

Rabbi Isaac of Acre and His Followers: Early Kabbalists under Sufi Influence

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No mystical teaching so defines the soul of Jewish mysticism, as does the Kabbalah. This medieval spiritual path is as central to Judaism as is Sufism to the practice of Islam. What is virtually unknown, however, is how indebted is the Kabbalah to Sufism - and how the two systems are in fact intertwined at their roots. The medieval Kabbalah grew out of Jewish philosophers' study of Islamic mysticism, borrowing Sufi prayer methods, joyous forms of worship and even teaching stories from earlier Sufi antecedents. In fact, to look for the provenance of this

Jewish

manner of ordering the world, a historian would have to plumb the teachings of philosophers with names such as Ibn Arabi, Ibn Masarra, al Ghazali and even the Prophet Muhammad, himself!

Of course, the intermingling of these mystical streams has long since run underground, subterranean whispers from a time of mutual respect and mystical symbiosis between Islam and Judaism. But the stories of medieval Kabbalists, well known and unknown bear the mark of their work with the Sufis. In looking at just one obscure Jewish Kabbalist, we can get a sense of how prevalent was Sufism in the growth of this Jewish mystical practice, and even appreciate how much Sufism influences Jewish worship to this day.

Rabbi Isaac of Acre, active around the turn of the 13th century, provided a bridge between the eccentric, Sufi-inspired visions of earlier Jewish/Sufis and mainstream Kabbalistic thought. Due to his importance to later Jewish mystics, from the 16th century Safedian Kabbalists to the 18th century Baal Shem Tov and his Hasidism, Rabbi Isaac insinuated many important Islamic mystical ideas in the heart of the Kabbalah, bringing them to a wide Jewish audience.

Born in the Holy Land, Rabbi Isaac left Acre on the Mediterranean Sea, in 1291 C.E., eventually traveling to northern Spain to search for the redactor of the Kabbalistic tract, the *Zohar*. Disappointed to learn that that book wasn't recovered 2nd century Jewish lore (as it was purported to be), but penned by Moses de Leon a couple of decades before, he moved on, settling for his final years in North Africa.

During all of these travels, however, he never lost his fascination with the Sufi way, or his passion for wrapping Sufi ideas in with the Jewish mystical system. Most important was Rabbi Isaac's introduction into the Jewish spiritual lexicon of the Sufi ideal of *hishtawwut*, or equanimity. *Hishtawwut* signified that the adept had reached a spiritual plane where he did not care at all what others might think of him - or how he was perceived in the world, thereby preparing him for the entrance of God's power.

Isaac said that this condition of equanimity was a necessary precursor for *hitbodedut*, the concentration that led the Holy Spirit to descend unto the mystic, and even to prophetic understanding. *Hitbodedut*, like *hishtawwut*, was an idea new to Judaism, carrying with it two specific Sufi meanings. On one hand, it represented the intense mental concentration required to achieve *devequt* (or union with God); as well, it implied the solitary nature of this activity and the necessity to separate oneself from a community of worshipers to pray. This concept of solitary retreat, when combined with the Sufi-inspired Kabbalistic prayer method known as the *Science of the Letters*, bore a striking resemblance to a Sufi *dhikr* ceremony.

As Isaac stated: "He who merits the secret of communion (*devequt*) will merit the secret of equanimity (*hishtawwut*), and if he receives this secret, then he will also know the secret of *hitbodedut*, and once he has known the secret of *hitbodedut*, he will receive the Holy Spirit."ⁱ

Isaac held that the purpose of Sufi-inspired letter combination meditation, leading to *devequt*, was to cause God's power, *ruhaniyyut*, to descend and cling to the human soul.ⁱⁱ As Isaac himself said, "the wise man comes to isolate himself and to concentrate to bring down into his soul the divine spirit."ⁱⁱⁱ This theory - again, borrowed from Muslim mystics - posited that through *hitbodedut* and the combination of the letters in prayer, the supplicant could actually cause God's power (the *ruhaniyyut*) to descend and cling to him.

This represented another subtle change in Jewish mysticism, as in Judaism's most recent past, prayer had offered a one-way pathway to God, with the adept ascending on high to achieve proximity or, at the very best, communion with the Divine Power. Suddenly, however, meditative prayer could draw *down* this power, this *ruhaniyyut* into the human soul, helping to affect the world in a positive way through the agent of the mystic. Rabbi Isaac's interest in this particular idea facilitated its inclusion in the later Kabbalah.

Another idea taken over directly from the Sufis mirrors the erotic ideal of sexual union with the Godhead, but gives it a decidedly human twist. In Isaac's words, "he who hath not loved a woman hath no phenomenal model for worship of God." That is to say, the world of the five senses could provide the impetus for spiritual experience. We see this idea played out time and again in the Kabbalists, for whom every experience in the world became metaphor of and even a stairway to true knowledge of God. This idea mirrors Ibn Arabi, who said in his *Fusus al-Hikam*, "The contemplation of God through woman is the most perfect of contemplations."^{iv}

Rabbi Isaac did not toil alone in the Holy Land, being surrounded by a coterie of Sufi-leaning Jews. One Sufi-inspired Jewish Rabbi, ABNeR, is often quoted by Isaac - and considered his mentor. It is quite possible, however, that the so-called "Rabbi ABNeR" (known only by this acronym through Isaac's writing), was a *Sufi* master with whom Isaac studied. It was not unusual for Jewish/Sufis to hide their Sufi sources behind spurious Jewish names or concocted "traditional" Jewish tales.

Indeed, one particular teaching story told by Rabbi ABNeR, known only via the writing of Rabbi Isaac of Acre, was a reprise of a story conveyed by the Jewish/Sufi Bahya Ibn Pakuda, with Bahya identifying it as a Sufi anecdote! Rabbi ABNeR's tale as quoted by Isaac, explicates the mystical idea of equanimity:

"Once upon a time a lover of secret lore came to an anchorite and asked to be admitted as a pupil. Then he said to him: My son, your purpose is admirable, but do you possess equanimity or not? He replied: Indeed, I feel satisfaction at praise and pain at insult, but I am not revengeful and I bear no grudge. Then the master said to him: My son, go back to your home, for as long as you have no equanimity and can still feel the sting of insult, you have not attained to the state where you can connect your thoughts with God."^v

This anecdote originated in al-Makki's Sufi manual, *Qut al Qulub*. The anchorite limned by Isaac in his story is none other than the Prophet Mohammad!^{vi}

Other adepts of Rabbi Isaac's day were not above studying directly with the Sufis themselves - and, like Isaac, often used Sufi inspired tales to illustrate their newly formed Jewish mystical concepts. For instance, in the Sufi-inspired Kabbalistic tract known as the *Sha'arei Zedek* (c. 1295 C.E.), which emanated from Isaac's circle, the anonymous author illustrates the path of *hitbodedut* by using a story pertaining to the Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina (d. 1037), stating unabashedly that this Sufi was, in fact, his source. The author states:

"I found in the words of one of the great philosopher's of his generation, namely, Ibn Sina, in which he said that he would concentrate while composing his great works, and when a certain subject or matter would be difficult for him, he would contemplate its intermediate proposition and draw his thought to it."^{vii}

Also from the *Sha'arei Zedek* we find ideas borrowed from the Sufi concept of *fana*, or annihilation of the personal ego in that of God during divine union, expressing this mystical concept as a "moment of inversion, in which one's inner essence is seen as projected outside." Here, the unknown Jewish adept shows his respect for his Muslim brethren by redacting almost verbatim a passage from Sufi philosopher Ibn Arabi.

There were many other Jewish practitioners of this time period that clearly ingested the Sufi Way, and the Sufi-inspired Kabbalistic works of Isaac of Acre. Rabbi Moses Narboni (d. 1362 C.E.) quoted extensively from Isaac's circle in his *Sefer 'Or HaSekhel*;^{viii} additionally, a Rabbi who might well have been another teacher of Isaac, Rabbi Nathan, included the specifics of an esoteric Sufi concept concerning five worlds in his writings. The only mention of the five worlds theory that predated Rabbi Nathan was in a commentary on Ibn Arabi's work by the Islamic thinker Abdel Rizak al-Kashani.^{ix}

Isaac's influence wafted through the centuries, seeding itself into the work of the 16th century Kabbalist, Rabbi Judah Albotini (d. 1519 C.E.), who was head of the Jerusalem rabbis. Known as a commentator on the writings of Moses Maimonides, he nonetheless wrapped Rabbi Isaac's ideas concerning *hishtawwut* in with historical Jewish practice. For instance, in lieu of the necessary preconditions to approaching divine union with God mentioned in the Talmud, of which wisdom was primary, Albotini stressed *hishtawwut*. In his writings, he related a story exemplifying the necessity of reaching equanimity prior to achieving the level of *hitbodedut* that seems to come almost verbatim from Isaac of Acre's work. Albotini's story ran thusly:

"By this he shall ascend to the level of equanimity, as that sage said to his student, who asked him: 'Will you teach us the secret of the Chariot?' He answered: 'Have you achieved equanimity?' And the student did not understand what he was saying to him, until he explained the matter to him, namely that all attributes are equal to him. And this was what he said to him: 'If a man insulted you, and took away that which was yours, would you be angry and strict with him over this? And if he did the opposite, namely, to honor you and give you many gifts, would you rejoice over this and feel it? And would you feel in your soul that you were affected by these two opposites?' Then this master said to him, 'If so, then you have not yet acquired the quality of equanimity, that is, that it should be equal to you whether it should be honor or its opposite. And since such is the case, how can you ascend to the level of hitbodedut, which comes after you have achieved equanimity?'"^x

Albotini's interpretation of the preconditions for divine union related to the tendency of the Sufis to diminish or even negate completely the value of scholarly learning,^{xi} which even in the 16th century was still primary for Jewish traditionalists.

There were others that were clearly inspired by Isaac of Acre's new take on Jewish mysticism. Rabbi Shem Tov Ibn Gaon,^{xii} Rabbi David Ibn Zimra, Rabbi Joseph Ibn Zaiah and some of the greatest Kabbalists of the 15th and 16th century mystical center of Safed were all greatly attracted to the work of the itinerant, prophetic luminary.

Ultimately, Rabbi Isaac and his circle of Sufi inspired Kabbalists laid that groundwork for the widening influence of the Islamic mystical system on the reinvigoration of Jewish mysticism. Following their lead, later Jewish mystics continued to be attracted to the Sufi undercurrents of Jewish mysticism, even if they didn't always know exactly the provenance of the "new" ideas.

ⁱ From Isaac of Acre's *Me'irat Einayim*, quoted in *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Idel, pg. 112

ⁱⁱ Ibid. pg. 115

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Ibid. pg. 115

^{iv} These two quotes come from *Treatise of the Pool* (introduction), Fenton, pg. 63-64

^v *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Scholem, pg. 97 For another, slightly longer rendition of the tale, see *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Idel, pg. 113

^{vi} *Treatise of the Pool* (notes), Fenton, pg. 63

^{vii} *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Idel, pg. 111-112

^{viii} See *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Idel, pg. 63-71 for specific instances.

^{ix} Ibid. pg. 95 For more on this idea, see Ibid. pg. 73-89

^x Ibid. pg. 123

^{xi} Ibid. pg. 123

^{xii} See Ibid. pg. 119-122

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