

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali

The most important Sufi, whose work was found quoted time and again in Jewish tracts, was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111) – known as “al-Ghazali” (the “gazelle”) to the Arabs, but often referred to as “Abu Hamid” in Jewish works. His treatises have been found copied out into Hebrew in medieval Jewish libraries, and his ideas are sprinkled throughout medieval Jewish texts.

Born at Tus, in eastern Iran, al-Ghazali had tremendous professional success prior to his “conversion” to Sufism. After rising to the pinnacle of his temporal career, as the chief professor at the pre-eminent university in Baghdad, he passed through a spiritual crisis. Four years after reaching the heights of his profession, he abandoned his post and left the region to adopt the life of a poor Sufi. In 1106, he was persuaded to return to teaching, this time as a Sufi adept. An important consideration was his friends’ insistence that a “renewer” of Islam was expected at the beginning of each (Islamic) century, and they argued that al-Ghazali was the “renewer” for the new century beginning in 1106. Al-Ghazali did fulfill this role within Islam, becoming known as “Renovator of Islam” for single-handedly realigning Sufi practice with traditional Islam.

Al-Ghazali’s influence within the development of Jewish mysticism was far reaching, as well. A wide range of Jewish mystics, including Moses Maimonides (12th century), Abraham he-Hasid (13th century), Obadyah Maimonides (13th century), Judah Halevi (12th century), Abraham Ibn Hasdai (13th century) up to the Kabbalist Abraham Gavison of Tlemcen (17th century) specifically quoted the Sufi master in their own exegesis of *Jewish* life and law. This final rabbi concluded his Hebrew translation of al-Ghazali’s mystical poetry with these words: “I have

translated the poetry of this sage, for even though he be not of the children of Israel, it is accepted that the pious of the gentiles have a share in the world to come and surely heaven will not withhold from him the reward of his faith.”