the relation between the *Kav ha-yashar* and the popular homiletic or ethical treatises diffused by the Shabbateans from the end of the 17th century to the first decades of the 18th century. During this period, what G. Scholem called the “moderate Shabbateans” concentrated their works mostly on the ethical perspective. The transgressions and the failure of the false Messiah gave rise to a need for moral redemption<sup>13</sup>. This desire for individual improvement and collective purification led to the publication of treatises that attempted to create a synthesis of ascetic, penitential practices, messianic speculations and kabbalistic themes, in particular through the use of *kavvanot*, *yihudim* and meditation on the letters of the prayers. Apart from works of technical mystical theology, a more « popular » kind of Kabbalah was diffused, based on several isolated conceptions, mainly the ethical foundation, embroidered with aggadic material from the Midrashim, the Zohar or the *Shivhei ha-Ari*<sup>14</sup>. Let me just mention the *Shevet musar* (Constantinople, 1712, translated into Yiddish, Amsterdam, 1732) by Eliya ha-Kohen Itamari.

The *Kav ha-yashar* stands at the confluence of several interwoven mystical traditions and included many ingredients. First, the Jewish Midrashic-apocalyptic, like the *Heykhalot*, the *Merkaba*, the *Book of Enoch*, and other texts like the *Alfabeta d-Rabbi Akiba* quoted several times. But we find no references to philosophical or speculative ingredients, like secrets of the divine throne, cosmogonic speculations and the order of the creation (*ma’aseh bereshit*), the *eyn sof* and the realm of *sefirot*. The most important tradition is the ethical kabbalistic literature, especially the *Tomer devorah* by Moshe Cordovero, the *Reshit hokhmah* by Eliya ben Moshe da Vitas and the *Shnei luhot ha-brit* by Isaiah Horowitz. We also find allusions to masters of practical kabbalah like, for example, Joel Ba’al Shem of Zamocz or to the kabbalistic

---

<sup>13</sup> G. Scholem, *op. cit.* note 11, 2000, p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> We could mention, for example, the *Naggid u-metsaveh* (Amsterdam, 1712) and the *shulhan arukh shel Ari* by Y. Zemah (Francfort-on-Oder, 1690), the *Yalkut Reuveni* (Prague, 1660 and Wilmersdorf, 1681), the *Midrashei ha-peliah* (Poland, 17th century), the homiletic works by Bezalel ben Solomon of Slutsk and Berakhia Berakh Spira. See G. Scholem, *La Kabbale, une introduction, origine, thèmes et biographies*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1998, pp. 154-158.

teachings of Yaakov ben Eliezer Temerls, both from the 17th century. Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover stressed ethical values and penitential practices typical of the post-Shabbatean literature of the 18th century, the main theme being the war between good and evil and the leading role of the *Sitra ahra* in all aspects of life. The two antagonistic forces are engaged in a ruthless and tragic battle for domination. The universe is saturated with diabolical forces led by Lilith, Ashmedai and Samael who persecute humans in order to destroy the world and gain power over creation. This book is a remarkable example of the penetration of magic and kabbalistic notions in the popular Jewish literature, especially demonology, the life after death and the transmigration of the souls. Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover insists on the interdependence between the temporal world and the divine world, which leads to the obsessive idea that each act, even the most banal, could participate or, on the contrary, slow down, the process of individual and collective redemption (*tikkun*). Man is placed at the center of a cosmic drama and the human body is a battlefield between the two forces for domination. There is a direct link between performing a *mitsva* or giving in to sin on earth and the echoes in the upper world. Each Jew has constantly two options in front of him. Either he gives way to the messengers of the Satan which seek to dominate him, or he frees his soul from the influence of evil forces and adheres with all his might to the commandments, thus participating in the strengthening of the Divine world. Good brings humans back within the divine world and restores a direct communication between God and His creature, while evil removes from it. Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover warns the reader against the havoc that sin could wreak on the sinner, on the community and on the upper spheres. The obsession of the *yetser ha-ra* and the power of the *Sitra ahra* lead, in accordance with Shabbatean thought, to emphasize the healing role of asceticism and repentance, centred on penitential practices, acts of reparation (*tikkunim*), injunctions of fasts, inventory of possible sins and rituals of purification, like mortification, confession and the recitation of divine names<sup>15</sup>.

---

<sup>15</sup> On this aspect, see J. Baumgarten, "From Translation to Commentary : The *Kav ha-yosher* (Francfort, 1709) ", *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 2004, pp. 269-287 ; id., "Eighteenth-Century Ethico-Mysticism in Central Europe : The *Kav ha-yosher* by Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover (Francfort, 1705)", *Studia*



The *Kav ha-yashar* shows an gradual evolution in the practices of reading the mystical tradition. Its study was always submitted to conditions and restrictions, whether age, degree of moral perfection or level of knowledge. The Kabbalah was confined to a small elite motivated by the conviction that the hidden meanings and « mysteries » of the Torah could be transmitted only to learned initiates and must be hidden from the Jewish masses. The channel of reception was also an important aspect, founded on the necessity of oral transmission from a master to a pupil. The development of printing made a limited range of mystical works available not only to the literate and to those who traditionally belonged to the ranks of consumers of books, but also to less experienced readers. It broadens the dissemination of mystical ideas and, even more, the diffusion in the vernacular. Canonical texts could be read by Jews who do not have the necessary religious culture to understand them. Simple readers, not only semi-literate men, but also women and children who were excluded from the study of mystical sources, could share limited portions of the kabbalistic tradition. One of the concerns of many Yiddish authors was to legitimize the spread of the mystical ideas in the vernacular as an integral part and a new step in the chain of transmission. They established Yiddish as a possible medium of diffusion of the kabbalistic secrets. But Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover is also conscious about the danger of revealing all the hidden secrets of the Torah in the vernacular. He imposed restrictions and diffused only tiny parts of the mystical tradition. Already in the *Zohar*, we find references about the revelation of secrets to the happy few : “These things are not to be revealed but to the most holy persons” (III, 290a). These restricted circles are often called the “humble and pious” (*tsenu’in*). Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover expressed a similar restriction. In chapter 102, we find a commentary on *Guematria* : “there are other secrets which I don t want to reveal to everybody, but only to humble and pious” (*ve hinéh yesh be-yade od divrei kibushin she-eyn ani rotse legalotam bifné kol adam ki-im la-tsenu’in...*). In the Yiddish version, we read : “And I have an

---

*Rosenthaliana, Between two Worlds: The German-Yiddish Encounter*, edited by J. Dauber and J. C. Frakes (in preparation, to be published in 2007).

explanation or an answer (to a question in a commentary)<sup>16</sup> that we cannot reveal except to pious persons” (*un ikh hob oykh deroyf ayn terets nor men tor dos nit megale zayn nor tsu frume layt*). Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover distinguishes two ways of transmitting the Kabbalah, one for the initiated and one for the less learned readers<sup>17</sup>.

In adopting a specific *dispositio* in each chapter of the *Kav ha-yashar*, the printer and the author show their willingness to expand the readership and to induce a multiplicity of readings, combining silent private and oral social readings. The *Kav ha-yashar* belongs to a small number of bilingual books with the top of each page in Hebrew and the bottom in Yiddish. First, it could be used for pious private readings at home, for example during shabbat, either by *lomedim* who study the top part of the book in Hebrew or by simple Jews who concentrate on the lower part of the page. We could add other ways of transmission, especially collective reading and study. In Central and Eastern Europe, after the mystical apostasy and the death of Shabbatai Tsvi (1676), the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century show a circulation of Shabbatean propaganda, especially in small underground groups of ascetic pietists and mystics in which the ideology of the « believers » (*ma'aminim*) was diffused and Nathan's writings were copied, studied, along with the Zohar and ethical and kabbalistic texts. In Bohemia, we could mention Issachar Behr ben Yehuda Perlhefter, the rabbi and wandering Shabbatean preacher and, in Prag, Mordekhay Eisenstadt (1677), an ascetic preacher, and his brother, who travelled through Bohemia, Southern Germany and Northern Italy and attracted a large following, exhorting them not to loose faith in the forthcoming redemption. In Moravia and Silesia, we know the peddler lay mystic and revivalist preacher Leibele Prossnitz<sup>18</sup> (1670-1730) connected to Tsvi

---

<sup>16</sup> Note the discrepancy between the two versions. In the Hebrew text, we read : “and there is an other secret ( or moral words)...”.

<sup>17</sup> M. Idel, “On Rabbi Hirsh Koidanover's *Sefer Qav ha-yashar*”, in *Jüdische Kultur in Francfort am Main von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. by K. E. Grözinger, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1997, p. 123.

<sup>18</sup> Judah Leib ben Jacob Holleschau Prossnitz (c.1670-1730), Shabbatean prophet, see G. Scholem, *La Kabbale*, Paris, Cerf, 1998, pp. 657-659.

Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsch<sup>19</sup>, the writer of the adaptation of the Zohar in Yiddish *Nahalat Tsvi*. In Vilna, we find the former silversmith Heschel Tsoref (1663-1700), who became the prophet of the Shabbatean movement in Poland, the brandy distiller Tsadok of Grodno (in 1694-96) and another prophet Hayyim Malakh<sup>20</sup> (between 1696 and 1700) who propagated Nathan's ideas in Poland and Podolia. We have also testimonies about the *havurah* (« holy society ») of Yehuda

Hassid<sup>21</sup>, the *maggid* of Sziedlow (at the end of the 17th century), a group opposed to the social authority of the rabbis and the *kehilot*, composed of Shabbateans, called *hasidim*, who indulged in extreme asceticism and messianic speculations<sup>22</sup>. Another center of Shabbateanism crystallized in Mannheim (between 1708-1725) with Isaiah Hasid of Zbarach<sup>23</sup> who preached in his *beyt ha-midrash*. Many of the most influential moral preachers and authors of moral literature of a radical ascetic bent were secret Shabbateans. Some *musar-sefarim* of this period belong to this category, such as the *Ketonet passim* (Lublin, 1691) or the *Tsafkenat pa'ne'ah he-hadash* (Francfort-on-the-Oder, 1694) by Joseph ben Moshe Ashkenazi of Przemyślany who was suspected of Shabbatean leanings. His book of prayers, the *Keter Yosef* (Berlin, 1700) was condemned by rabbis, because of the many allusions to Shabbatai Tsevi. If we don't find similar ethical texts written in Yiddish, some books could be related to the homiletic literature diffused among Shabbateans circles. We could mention, for exemple, the *Seder tefilah derekh yesharah* (Francfort, 1697) and the *Derekh ha-yashar le-olam ha-*

---

<sup>19</sup> G. Scholem, "Zevi Hirsch ben Jerahmeel Chotsch", *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 5, col. 502-03.

<sup>20</sup> G. Scholem, *op. cit.* note 11, 200, pp. 153-155, 171-178.

<sup>21</sup> See note 11.

<sup>22</sup> B. -Z. Dinur, "Aliyatah shel havurat Rabi Yehuda he-Hasid le-erets Israel ke-reshitam shel ha-zmanim ha-hadashim be-toldot Israel", *Be-mifneh ha-dorot*, Jerusalem, Mosad Bialik, 1955, p. 26-29. See the answer (and bibliography) by M. Benayahu, "Ha-*havurah qadosha*" shel R/ Yehuda Hasid" in *Sefunot*, 3/1960, p. 131-182. See also J. J. Schudt, *Jüdische Merkwürdikeiten*, Francfort am-Main, 1714-1718, vol. 2, book 6, chap. 27, par. 35, p. 59, 62-63 ; P. Beer, *Geschichte, Lehren und Meinungen aller bestandenen und noch bestehenden religiösen Sekten der Juden*, vol. II, Brünn, 1822-23.

<sup>23</sup> G. Scholem, *op. cit.* note 14, 1998, p. 425.

*ba* (Francfort, 1704) by Yehiel Mikhl Epstein, the *Nahalat Tsvi* (Francfort, 1711) by Tsvi Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsch, an adaptation of the *Zohar*<sup>24</sup>, and the *Kav ha-yashar* (Francfort, 1705) which could reflect the popularization of kabbalistic sources or ideas and the style of the *deroshes* delivered in vernacular to simple listeners among small circles of Shabbateans during gatherings of « believers ». It could also have been studied collectively by small groups of Shabbatean readers seeking the way of purification through asceticism and mortification. In this case, the *maggid* refers to a moral instructor who exhorted simple Jews to self-sacrifice, repentance and penitence.

The structure of the *Kav ha-yashar*, close to the homiletic literature, seems to indicate that the text was originally based on oral teachings, before being written down for printing. Each chapter is composed on the same pattern, with a central unifying theme, its development and a final moral lesson. It preserves, even if we have lost the original oral form, many elements of orality, like, for example, rhetorical devices or fixed formulas. The opening of each chapter starts with a biblical verse or a quotation. Then we find the general theme (*nose*) of the *derush* which is often repeated. An important literary form is the *ma'aseh*, *sippur* or *mashal* taken from many oral and written sources, mostly kabbalistic legends like the *Zohar* or the *Shivhei ha-ari*, in order to capture the attention of the less intellectual audience, to dramatize and to give concrete examples of moralization. The use of aggadic material taken from kabbalistic texts was typical of Shabbatean propaganda diffused by preachers who used very little talmudic material and gave more importance to the *aggadah* to dissimulate the heretical « holy faith », to attract simple listeners and initiate them to the tenets of the sect. In the oral discourse, the *maggid* weaves a series of small *derushim* into a

---

<sup>24</sup> G. Scholem mentionned Yehiel Mikhl Epstein as a possible Shabbatean. He wrote : "Some kabbalists who also wrote moral tracts in Yiddish belong to this camp (the secrets Shabbateans) such as Tsvi Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsch and Yehiel Mikhl Epstein". See G. Scholem, "Shabbatai Zevi", *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 14, col. 1248. Yehoshua Horowitz, on the contrary, wrote : " It is very doubtful wheter he had any associations with the Shabbatean movement ", see Y. Horowitz, "Epstein, Jehiel Michal ben Abraham ha-levi", *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 6, col. 833.

coherent discourse. We find the same structure in the *Kav ha-yashar*, composed of a chain of small textual units joined together by fixed transitions. We find many repetitions or recapitulations to summarize, to stress certain admonishments and to lead the reader to repentance and fear of sin. The chapter ends with a positive ethical lesson (*musr-haskl*) or a moral exhortation to be meditated and remembered. But Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover introduced major differences in the traditional pattern of the sermon. He founded his discourse mostly on mystical references removed from their original sources and rewritten for simple readers. Kabbalah is mainly used as an ethical tool to remind the cosmic effect of all human behaviour. For example, the commandments have an exoteric function, to lead to spiritual perfection, but also a esoteric one, to take part in unifying and strengthening the divine world. Tsvi Hirsh Koidanovers's goal is to awake the fear of sin, of transgression, to stress the sinfulness of the present generation, to express collective anxiety and to call for collective repentance. He criticises the simple Jews for their improper behaviour, their moral imperfection, and the wealthy, powerful members of the *kehilot* for their selfish behaviour. They corrupt the *Klal Israel* and they are responsible for the delay in the process of redemption. He hammers out appeals to penitence and asceticism and multiplies ethical rebukes. The *Kav ha-yashar* provides evidence of the penetration of kabbalah into vernacular homiletic literature. But, even if the book could be related to the same kind of ethical literature read among Shabbatean circles, it seems more difficult to bring out elements of the Shabbatean "theology" integrated into the pattern of the vernacular sermon <sup>25</sup>.

## II. The *Nahalat Tsvi*, the adaptation of the Zohar in Yiddish

An interesting example of Yiddish ethical and mystical books printed between the 17th and 18th centuries is the translation of parts of the Zohar, the *Nahalat Tsvi* or *Taytsh-Zoyer* by Tsvi Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsch (first edition, Francfort, 1711). This book was constantly reprinted (about fifty editions until the 20th century and from the 19th century under the title *Nufet tsufim*). The Yiddish adaptation of the Zohar

---

<sup>25</sup> A Shabbatean penitential liturgy was published in Yiddish in Cracow (1666), the *Tikkunei teshuva me-erets ha-tsvi zera*.

is the result of a long process of writing<sup>26</sup>. Before being printed, it was translated by Aviezer Selig of Lublin, a kabbalist, head of a *Yeshiva* near Lublin and the great-great grandfather of Chotsch. He began writing the text in 1601 but did not publish it before his death. His son Yosei of Wien assembled the *haskamot* to make possible the publication of the book. The *gezerot tah ve-tat* (1648-49) nonetheless thwarted his plan. It was the grandson of Aviezer Selig who undertook the task of publishing the book after introducing changes. First, because the manuscript had been damaged, secondly because the translation was too literal, and finally because some esoteric passages had been translated. The adaptor thought it was unthinkable to reveal to ordinary Jews all the secret parts of kabbalistic doctrine. Then, Tsvi Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsch undertook the task of rewriting the translation, suppressing the passages judged too complex, hidden and speculative. He completed the defective sections, reorganized the structure of the work, added quotations from mystical texts such as *Tikkunei Zohar*, and adapted the style of the book to make it more colloquial. The publication was further delayed several times, in particular for reason of a fire ravaged the city of Francfort (1711) and because of financial difficulties.

The Yiddish preface<sup>27</sup> provides interesting information about the decision to translate the book into vernacular. The author explains that the history of the revelation of the Torah is divided into various phases. At Mount Sinai, God asked Moses to reveal the secret sense of the Torah to scholars, keeping the obvious sense for the Jewish people. Even if the simple people could not penetrate the hidden aspects of the Torah, (compared to a garment wrapped around the heart of the revealed law) their reward would not be no less great, all the more if their intention during prayer, their fervor (*kavone*) and fear of God are sincere. Moses wanted to give the *Mishnayes*, the *Gemore* and the *Midroshim* at the same time, but God refused. It was not until the destruction of the Temple when Israel was exiled and the law was progressively more forgotten that

---

<sup>26</sup> This process of writing could be related to the way Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover edited his *Kav ha-yashar*.

<sup>27</sup> The following quotations are taken from the Yiddish introduction of the *Nahalat Tsvi* by Tsvi Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsh (Francfort, 1711), without pagination.

Jean Baumgarten

the oral law was written down. The great secrets that it contains were nevertheless concealed. In their turn, these secrets too were lost. God sent Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai and his disciples (compared to the great light that was hidden for the six days of creation) to uncover them. As for the choice of the vernacular, the author explains:

Thus in this work there are many things written in the revealed sense. Even if it is in *loshn koydesh* the reward is very great, for the Holy Torah was taught by Moses in seventy languages... Especially in that country where the language of the Targum is spoken, the book of the Zohar was addressed to everyone, even the masses. In our country, the language for everyone is Yiddish, so that those who are educated should not think it shameful to read holy books in Yiddish (*taytshe sforim*). Thus it is that here the language of the Zohar should be Yiddish. I have therefore introduced into this book many fine *peshotim* that appear in the Zohar and reveals the hidden meaning of the verses and interpretations, so that this holy book should awaken the fear of God in the hearts of everyone.

But we have to be cautious when we speak about “mystical texts in Yiddish”. What does the “‘vernacularization’ of kabbalah” precisely mean? In the Yiddish introduction, we encounter such a statement: “The redemption could not come quickly, except if we read it (the Zohar), each (Jew) according to his perception and comprehension.... The learned (*yodei sefer*) must not be ashamed to read the Zohar in the language of the people, because it was written in the popular language of the former generations...”. In fact, the translator did not retain the esoteric, philosophical parts and the speculative, abstract commentaries of the Zohar, as the description of the *sefirot* and the upper world. He stressed the concrete resonance of moral conduct and narratives parts. In the introduction we read :“ when an ordinary man (*gemeyner man*) wants to study Zohar, he will choose the ethical teachings (*muser*), the revealed parts, the simple words (*devorim peshutim*) and stories according to the literal meaning (*deyrekh peshute*)”. Therefore, the adaptor often interrupts the translation explaining that he could not reveal more of the text. For example, in the treatise *Heykhalot* (Zohar I, 38-45) with the description of the seven divisions of the upper world, we read about the supreme secret (*sod ehad*) : “as the masters of kabbalah know well, those who understand the upper secrets that we can’t all write in Yiddish”. (*Vi di balei-kabole vaysn voyl un far shteyn di soydes elyoynim dos men kon*

*nit als shreybn bl"a (bi-leshon ashkenaz)*. From this excerpt, we deduce that they are different circles of transmitters of the Kabbalah. First, the *tsaddikim*, *talmidei hakahmim*, *ba'alei kabbalah* or *mekubalim* who played a major role in the transmission of the secrets of the Torah. Second, the intermediate group who understand, read Hebrew and, then, the simple Jews, the Yiddish readers.

The most interesting aspect was that the Yiddish adaptation of the Zohar could have circulated and been interpreted during individual and collective readings among circles of Shabbateans in 17th-18th century<sup>28</sup>. Both writers, Tsvi Hirsh Koidanover and Tsvi Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsch were linked to the circle of Heschel Tsoref, the ascetic mystic, seer and one of the Shabbatean leaders in Poland who revealed to a group of “believers” prophecies and esoteric explanations, often founded on *Gematriot*. For G. Scholem, the Chotsch’s commentary on the *Tikkunei Zohar*, the *Hemdat Tsvi* (1706), is a clear testimony of his “Shabbatean belief”. After his stay in Cracow, Tsvi Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsch belonged to the circle of Heschel Tsoref, before to flee to Germany after the scandal induced by the publication of his zoharic commentary. Another indication is the reference to simple men and to women reading the Zohar. Let’s remind that the Shabbatean theology gave a major role to women. This transformation could be seen, especially, in the *aliyah* of women in shul, the promotion of equality of sex and the participation of women to circles of study. We have testimonies of Jewish women from Shabbatean circles who studied the Zohar in Amsterdam, Hamburg, Altona and, after, in Prague among Frankist groups. There are also letters and *responsa*, from opponants to Shabbateanism, like Moses Hagiz, in his *Mishnat hakhamim*, or Eliezer Landau, who were indignant to see men, women and children studying together the Zohar in vernacular without

---

<sup>28</sup> For G. Scholem, Tsvi Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsch represents the Lurianic school of the shabbatianism. He wrote : “It is not accidental that the author of the first attempt to vulgarize parts of the Zohar in Yiddish was a Shabbatean”. G. Scholem draws a parallel between Tsvi Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsch and Yaakov Koppel Lifshhitz, the author of the *Shaarei gan eden*, who was also a Shabbatean. See, G. Scholem, *Les Grands courants de la mystique juive*, Paris, Payot, 1983, p. 421, note 74.



the slightest knowledge of mysticism<sup>29</sup>. In the *Nahalat Tsvi*, we find evidences that the text was for men and women. For example, in the title page which is surrounded by biblical quotations mentioning women as Exodus, 19, 3 : *Koh tomar le-vet ya'akov ve-tagid li-vney Israel* : “You shall say to the house of Jacob and declare to the house of Israel”). The Midrash Pesikta and Rashi comment: “*To the house of Jacob* concern women. *To the children of Israel*, means that you must explain to men”; We find also the verse (Deut. 31, 12) : *hakehél et ha-am ha-anashim vecha-nashim* (Deut. 31,12), “gather the people, men, women and children”. And another passage (Deut. 29, 28) : “The secret things (*ha-nistarot*) belong to God ; but the revealed (*ha-niglot*) belong to everybody, to us and to our children, forever”. Also in the *haskamot*, R. Naphtali ha-Cohen Katz de Frankfurt approved the publication of the book of “literal commentaries and edifying sayings from the *Sefer ha-zohar* in *leshon ashkenaz* for women and ignorants”. In another *haskamah*, R. Wolf of Dessau explains that the author “has the pure intention to print revealed words of the Zohar which could be said in any language that women can hear (understand)”. These quotations are testimonies of the slow spread of kabbalistic books and mystical ideas among female readers and of the evolution of the Ashkenazi religious culture in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Another interesting aspect of the translation of the Zohar is the mode of rewriting. Often the translator changed the order of the book, condensed it, keeping only the texture of the original and adapting many portions. This dismembering of the Zohar introduced a distance towards scriptural authority, a form of de-canonization of the literality aspect of the Zohar which could be subject to textual manipulations and transformations. The “vernacularization” of the Jewish tradition leads to a de-sacralisation of the authoritative nature of the text which does not cause the same kind of respect, but rather introduces a more free, individual, reading and rewriting, independent of the *talmidei hakhamim*. As an example, I could mention briefly the adaptation of *Sabba d-mishpatim* (Zohar II, 94b-114a), on the revelation of hidden secrets

---

<sup>29</sup> See A. Rapoport-Albert, “Al ha-ma’amad ha-nashim be-shabbtaut”, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, tome 17, R. Elior ed., Jerusalem, Hebrew University, 2001, pp. 239-249.

about the soul and its fate in the afterlife, especially about the resurrection, celestial hierarchies and the reincarnation known (*gilgul*) as “secret of impregnation” (*sod ha-ibbur*), “secret of levirate marriage” (*sod ha-yibbum*) or “rolling”, “transmigration” (*gilgul*). One of the main topics of the *sabba d-mishpatim* is also the relations between man and woman in the throes of love. This chapter depicts the encounter between R. Hiyya and R. Yossi, two students of Shimeon bar Yohai, with an illiterate old donkey driver, R. Yeiva Sabba (the Elder). R. Yossi seems annoyed by the « foolish questions » and « empty words » of the old man who shows folly (*shtuta*). The old man confessed that he is not an unlearned, but he has been reduced to a monkey driving and traveller to support his children’s education. In fact he is an hidden *tsaddik*, a *lamed-vovnik*. The motif of the disguised learned sage is characteristic of Shabbateanism and Hasidism. The adaptor of the Zohar in Yiddish brings many changes to the original text. First, he adds a prologue which presents brief ideas about transmigration (*gilgul*). Then, a short passage about errant *talmidei hakhamim* disguised in merchants. He gives the passages in the Zohar where we found the same topic and also in his own book *Hemdat Tsvi*. Then starts an abridged version of the “uncomprehensible” speech of the old merchant (Zohar II, 95a) considered as empty words (*lere red*). R. Hiyya explains that sometimes in “vessels that seem empty, grain of gold can be discovered” which in Yiddish becomes: *tsu staytn gefind men in di lere layt gildene glokn di klingn mit toyre* (“sometimes we find in empty person golden (bells) which sounds with Torah”). He explains that the verses are plain enough in the *peshat*, but they are also words with an hidden meaning (*far holen, setimin*). The adaptor also shorten the original text or he emphasizes aspects that could be relevant for a less learned audience. For example, he explains that there is no need to be ashamed in speaking *Divrei Torah* to everybody, whether scholars or not. In fact, the author, less than writing a literal translation of the text, seems to put down in writing an oral explanation of the Zohar. This aspect could be confirmed by the fact that Chotsh was a *maggid*. As a shabbatean, he could be used to explain Zohar to simple Jews in vernacular. If it is impossible to delimit the two strata of the text – the first one being the translation made by Aviezer Selig of Lublin, and the second one the adaptation form Tsvi Hirsh ben Yerahmeel Chotsch – we could say that the Zohar in Yiddish is a

*Jean Baumgarten*

testimony of the oral explanations of Kabbalah delivered by preachers in Europe in the 18th century, especially in small circles of Shabbateans. If we lack historical sources which depict how the Zohar was diffused to simple Jews, from the style of the *Nahalat Tsvi*, we could understand what could have been a small group of less learned men, women and children who gathered for a *shiur* lead by a preacher who translated, explained and commented the Zohar. The *Nahalat Tsvi* is an interesting testimony about the ways the Zohar was disseminated in Yiddish in 18th century Ashkenazi society.

### **III. A bridge between the Yiddish ethical texts and the Hassidic literature**

Changes do not come from the emergence of mystical texts in vernacular - there is no real « mystical » tradition in Yiddish - or from new religious thoughts or kabbalistic doctrine in Yiddish. The novelty comes from the practices of reading canonical texts, as the Zohar, which was grasped by new groups of readers on the fringes and read in a way that escaped the control of the rabbis. These testimonies show new channels of diffusion of the “mystical” tradition in vernacular, especially among small Shabbateans fraternities, parallel to the communal authorities and constituting an alternative sociability. Mystical texts, until then only diffused among the elite of the *talmidei hakhamim*, were rewritten, dismembered and diffused in Yiddish among lay audience, “ignorant” men, women and children, thus transgressing in secret the rabbinical restriction. The ingredients that constitute these Yiddish texts are taken from ancient sources, reworked and redistributed in new textual configurations, at the same time that they are handled and read by a broader audience. What is more important is the technique used by moral preachers and writers to transform an existing tradition into vernacular. In this way, we could say that the *Kav ha-yashar* is a testimony, among others, of the evolution in the diffusion of mystical texts and of their accessibility to a wider range of readers, which prefigures the break of Ashkenazi religious culture in the pre-modern period and the rise of Hasidism.

The mystical texts in Yiddish are also a clear testimony to the religious and existential anguish of the Jewish masses in Ashkenazi

society of the 18th century. The authors took the themes of the Zohar, Lurianic and Cordoverian Kabbalah and used them to try to explain the ethical failings of the society and the social crisis in the Jewish communities of the period. It should be noted that most of the mystical texts in Yiddish and above all the *Kav ha-yashar* was published in the period just preceding the rise of Hasidism : from one side, many themes seems to prepare the reception and dissemination of Hasidic ideas among Jewish people. We can considered *Kav ha-yashar* as a kind of pre or proto-Hasidic text in Yiddish. M. Idel<sup>30</sup> points out specific themes found in the *Kav ha-yashar* that we find in the later Hasidic literature, like, for example, union with God (*devekut*), devotional attitude (*kavvanah*) during the performance of prayer or *mitsvot*, practice of contemplation and mystical solitude (*hitbodedut*), the drawing down of the Holiness (*hamshakhah*). We could also considered the adaptation of the Zohar in Yiddish as a good example of texts who fostered the popularization of Kabbalah among less learned Jewish readers. These texts showed the diffusion of a mystical terminology, beliefs and conceptions, which became common references, shared by large groups of Jewish readers. When such books as Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye's *Toledot Yaakov Yosef*, Dov Ber's *Maggid devarav Le-Yaakov* or the anonymous *Tsava'at ha-Ribash* ("The Testament of the Besht") were published, the cultural ground or background was prepared to receive such Hasidic treatises. Therefore, we must analyze and put back the Yiddish ethical-mystical printed production in the *continuum* of the history of the Jewish mystics, as a intermediate landmark, a point of contact between the kabbalistic books and the major Hasidic texts. Perhaps, these Yiddish chapbooks played a greater role than we thought. They are a transition between the diffusion of kabbalah in Ashkenazi society during the 17th-18th centuries and the rise of Hasidism.

JEAN BAUMGARTEN, Directeur de recherche at the CNRS, attached to the Center for historical research (CRH/EHESS), has written articles and books on Ashkenazi culture, Yiddish language and literature. Lastest publication: *Naissance du hassidisme* (Paris, 2006). jean.baumgarten@wanadoo.fr

---

<sup>30</sup> M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections, Kabbalah and Interpretation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 150-152.